

# Conversations in Community Change

More Voices from the Field



Edited by  
**Max O. Stephenson, Jr.**  
**Cathy Grimes**

# Conversations in Community Change

*Conversations in Community Change:*

*More Voices from the Field*

Max O. Stephenson Jr. and Cathy Grimes, Eds.

Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance

in association with

Blacksburg, Virginia

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so that corrections may be published in future editions.

## Dedication

*For Jessica  
Whose Joy and Wonder Provided  
An Enduring Example to All  
Who Encountered Her  
MOS*

*In memory of my mother,  
Flavia Roach,  
Who would have loved these interviews  
CG*

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to thank Max Stephenson, Jr. for his thoughtful leadership and excellent insights as this volume has come together. As ever, we are responsible for any errors that may remain.

MOS and CG  
August 30, 2022  
Blacksburg, VA

# A Snapshot of the Changemakers you will Encounter in these Pages

In 2011, an interdisciplinary group of graduate students and faculty members interested in community building and engagement and democratic social change at local, regional, and global levels began meeting informally to explore approaches to these phenomena under the sponsorship of the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance (IPG). The group called itself the Global Dialogue initially, as members were interested in how communities in the United States and in other countries tackled community change for social justice successfully. As time passed the group changed its name to Community Voices (CV), and finally, to the Community Change Collaborative (CCC) as members' interests, scholarship, and research foci shifted.

Currently, CCC membership includes students and faculty from across the university, as well as alumni, community members and IPG faculty and fellows. Twenty-five graduate and one undergraduate student conducted the interviews in this book. All were undertaken under the aegis of CV or CCC. Several students participated in more than one interview, giving the reader the opportunity to learn about those individuals as well as their guests.

From the beginning, the group has invited leaders from the public, market, and nonprofit sectors who are involved in efforts to secure democratic change to share their experiences in public presentations and interviews. The 16 interviews in this book originally aired on WUVT's *Talk at the Table* radio program or were featured in the podcast series, *Trustees without Borders*, both hosted by IPG senior fellow Andy Morikawa. In conversation with their student interviewers, the 20 guests featured in this volume shared stories and insights concerning their work, discussing successes, challenges and setbacks, and innovative approaches. Throughout, the interviewers were interested in understanding better the factors that mediate citizen agency, an antecedent and underpinning valence for all possibility of democratic social change. They were similarly curious to learn more about the strategies

their guests had employed to encourage individual and collective consideration of efforts to secure meaningful steps toward social justice.

The interests and work of those profiled in this book span multiple fields, including the arts, journalism, political activism, law, education, and sciences, to name but a few. In these pages, you will meet Liz Lehrman, a MacArthur Foundation Fellow; Karen O'Brien, a Nobel Prize co-recipient; Lily Yeh, an internationally recognized and award-winning artist, Alia Malek, an award-winning international journalist and author; John Ferguson, a heralded concert pianist and executive director and founder of *American Voices*, among other outstanding globally recognized writers, artists, community organizers, activists, business leaders, and scholars.

As Max Stephenson has noted, three broad themes have emerged during the interviews students have conducted with this group of gifted professionals over the years, “the imperative and animating power of the imagination, the criticality of story or narrative to individual and community self-understanding, and the abiding significance of human agency to democratic change and possibility” (Stephenson, 2021, p. 1). You will encounter these themes in the interviews that comprise this book.

Perhaps not surprisingly, CCC's guests also explored the idea of community in their interviews for this volume. Liz Lehrman, for example, discussed her years of sharing dance with residents of a senior-living center. Lisa Jo Epstein recounted a project with young adults in a Youth Empowerment Program that employed theater and theatrical exercises as its animating and defining strategy. Lily Yeh shared accounts of her arts related work with a loosely knit group of neighbors in Philadelphia to reclaim and revive a drug ridden area, and with survivors of the genocide in northern Rwanda. Alia Malek mused on the status, fates, and character of the communities that either shelter or disdain refugees. Other interviewees shared accounts of their work for social change in metropolitan centers, suburbs and rural villages and towns in the United States and beyond. All highlighted the fact that the process of change is itself ever evolving in communities, which rarely remain static themselves.

We hope the rich insight and experiences shared by the individuals featured within these pages encourage you to think afresh and in new ways about democratic change.

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Stephenson, Jr. Max O. (2021), "Introduction," in M. Stephenson and C. Grimes (Eds). *Conversations in Community Change: Voices from the Field*. Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech Publishing.

# Foreword

I first met my Ph.D. advisor, Dr. Max Stephenson, Professor of Public and International Affairs and Director of the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance, in a face-to-face meeting in August 2015. During our conversation, he invited me to join Community Voices (CV), a multidisciplinary group under his supervision led by graduate students from across the campus interested in creating positive social change in the world. During my five years of doctoral study and one-year postdoctoral appointment, I avidly participated in CV and (the later renamed) Community Change Collaborative (CCC) weekly meetings, podcast interview series with community change scholars and professionals working in different policy domains, guest speaker series, film discussions, and community-based projects. Even now, with a more than eight-hour time difference and amidst my research and teaching responsibilities at the University of Tehran, I join the group whenever possible to enjoy the dialogue with like-minded people and to ponder fresh ideas.

As I reflect on my membership in the CCC, I feel grateful for the experience in many ways. The CV was the first place I developed friendships with individuals with whom I remain in touch. As an international graduate student, developing networks of peers had a profound impact on my experience while living abroad and, in every dimension of my academic and professional life. One vital aspect of the CCC for me was the opportunity, as graduate students, to engage in Community-based Projects and to experience participatory research through co-facilitating community meetings under the supervision of university faculty members and professional community organizers. Participating in the CCC weekly discussions and writing for the *Community Change Journal* (the Institute's academic publication) strengthened my analytical skills and capacity to express my views. However, I believe that, for me, the most empowering component of the CCC were the interviews in which I participated.

I clearly remember the first time Dr. Stephenson suggested that I interview one of our guest speakers. I was thrilled and at the same time worried that the interview would not be as high quality as the ones conducted and recorded for the series before. Nevertheless, with Dr. Stephenson's and Andy

Morikawa's (a Senior Fellow at the Institute who records and hosts the series) support, the process of reviewing the guest's work, crafting questions, and interviewing turned out to be a delightful experience. The conversation went smoothly, and the interviewee and I bonded, an outcome that occurred in all the interviews in which I had the privilege to participate. Aside from a deeper understanding of our guest speakers' work, the interview process generatively helped the graduate students engaged to develop confidence in our capacity to lead thoughtful conversations, an invaluable asset for me, particularly, as a female international graduate student. This is one of many examples of the opportunities that the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance, as the home for the CCC, created for graduate students to develop capacities and to engage in possibilities otherwise not available to them.

Talking and listening to prominent change agents leading projects all over the world (including the leaders of, for example, Bond Street Theatre; the renowned artist Lily Yeh; the director of Rio de Janeiro's Catalytic Communities nongovernmental organization, Theresa Williamson; and the award-winning journalist, scholar, and human rights activist, Alia Malek) and across multiple domains (e.g., arts, journalism, agriculture, storytelling), not only influenced my doctoral research methodology, but also created hope in me (and many of my friends as interviewers or audience members of the interview series) to imagine possibilities for democratic change, even in communities notorious for their rigidity. The CCC interviews served as arenas to develop a civic capacity to have democratic conversations. During an open-to-the-public interview, for example, the distinguished journalists Hamid Bilici and Mahir Zeynalov shared their insights regarding the rapidly diminishing freedom of speech in Turkey and exchanged ideas with a student in the audience who supported an opposing political party. Bilici observed in that exchange that, "Our problem [in Turkey] is we are lacking in democracy [...In a democracy] there is no way one dictates one's ideology upon others."

Another especially memorable interview was with Alia Malek whose storytelling power, courage, and passion for ameliorating the conditions of Syrian refugees captivated all whom she encountered. The conversation intrigued me to the point that, together with Dr. Stephenson, we have since explored and co-authored articles and chapters on Syrian refugee rights and living conditions in various hosting countries. Similarly, Theresa Williamson's

valuable work in favelas in Rio was so captivating that several of us initiated a research group to study resilience, agency, and community change in the Maré favela. That multidisciplinary group has developed four articles to date and presented its research results at four international conferences.

For me, the process of creating the *Community Conversations* interviews and books is like weaving a Persian rug. Dr. Stephenson and Andy Morikawa set up the loom for us. Then, with his decades of experience in exploring democratic governance, international development, refugee and peace studies, Dr. Stephenson introduced to us myriad designs and colors from which we could choose. With each interview, we added a knot to what is always a highly collaborative work. Drawing on her many years of experience as a distinguished journalist and editor, Cathy Grimes was there for us all the time to comb the knots gracefully to ensure a thought-provoking work of art.

I wish the readers the same joy and delight each of us involved in developing this book experienced while conducting, editing, and reading these interviews.

Neda Moayerian

August 1, 2022

Tehran, Iran

# Introduction

## *Reflections on the Paradoxical Character of Social Change*

MAX O. STEPHENSON JR.

### **Reflections on the Paradoxical Character of Social Change**

A colleague reminded me some weeks ago of a fine book by David Orr addressing perhaps the most famous poem in American history and among the most storied in the English language, Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." In that 2015 volume, Orr took issue with a widely popular and accepted interpretation of Frost's poem as a simple paean to individualism and personal agency. As I wrote in a commentary published in 2016,

Nonetheless, Orr concludes that the power of the poem does not rest in its supposed celebration of individual agency, but instead in its evocation of the indeterminacy of its exercise. As Frost observed:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>1</sup>

I reread Orr's book in recent days as I have worked with Cathy Grimes on final edits of the interviews that comprise this book and again found myself pondering how different Orr's interpretation of the poem was from received wisdom. I was also struck by how powerfully the orientations, reflections, and activities of the professionals revealed in these pages echo the truths Orr contended are contained in that renowned 20-line elegiac reflection. Like "The Road's" traveler, those interviewed for this volume have made choices as they have pressed to secure a more just world. They have done so amidst profound uncertainty and often, equal measures of antipathy, but they have nonetheless made decisions and persevered in pursuing the paths those choices represented, whether those concerned innovative ideas, fresh

communal paths, or both. I have accordingly organized these introductory thoughts around the application of Orr's interpretation of Frost's ideas in "The Road Not Taken" to the work and contexts of those who appear in these pages. Here, for reference, is the text of Frost's poem:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>2</sup>

Orr argued that "The Road" is not about the lonely solitary figure making a singular choice and risking much, or perhaps little, as the poet was not clear on the point. Instead, as Orr observed:

If you think of the poem not as stating various viewpoints but rather as performing them, setting them beside and against one another, then a very different reading reemerges. ... "The Road Not Taken" acts as a kind of thaumatrope [an optical instrument or toy that shows the persistence of an impression upon the eye and that consists of

a card having on its opposite faces different designs that appear to the eye combined in a single picture when the card is whirled rapidly round a diameter by the strings that hold it], rotating its two opposed visions so that they seem to merge. And that merging is produced not by a careful blending of the two—a union—but by ‘rapid and frequent transitions.’ ... The title itself is a small but potent engine that drives us first toward one untaken road and then immediately back to the other producing a vision in which we appear somehow on both roads, or neither.<sup>3</sup>

This is to say that life decisions and directions are always mediated by contexts that may be understood to exist at multiple analytic scales, are never unidimensional, and are therefore always uncertain in prospect and portent. These may and do often blur together, and they often evidence fuzzy contours and indistinct potentials. Understood in this way, the poem is not so much about clarity, agency, and certainty as it is about the difficulty of exercising choice amidst complexity and indeterminacy, and choosing, because one must. For the scholars and professionals in these pages, those decisions were not simply, or even principally, about themselves, but were about how to work with others while also encouraging those individuals to engage in sustained reflection on their lived realities. Agency understood in these terms becomes not the definitive exercise of preference or judgment, but something of a tentative testing of discretion and direction, a movement toward what appears to be reasonable or probative perhaps, but which can in no sense be discerned at the outset as dependable or sure. The poem reminds its readers that what they will experience as their lives unfold is never fully fathomable in advance, and in any case, that they will assuredly be changed by seeking to realize whatever apparent option(s) they may adopt, as will any of those with whom they may interact as they pursue those choices. It is as if humans persistently, dynamically, exist at a crossroads of paradox characterized by possible courses and reliefs that are insistently hazy, irrespective of whether they have been well or poorly traveled in the past.

Orr specifically explored this idea of crossroads, so central to the poem, by employing anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of liminality. Here is how Turner described that phenomenon:

A limen is a threshold, but at least in the case of protracted initiation

rites or major seasonal festivals, it is a very long threshold, a corridor almost, or a tunnel which may, indeed, become a pilgrim's road or passing from dynamics to statics, may cease to become a mere transition and become a set way of life, a state. ... Let us refer to the state and process of mid-transition as 'liminality' and consider a few of its very odd properties. Those undergoing it—call them 'liminaries'—are betwixt-and-between established states of politico-jural structure. They evade ordinary cognitive classification too, for they are neither-this-nor-that, here-nor-there, on-thing-not-the-other. ... The most characteristic midliminal symbolism is that of paradox, or being both this and that.<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on Turner's conceptualization, Orr suggested,

A crossroads gives us exactly this scenario. The person who stands in such a place, debating his path, is neither on one road nor on the other. He is literally betwixt and between. ... The crossroads is, as Frost would say, the only spot in which one actually *can* travel both roads as one traveler.<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me that those interviewed for this volume find themselves constantly working in just such a state of liminality, of enduring paradox, in which they can never be sure of either the immediate portent and appropriateness of their actions and choices, nor of their longer-term implications or forms nor, indeed, when the results of choices may become, in Turner's terms, "set ways of life." Indeed, they cannot even be secure in the pertinence of the decisions they make, even as they must make them. That is, as those who share their thoughts and stories here have bent efforts to encourage possibilities for social change and justice, they could not know the ramifications of their choices, could not know whether they might yield outcomes anything like those for which they may have wished or instead, produce results that were far different from the scenarios they envisioned. In fact, they could not, as they pressed ahead, possess any certainty whatsoever concerning whether their efforts would yield any positive results, or might instead promote pernicious possibilities, or might rigidify and themselves create new constellations of obstacles. As Frost's traveler observed pithily in these terms, "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back."

Nonetheless, whether seeking to use music to encourage interaction and peacebuilding among otherwise conflicting parties, employing theatre to allow populations to reflect on difficult life circumstances or to ponder alternate ways of thinking, or working to assist a population only recently involved as victims or perpetrators in genocide begin to conceive of how to learn to live together once more amidst the continuing travail of the unimaginable, those interviewed for this book recount proceeding as if from crossroads to crossroads, addressing shifting circumstances and often deeply problematic exigencies as they did so. One might liken the individuals featured in this volume metaphorically to high wire trapeze artists working without a [social] safety net as they pressed for realization of their always risk-filled efforts.

The portrait that emerges from the liminality highlighted in “The Road Not Taken,” in which these interviewees have spent their careers, reminds the onlooker or analyst that no social change effort occurs apart from the involvement of many individuals. The choices implicit in such initiatives demand a complex admixture of person-to person and broader group, or social, engagement. And the formula—the options, so to speak—for how such amalgams will occur, will themselves shift across time. This is the very essence of complexity, even as it points up a tension implicit in human behavior. Human beings are innately social beings who cannot survive apart from their counterparts, especially, their families or family surrogates. Nonetheless, rooted in our evolution, human self-absorption and selfishness knows no bounds and our present prevailing social frame, dominated by capitalism and an associated hyper-individualism that often pretends that humans exist as if solitary beings confronting and exercising only utilitarian consumerist buying and selling choices, only encourages that proclivity.

Nothing could be further from humans’ lived reality, but the pervasiveness and broad acceptance of that atomistic construct reveals both the power of today’s dominant frame and the fact that those assenting to its strictures can wind up denying their very natures, their inherent interdependence with others by adopting it. This fact can exacerbate the always present challenge for would-be changemakers implicit in encouraging coalitions of the willing to press for shifts in prevailing community norms, beliefs, and values to galvanize and sustain social reflection. It can also work to corrode such fledgling efforts by eroding the ties those newly framed values represent by

suggesting they somehow limit personal freedom to act or believe as one might wish. The analysts and professionals whose interviews comprise this book have had to devise ways to bring those with whom they are working to an awareness of the power and pervasiveness of such claims in the United States and elsewhere and then go further and identify or develop strategies to work with them to devise opportunities for all engaged to share new norms and values and to come to accord concerning their significance for societal progress toward justice and democratic opportunity.

None of the individuals in these pages appears to have been daunted by the challenges their efforts must address in these terms, even though those might fairly be described as often Sisyphean in character. What seems clear is that those engaged in change initiatives only rarely can know if their efforts will scale and gain broad acceptance and result in significantly different social frames or imaginaries. More often, indeed, they may toil for decades and perish and never witness the complete fruition of their efforts. One thinks, for example, of the thousands in the United States who have worked for civil rights for African Americans or for women, or those who did the same on behalf of the human and civil rights of those with impairments. Many labored their entire lives without ever seeing tangible social change and yet just such has now occurred for these groups and others, however imperfectly and fitfully, because of their sustained efforts.

In an important sense, those interviewed for this volume have spent substantial portions of their lives and careers within Turner's protracted space of liminality in which they have labored to promote new possibilities. They have done so in social contexts constrained, often severely, by prevailing beliefs, fears, and values and without any certainty that their efforts would be permitted to continue, let alone yield sustained social change. Even so, they have persisted and surely have experienced micro-scale victories that have constituted behavioral reinforcements. Nevertheless, the overarching context in which they have bent their efforts has been one of existential possibility, rather than known certainty, or even readily identifiable probabilities.

Few authors have so incisively pointed up this signal reality as historian Rebecca Solnit. As she observed in her book, *Hope in the Dark*, concerning a conversation with a friend active in the civil rights movement:

My friend's different from many of his peers, and we talked about the more profound revolutions that had unfolded in our lifetimes [each was born in the 1950s], around race, gender, sexuality, food, economics, and so much more, the slow incremental victories that begin in the imagination and change the rules. But seeing those revolutions requires looking for something very different than armed cadres. It also requires being able to recognize the shade of grey between black and white or maybe to see the world in full color.<sup>6</sup>

Solnit went on to contend:

Much has changed; much needs to change; being able to recognize milestones and victories and keep working is what the time require of us. ... The deeply engaged well know that the particular bit of legislation under discussion isn't everything we hope for, doesn't get us all the way there, and also know that it can be a step forward from which further steps can and must be taken, and that change is often made incrementally, not by a great leap from pure evil to goodness.<sup>7</sup>

Irrespective of their specific domain of activity, those interviewed here appear to have been able to live and even to thrive within the liminality to which Frost, Turner, Orr, and Solnit have pointed. They have worked, and continue to work, assiduously for social change and justice despite the profound difficulty of doing so and while also seeking self-reflectively to dignify those with whom they are interacting, a task itself replete with a changing and changeable set of paradoxes to navigate. This liminal social space is profoundly important to the health of freedom and democracy and extremely challenging for those who must act within it. I know readers will profit from the trove of insights these leaders offer concerning the liminality of social change. They have addressed their hopes and responsibilities with profound moral courage and sincere dedication. It is a special privilege to showcase their efforts here.

MOS

August 27, 2022

Salem, Virginia

# Notes

1. Stephenson M. Jr. (2016, March 28). "The Road Not Taken," Soundings. Available at [https://ipg.vt.edu/tags.resource.html/ipg\\_vt\\_edu:Soundings](https://ipg.vt.edu/tags.resource.html/ipg_vt_edu:Soundings)
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PART I: ARTS, COMMUNITY  
AND SOCIAL CHANGE

# Chapter 1: Dudley Cocke

**Dudley Cocke**, Artistic Director of Roadside Theatre

**Date of Interview:** March 13, 2011

**Interviewers:** Brendan Brink-Halloran, Scott Tate, and Andy Morikawa

**Brendan Brink-Halloran:** Our first question concerns leadership in relationships. How do you see your ability, or the ability of your organization, to form authentic relationships across real or perceived differences in a way that dignifies those differences, yet allows for collective action and perhaps collective imagining?

**Dudley Cocke:** Well, that's not a quick process to begin with. I think one of the chief problems, when you're trying to bridge difference, is that often people on each side of the bridge, each culture, for example, really don't feel like their own voice has been heard. So, it's very hard for people whose own voice hasn't been heard to think of making a bridge. One of the images we can make, since we're here at Virginia Tech where some engineering goes on, if you think of a span of a bridge, the span depends on how strong the anchor is on each side. And similarly, I think when you're trying to bridge differences, each side of a divide has to be confident in their own voice. So, often, when we are working in communities to bridge differences, we begin with making sure and helping each of the partners in the bridge find their own voice, and they then figure out when they're ready to make the bridge. That really depends on having confidence and knowledge of one's own voice before you can even think of making the span.

**Brink-Halloran:** In your work do you find that you encounter significant differences and perhaps identities formed around those differences? Or do you feel that when you get people to have their own voice, and perhaps to give them a chance to talk together, that some of those differences aren't quite, or weren't quite, as concrete as perhaps they appeared to each participant?

**Cocke:** I see where you're going there. We seek out difference. I think there is a lot of division in this country. It seems like in the present, a huge amount

of divide, so the answer to your question for me, in my experience, is both-and. Yes, there is difference, and the difference is distinct, and we need to acknowledge it, the particularity of people and cultures and communities. But there's also a lot of universal things that, if we can acknowledge the difference then, in my experience, we can get to a lot of the common ground where we can meet and exchange. It's both-and for me.

**Scott Tate:** Dudley, I'd like to ask you to expand on that a little bit more, but more specifically in terms of the vision you have for Roadside Theater and the work that you've done with communities. What is your vision for working with communities and your vision with the organization?

**Cocke:** A lot of it is caught up in the history. Roadside Theater started in 1975 and it started in a place—eastern Kentucky, southwest Virginia, upper east Tennessee, southern West Virginia—right there on the Cumberland Plateau. It started in a place that really didn't have any professional theater. And when we said what we were aiming to do, people thought, well, good luck. We'll see you washed out in a few years, heading to New York or at least Louisville, Kentucky. When we said, well, why do you think we won't be able to do it? They said, the audiences have no habit of going to the theater, plus you don't have any theatrical traditions.

Well, that was wrong. So, we started thinking about what the theatrical traditions were right around us. And, as almost everybody knows, country music came out of that very place I'm talking about and flowed down to Nashville. Bluegrass music is still centered there, with people like Ralph Stanley. So, we had a wonderful musical tradition. We also have a very strong oral history tradition. Often you find areas and cultures where the official story has been written down, and the unofficial story, or the people's history, is kept in the oral tradition, and that's true where I am. So, there was all this oral history, and then there's this grand archetypal storytelling tradition: the Jack tales and the Muttsmeg tales, for example. So, we had that to draw on. Then you put all that together and think about some of the dramatic church services that we have two, three times a week, and you've got the makings of a theater. So, we, from the beginning, began inventing both the content, because there was no Appalachian body of drama, and also the form. And we drew it out of those influences. So that's the place we jump off from and that's our orientation.

**Tate:** You mentioned place. One of the things that I hear you saying is that you build your work on the place itself, on its history, its traditions, its cultures. But in terms of working with the community from the place where it is, looking toward the future, what's your vision of working with communities to move forward?

**Cocke:** Well, James Baldwin once said that “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.” That's certainly true in our work. But the first thing we had to start at Roadside doing was stitching together our history, from about the Civil War to now, because that history had been told from the coal company perspective. That was the written history. And there is, as I said, a parallel track of history, a people's history very different than that official version. So, we began uncovering and telling that story in a series of plays, musical plays for the most part, that retold that history up to the present from the communities' or people's point of view. So, you have to have some sense of your past before you can begin plotting your future, and if that sense of your past is a very discouraging or stereotypical sense of your past, it's going to be hard to have the vision, the hope to look forward. So, we began, by that process, and then as we got up into the present, our plays are more about contemporary issues. But it goes back to this point I was making earlier, which is by then, people had their own voice, a collective voice in the community, and their own sense of their history, a much more prideful sense. So, that's important when you're trying to figure out the future in really very hard times. Central Appalachia, as you know, is where the war on poverty began in the 1960s and it's still one of the poorest places in the United States. So, there are a lot of challenges there. It's economically poor, but it's culturally very rich, and of course, the paradox is, how can you have such a rich land full of resources, natural resources, and poor people? Now, that's something for the country to ponder. And there are many examples of it now beyond Appalachia.

**Brink-Halloran:** Dudley, when you talk about the challenges faced by folks in that part of the country, that gets me thinking about ways to catalyze change, and I wonder if you see yourself and your organization as a change agent, as working to spark or catalyze or empower change in that region, or if you could maybe talk a little bit about that.

**Cocke:** As I mentioned with the James Baldwin quotation, there is something important that artists do, which is to ask questions that have not been asked.

So, that's a function of art. Really, we work in many ways. And if you're looking at policy change, one of our current projects is called *One Thousand Kites*, and it's a project about over-incarceration in the United States. The United States has five times the incarceration rate of any country in the world.

Again, that's something for us to think about. How can we in the land of the free, home of the brave, have five times the imprisonment rate of any other nation in the world? So, that was an issue that came to us. We don't sit around and think about what all the national issues are. We look right around us, and it's through the lens of what is right around us that we see out into the rest of the world. So here we are in the mid-1990s in southwest Virginia, where I live, and suddenly these super maximum-security prisons start being built right in our backyard. That means our neighbors are going to work there. And we're thinking, what does this mean for us? Now, we're told that these prisons are for the worst of the worst, and so that, boy, they're putting the worst of the worst down here with us. Well, who are these worst of the worst? They're African-American people from Tidewater, Richmond, and Northern Virginia. And then, because there's such a thing as prisoner renting, you must keep the beds full. They're state-private partnerships. There's some money to be made. So, they have a thing called prisoner renting. If you are a warden and you've got 10 beds empty, that's not good. You need that income, so you call a prison broker and you'll get 10 prisoners from somewhere. Could be New Mexico. Could be Connecticut. We had women prisoners from all the way in Hawaii. We had male prisoners from the Virgin Islands. Now, if you have a family member incarcerated in Appalachia and you're living in Hawaii or the Virgin Islands, how many times do you think you're going to see that person? So, what we just finished doing was a campaign across the state of Virginia, which has no parole and mandatory sentencing. We were on a campaign, a community restoration campaign, we called it, in which grassroots groups across the state were organizing and talking to their legislators about some kind of reform, where people who make extraordinary efforts can be released earlier than required by a fixed mandatory sentence. It makes economic sense. Rehabilitation is important. These people are coming back into our communities and we want them to come back rehabilitated. So, this is the kind of thing that we do. What was our role in it? We ran the media campaign for it from a website. We trained about 100-plus community people with flip cameras, which is this

technology that you can use to record stories, and we showed them how to do it, load it right up onto the website. So, that created 100 community correspondents who could go out and get the story about what prison means in their communities. And it's not just from the prisoners' point of view. I mean, we're all affected by it. So, it's the prison guards, the people working there, it's the whole 360 degrees of the experience that we're trying to get at. We don't have the idea for reform, exactly. That's not our role. Our role is to stimulate the conversation and we believe when people in Virginia and other parts of the United States understand how out of control the situation is, that the citizens will figure out what the right answer is. So that's the kind of theory of change that we work with. If I wanted to put it in a more theoretical way for Ph.D. students, I might say something like, those experiencing a problem have to be the generative base for its solution, and that when you lose that connection to those most affected by a challenge, when it gets lifted off the reality and the iterative critical discourse of those most affected, then you lose a strong strategy. So, we say, everybody is affected in Virginia. Nobody, none of us sitting right here in the studio, is more than two degrees of separation from the prison issue, so that's the kind of theory that we work with, but we work with it in a very practical way, with churches and community organizations, that are our partners.

**Brink-Halloran:** We have kind of a thread through a lot of the questions that you've been answering about helping people take ownership of their history by using culturally appropriate and grounded-in-place stories and giving people a chance to exercise their voice. It sounds like you see part of the role of your organization of helping to catalyze people to have the capacity to utilize their agency to make change on the issues that they see in their communities. Does that kind of mesh with the vision that you have?

**Cocke:** Very well put. That's exactly what we're doing. One of the things we're doing.

**Tate:** And great examples, by the way. One of the things that I'm thinking about is, if you could elaborate a little bit in your work with communities, how do you see your work empowering people in communities, or working with communities to help recognize and solve the problems they face themselves? How do you see communities building capacity and maybe your experience and work with that?

**Cocke:** What we do when we go into a community that we're not a part of, we help that community amplify, and in some cases find its voice. Now, there are some important principles in doing that. One, most any community you walk into is going to have some sort of divisions in it, some sort of segregation, whether it's by race or by class, those are the two big ones. So, one of the roles we have, as outsiders, is to come into these communities and make sure the door stays open so that everybody can be in the conversation. I mean, what we've lost in the United States, it seems in this year, by this year 2011, is a real democratic Commons, where people from all stripes can come together and listen to each other. So that's our jumping-off point, to try to create that space where people can come together, and once they are together, we have specific methodologies that help them listen to each other, and then define their own problems. I mean, it's just remarkable to me how divided communities are.

A lot of the orientation of Roadside Theater's work, and my own orientation, comes out of conservative political philosophy, and yet anybody who hears that I'm in the nonprofit theater media business would immediately assume that I'm all liberal oriented. It's just not true. I mean, two of the tenets of conservatism as a philosophy: one of them is, reality is that which, when you don't believe it, it doesn't go away. Well, Central Appalachian knows a lot about reality. And the second is that evil exists, and we can think about that in a lot of different ways, but certainly the culture of Central Appalachia, a lot of that population recognizes that. And it kind of reminds me that one time, Carl Jung was asked what motivated his whole career and his philosophy and research, and he said something to the effect that, "I was trying to understand where evil comes from."

**Tate:** Hearing about the work that you do, some people may be surprised to see that you're engaged in theater, and it's coming from a theater company perspective, and want to get your thoughts more directly on what you see as the role of theater, but more generally the arts, in community problem solving.

**Cocke:** Well, to begin with, I didn't really go into theater until I was 29 years old. My background before then was in politics, not running for office, but I was involved with political movements, beginning with the Civil Rights Movement, very tangentially, as a teenager and then as I hit my early 20s, in the anti-war [anti-Vietnam War] movement. I'd always been interested in

writing and was writing, so I sort of slipped into theater, really thinking of it as just a writing gig (this play that I co-authored), as they say, and that would be that. Well, it turns out, and here I hadn't paid much attention. Once you write a play, it's useless unless it's produced. Well, that hadn't occurred to me. So, we thought we had a pretty good play, but it was useless until produced, so at that point we decided to found a theater company to produce that play, and then to go on.

So, I just began to understand the power of art. I mean, I'd always understood the power of culture, and art as a kind of concentration of culture. I define culture in a very anthropological, broad sense, which is the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional, and material traditions and features of people. So, if you're talking intellectual, spiritual, emotional, a lot of people forget that different peoples and different communities and different cultures have different emotional traditions. Anyway, if that's what culture is and you're concentrating that with art, you're really talking about a very powerful thing. It just reminds me that former Iowa Congressman Jim Leach, who is now the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in one of his first speeches after being appointed by President Barack Obama to the chairmanship, stated that culture was more powerful than politics. Again, here is something that we need to think about. Here's an Iowa Republican congressman who has come to that conclusion after a whole career on the Hill, and what's he talking about? Well, I think he's talking about the power of people's spiritual, intellectual, emotional traditions and features. That's who we are. And it was captured in the 1960s by, "We've got to win hearts and minds in Vietnam." So, it's not an obscure thought, but our policies often don't line up behind that. Our policies don't encourage art and culture very much in this country.

**Morikawa:** Could you tell us a little about your work with the Zuni nation?

**Cocke:** Well, we began the Zuni work 28 years ago. Roadside Theater created all original plays, and we toured them across the U.S. We perform a lot in Central Appalachia as well, but there's not a lot of cash there, and so we used the fees from national touring to subsidize the development of new plays and our work at home. We work a lot at home in the schools.

The point is, we were out touring through Arizona and New Mexico 28 years ago and on this three or four-week tour, we had a couple of down days, and

I had a good friend over in Zuni who I'd actually met on a basketball court in Gallup (New Mexico). He was on the other side, and I can't remember who won. I used to play a lot of pick-up basketball around the country.

Wherever I was, I'd head to a court. And so, we got quite a game going there in Gallup. And I met this guy, and he was a Zuni guy over in Gallup doing something or another, and we got to be friends, so from there we kept up a little bit. But here we were, the Company out there in New Mexico and we got two days off. I said, let's go visit my buddy in Zuni. So, we got to Zuni and he showed us around and we went to one of the dances.

One of the fellows, Tommy Bledsoe, in the company, had a very, very long red beard and long blond-red hair, quite a striking looking guy and wonderful banjo player. So, we were watching the dances and we heard this sort of whispering around us, and everybody in Zuni speaks Zuni, and we said, "What are they saying?" And they were debating, Edward [Wemytewa] said, whether that was ZZ Top. One of them said, "Is that ZZ Top?" And the other one said, "What would ZZ Top be doing in Zuni?" And one respondent said, "Well, I don't know, but it looks like ZZ Top." So that was our introduction to Zuni.

Of course, when musicians and storytellers come to a community, even though they're wanting to lay back with a two-day break, you don't. You've got to come into the schools and tell some stories. So, we went into the schools, just as a favor on our day off, telling some stories and playing some music, and the Zuni kids were falling out of their desks. I mean, they just loved these big archetypal stories that come from Central Appalachia, because they have their own great archetypal stories.

And the point was, that the kids had so much fun, it began to shame the Zuni people, who weren't using their stories in the school anymore. In fact, they'd lost their storytellers. And so, our small engagement kind of shamed them, seeing how much fun their kids were having listening to Appalachian stories. So that started what was to become the first Zuni language theater, Idiwanan An Chawe, that my friend (Edward Wemytewa) formed, but it really came out of this impulse: those kids were having so much fun that we've got to show them that we've got the same thing. So, that's how it started.

**Morikawa:** And does it continue today?

**Cocke:** Yeah, 28 years later, we're still going. We went through a whole period where we were bringing the Zuni young people, particularly middle schoolers, some few high schoolers too, into Central Appalachia, and then our students would go out there in exchange. Well, you know how that goes. In middle school, you had the boys falling in love with girls and vice versa and all this going on and on and on, and, "can you believe he threw that football 30 yards," and, that kind of sparking going on, so that really began to surface, the Native American part of the Central Appalachian culture.

A lot of people don't think of it maybe, but any family in Central Appalachia that was there before 1900 has got Indian blood, so one of the things that teachers did when we had the visitors from Zuni, they said to the kids, go out find out if you've got any Indian Heritage in your family. Oh, those kids came back the next day, they had more Indian heritage than you could shake a rattle at, and you know, it just all started coming up, but nobody had ever asked. If you don't ask the question, then there isn't any way to answer, right? So, that got them going and then, unbeknownst to us, I mean, we didn't help with it, but I think it was the Kiwanis or the Rotary, they started a whole little Native American museum. And it just came because they realized, hey, this is another wonderful part of who we are and thanks for asking.

**Morikawa:** Have there been relationships with other tribes?

**Cocke:** Well, we've performed and worked with other tribal communities, but those have been short-term and of course the Zuni folk, they've got relationships all through the Southwest. Their sister tribe is the Hopi. The Zuni and the Hopi are probably the two most traditional tribes in the U.S., and it's an accident of their good fortune of being Pueblo people, so that they are still on their native land, whereas, the Apache, for example, who were moved by our government to all sorts of other places; they were pretty much wiped out.

**Morikawa:** What is Roadside Theater working on now?

**Cocke:** Well, we're working a lot on this *One Thousand Kites* national prison work. After the Virginia campaign wound down just a few weeks ago, we heard from people in New York State who want to mount a statewide campaign. So, they want us to help them do that. Of course, all our process is iterative in the sense that, we try something, and we try to step back and

learn from it and improve on it. And so, we're right now sifting the lessons from the Virginia campaign, and it looks like we're going to take that up to New York. That's one thing we're doing. We founded a music school in southwest Virginia and that'll be coming up this summer and it's a wonder to see kids from 9 years old to 25 coming in with their mandolins and fiddles and their banjos and learning to play. So that's going on.

We've got a new musical, one of a series of plays we've made with Pregones Theater in the South Bronx. This is a Puerto Rican-Dominican theater in the South Bronx, and it's a play called Betsy. It's kind of funny how we got started with this Pregones bunch. We kept looking, this was 20 years ago or so, at the government poverty statistics. Every year, they print out what are the poorest communities. In fact, they just named eastern Kentucky, southern West Virginia and southwest Virginia as one of the most stressful places to live in the United States. Hawaii was the least stressful. So, there you go. Anyway, we're looking at these government poverty statistics coming out every year, and sure enough we're sort of playing tag back and forth with the South Bronx. And we said, "My gosh. It's always us and the South Bronx. They've got to be our cousins some which way. We'd better go see our cousins." So, we figured out how to hook up with a theater company there and see what's up. So that's how it started.

This new play is a musical and it's got 18 original songs, compositions, and it ranges from Irish songs, because the play starts in Ireland, all the way up to jazz, South Bronx-Caribbean infected jazz. So, it's a long sort of history, and the story is, this woman, Betsy—it's called Betsy— inherits her parents' jazz club. They are in the South Bronx, and they had been a famous jazz couple and right before her mother died, she was writing all this music and leaving fragments of this, that and the other, and Betsy inherits this box full of music and fragments and the club.

Well, it turns out that Betsy's grandparents, who she never remembered meeting, were from down here in the hills, and when her mother married a colored person, as they used to say then, if they were being polite, they would have nothing to do with her or the child again. So here is Betsy, suddenly discovering that half of her is this Scots Irish heritage and these two ghosts appear in the club and they take her through her whole history, beginning in Ireland, when her great, great, great-grandmother was seduced by a sailor. Great, great, great-grandmother was an Irish milking maid

seduced by a sailor, brought over to this country and of course abandoned by the sailor, good man that he was, and she became an indentured servant.

And in fact, this whole question of indentured servitude is something else we don't know enough about. Tony Morrison, the novelist, has written some about it. In *Beloved*, I mean, you see parts of it, but there were a lot of white indentured people. It's a shorter form of slavery in the United States and it's something to pay more attention to. So, it's a play about that and it's a musical. I mean most of our work is musical.

**Morikawa:** How about, in closing, Dudley, do you have a story you could tell us?

**Cocke:** Well, what do you want to story about?

**Morikawa:** How about a story about reconciliation.

**Cocke:** Hmm. Reconciliation. I'll tell you a story about the process of reconciliation. We are, as you can tell, pretty process oriented. We made this play called *Junebug Jack*, again one of a series of plays we made with the theater company from New Orleans, Junebug Productions. It's a theater company that came out of the civil rights movement and particularly out of the SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]. So, we made this play, *Junebug Jack*, a musical, and it tells the story of the coming to this country of African Americans and Scots Irish and traces this poor and working-class relationship of black and white people in the south from that time to the Vietnam War.

So, we had a problem with the play. Not with the script or the performance. The problem was, as we went around the country doing this play, how were we going to attract an audience of poor and working class and middle class black and white people to the theater? I mean, that's what the play is about. You don't want to make a play about that and then just do it for the wealthiest 15 percent of the people in the country, which is unfortunately the American nonprofit theater audience. So, we had a problem. How are we going to get these folks? I mean, people, working class, middle class, poor people typically do not go to the nonprofit professional theater. So that was our problem and what we wanted to do, because it wasn't just the play we were doing, but a whole conversation occurring in the community beyond the play. The play was just one milestone in this conversation about race and class, right? And

the play is very frank and it's argumentative. So, we had a problem of, how are we going to get these folks to come?

And the way we solved it is, we asked every community that we went to, to agree to put together several months ahead of time, a community choir. And it was an ecumenical choir. It was a choir drawing two or three people from the white Presbyterian church, four or five people from the African-American AME Zion Church, maybe a couple from the women's chorus, maybe some kids from the high school. So, they formed this community-wide choir, and we sent them the music. Of course, the music's all charted. We sent them the music ahead, they picked the choir director or chorus director, and they studied and learned the music. So, here you've got all these different people from the community who typically are somewhat segregated from each other, each in their own lives. Somebody said that Sunday is the most segregated day of all, right? So, here they are coming together and they're not coming together to hash out race and class. They're coming together to sing, and when they start to sing, they get a sound they've never gotten before in that community, and that sound they've never gotten, well the young people tune into that because they are B-O-R-E-D. So, they say whoa, something's going on here.

So, by then, they get the music all rehearsed, then I would come in, and spend a few days staging them into the play. We're talking the evening because people are working. I stage them into the play, then the whole community comes out. Of course, the churches have got to come out to support their people, etcetera, etcetera. So, suddenly the auditorium is full of the whole community. Now the curious thing is, they know their own singing traditions. What delights them is hearing the other traditions. But they are hearing the other traditions, knowing that their tradition has been fully represented, acknowledged, and represented. So, then from that, you've got the basis of trust for a conversation about how we can all get along better.

Now, I'll tell you, it was a little different. For some of our plays, we might get ready for the performance by having a sip of Wild Turkey [premium Kentucky Bourbon Whiskey]. In these performances, you prayed before you went on the stage. There was a cast prayer before you went on. It could sometimes get a little long, depending on our nerves, or the nerves of the other folks. So, that's a story about the process of reconciliation.

# Chapter 2: Bill Cleveland

**William Cleveland**, Director of the Center for the Study of Art and Community

**Date of Interview:** April 19, 2018

**Interviewers:** Max Stephenson, Thomas Murray, and Sarah Lyon-Hill  
Questions from audience members

**Sarah Lyon-Hill:** Your biography says that you originally completed a degree in psychology from the University of Maryland. Would you describe the road you took that led you to becoming a significant actor in arts-based community development?

**Bill Cleveland:** It's interesting, some of the metaphors we use: the road. It was more like a lost meander in the woods that leads you to a path that you never imagined you'd end up on. The irony is, one of the things that happens, I think you've all been through this experience, when you're in high school and someone says, "What do you want to do?" And you obviously have no idea, and I've ascertained that many counselors in high schools have a little trigger, and that is that for the people that are most confused, they recommend psychology because it's supposedly some place where you get your head straight. So, that's where I ended up. And unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, the University of Maryland at that time was really lockstep in the behaviorist field of psychology, which meant the idea that human beings were the subject matter really was kind of secondary. We spent a lot of time with animals, particularly rats and mazes, things like that. It was all behavior theory and a few other courses, Freud and Jung, and whatever.

So I came out of my university experience not a friend of my first encounter with higher education at all, because basically the thing that taught me the most was the cultural and social environment that I was experiencing in my daily life, in spite of what was going on in the classroom. And I'm really sorry to say that, because as I look back, I know there were things I could have taken advantage of, but at the end of the day, I sort of was thrust into the world via an alternative path, and one of the first places that I that I ended

up was Northern Ontario, Canada, on what was then called a commune. We were starting from scratch. We were going not only to save the world, but we were also going to save ourselves, we were going to be self-sufficient. We were going to survive the winter and ultimately do good. It was a commune that was devoted to helping young people who had sort of fallen off the log, let me just say. And we, I think, did a pretty good job, but the end result was that we sort of raised ourselves in an environment that asked us what we wanted to be responsible for, what we wanted to be accountable for, and in essence, it was the first university for me, rather than an experience in my life.

Along the way I picked up a guitar and I believed all the while that there were no limits to the idea of what we could be. So, back in the day you could just say, well, let's be a band. OK, we're a band. And then we ended up practicing a lot, rehearsing a lot, getting gigs, wandering around northern Canada, being a band and basically learning social entrepreneurship, being sort of career creative innovators, learning how to run a small business. And then coming back to the commune and learning how to be together as human beings in the middle of a place where, for six months of the year, you could be at the end of a road and not leave.

So, that all led me to come back to the United States. I have to say, I was not there because of the draft, although it was the same period, and there were a lot of Americans that were there for that reason during that period. I came back and I stumbled into this thing. It was the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, late 1970s. A significant economic downturn was underway in the U.S. and the typical policy-maker response, coming out of the New Deal pattern, was to create jobs programs. At that, time the Department of Labor basically had a massive budget that was used to hire unemployed people in cities and counties and nonprofits across the country. A good friend of mine who had been an intern at the Office of Management and Budget, looked at that Act and said, every artist I know qualifies for this program.

Long story short, six months later, we're on the road to three straight years of the largest investment in the arts by the U.S. government in history, to the tune of about \$300 million a year in late 1970s dollars. I ended up as an administrator and an artist, because you sort of did both back in those days in one of those programs, and it was the beginning of the idea that

art-making and community work had a place where they could connect. It was very strange because artists were basically given an opportunity to go interview for a senior center and convince them that there was something they could do that would be useful. It was all completely ad hoc and improvisational, but the great thing about it was that these were 40-hour-a-week jobs, so artists got to go and actually practice trying to make sense of themselves in places where they never imagined working, like jails, park districts and social service agencies, and learning by the seat of their pants, using their artistic skills actually to do the research, and then ask themselves, “What is it I know that could help these folks accomplish with they are trying to accomplish?” That’s really the door, the window, of the serendipitous sort of movie that I stumbled into, that introduced me to this incredible synthesis of art-making and community-building.

**Thomas Murray:** That’s fantastic, Bill. In coursework that I had with both Bob [Leonard, Professor of Theater at Virginia Tech] and Max [Stephenson, Professor of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech], we read your book, *Art and Upheaval: Artists on the World’s Front Lines*. We also came across this quotation that has stuck with me from a theater practitioner named Alvina Krauss who founded the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania and is a former faculty member at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She said in an interview in 1980 with *Northwestern University Magazine*, “that the community is beginning to see what I’d hope they would see. The theater, and the arts by extension, should be, can be, a vital part of the community, just as important as the school, the church, or for that matter, the grocery store. All theater is entertainment, first of all, but theater can illuminate life as it is.” I’m curious, what is your take on this idea and how do you see your positioning of the arts in your community?

**Cleveland:** I think one of the interesting things about Western civilization, and particularly modern Western civilization, is that there is a significant part of human history, maybe 39,000 years of it, that is often ignored. So, all the things that she mentioned were historically in the official job description for what we would think of as an artist, meaning a sort of a spirit leader or shaman in a community, long before anybody had a word called theater or dance or painting. And all those things were a natural function of the job of a person in the community who is basically trying to help the community

create coherence, cooperate, connect to the mysterious forces of the natural world that are so scary, and to answer, or at least to provide some context, for making sense and meaning in a world that is pretty threatening.

So, our forefather and mother artists really were at the center of the ritual fire in community life. The whole idea of entertainment, and the idea that what people do onstage in theater, has as its principal purpose a moment to take time out and do something different from what you normally do, is a small part of that original job description. And my sense is that what's always happened is that whether it's people coming from the artistic side of it, or from the other side of it, which is people basically trying to build community, to build some coherent narrative about what our society is about, what our tribe is about, people always have kind of veered back into it. The institutions we've created have resisted that because what institutionalization really says is, "This is where the definition of this function in our society is, and this is where the power is and these are the lanes and you don't get out of your lanes." And we're now living in a world where the lanes are well dissolved in art and science and politics and culture. All those things are melding and mushing together and a lot of the kind of struggle that we're experiencing in the world is a natural discomfort with all those borders starting to melt.

I think one of the reasons that there's a greater interest in artists—"Oh you're an artist, you might have something useful to me"—is that people are coming to grips with the fact that we live in a world that is change-constant, that uncertainty is a natural normal ongoing state of the world. Traditionally, one of the principal functions of the original job description for the artist or the shaman was to help to make sense and meaning of a world that is always in flux.

**Murray:** Speaking of in flux, there had been a resource called the Community Arts Network, that you were a regular contributor to, and you have been a board member for Art in the Public Interest, its governing agent. That online resource went static in 2010, and I have been working on the Virginia Tech Art Works Initiative to create something that provides the possibility for a similar exchange within the field of community cultural development, or arts-based community development. As we have been talking about the field, I have ended up in conversations with Michael Rohd, the founder of Sojourn Theatre and the Center for Performance and Civic Practice, as well as Mark Valdez of Cornerstone Theatre Company, and they have expressed

some caution that the term community cultural development may just be the term du jour, essentially arguing that this field is ever-changing and evolving, My question is, what's in a name, and do you have any sense of where we're potentially moving forward to?

**Cleveland:** This is something that I have paid a lot of attention to, and as is often the case, there are multiple “yes-and’s” in response to this question. The first is to note that you don’t need a term du jour when nobody cares. Often a title, a name, a label just sticks because. Community Arts was the term that was used for most of the time I think that Bob Leonard and I were involved in it. In terms of the broader cultural community, it was sort of thought of as maybe in the same context as crafters, a kind of human behavior that bears some resemblance to what artists do but was not particularly important in the broader scheme of things.

Now when Michael Rohd was here at Virginia Tech, he talked about how there is a rising interest in this field. One of the things is that there have been, by my count in the short time that I've been in this field, let's say maybe 30 years, there have been at least five periods of rising interest in it. So, my experience is that the nomenclature, the resources available, the interest and the motivation come and go. We are a society that has great skill in coming and going in all kinds of things, in the same way we forget our history. So, do these names matter?

One other thing I want to mention is that about two years ago, I did a study on who is training people in this field. Now, to do that, to have a coherent conversation with somebody about what the field is, you must start with, how do you define it? And then, what words do you use to define it? We came up with 17 current terms being used. And you could almost make a map like the old map of Italy, with all the different city-states. It was like, this one is this one because it's coming from universities. This one is this one because this foundation decided that was the term it wanted to use in its grant-making. So, to the question, what's in a name? Nothing and everything. The nothing is, I don't care what you call it if you're very clear about what your intention is, who you're accountable to and what your definitions of success are. You can call it, “I'm a hot dog vendor, and I happen to work with artists and we're really interested in changing truancy in our community,” if you wish. At the end of the day the question is, how's the truancy problem coming along, right?

But the flip side is that we live in a very distorted economic environment, not just in this field, but in the arts in general. And so, as the term du jour becomes wider and broader, you literally can see a migration of descriptions coming from different areas where resources are coming from and those get attached to dollars. And one of the interesting things, and I've worked with a lot of these funders, is how they will use a label and they'll be consistent in their use of it, but over time the definition of what that term means goes all over the place.

So as a practitioner, those of you who are going to be in arts leadership, whether you're raising money or not, you are going to have to learn the pretzel dance, and the pretzel dance is basically, what shape do you want me to be, in order for you to be able to see me so that I can get your attention, maybe to provide resources for me? The pretzel dance is really intense in this field.

And one of the things that I feel really strongly about is that this is a field that is young, and in order for the field to mature and to end up having rigor and having the kind of impact I think it can have, it's going to have to take control of the conversation about what matters, what defines success, what are the moral and ethical issues that are addressed here? Other than that, it's going to just go back onto the menu as something that will likely disappear.

**Lyon-Hill:** That kind of answers one of the questions that I had previously. When you talk about this field, particularly when it comes to government funding, there's a certain period where governments are all, "We're going to give money to the arts and it's going to help communities." And then, they are, "Now we're not, we're not going to do that. We're going to follow a more or less neoliberal framework and say the arts should fend for themselves. That's not the role of government." So, my question is, how do artists and arts advocates help to promote the field, help to define and take control of that story to show to funders, both private and government alike?

**Cleveland:** Well, you know, there's a very, very complicated economic theory that says the people who write the check get to determine the outcome they desire. So, my sense is that, in the broader arts field, if you look at it, largely nonprofit-based, in the nonprofit world, you have a three-legged stool that all nonprofits work under. You have a funder, whether it's government or a private actor, doesn't matter. You have some form of public, the recipient of

the service that is taking place. And then you have the service deliverer. So, you have a theater company, you have a funder, and you have an audience. Now in the more rigorous commercial world, that third leg isn't there. If I'm making hot dogs and you don't like 'em, you don't buy 'em, I go out of business. In the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, I must convince you, the funder, that what I'm doing is worth it. What I'm telling you I'm doing may be completely different from what I'm doing for the audience. That is, in clinical definition, the beginning of a schizophrenic relationship with the world and you can see that manifest in many, many nonprofit arts organizations. It is this, what did we tell, what story is this? And it's not healthy and the thing that it's most unhealthy for is the art, is the work. If you're skating on thin ice most of the time and you're not actually sure of the story you're spinning in order to find the resources that you need to do your work, and you're also trying to go out on limbs in a rigorous and intentional way and tell stories and connect with people in ways that transcend what they see on screen, you absolutely have to have your A game. And when you're second-guessing yourself, looking over your shoulder, when you're not sure of what you're doing, when in some cases your season is sort of determined by a whole bunch of things that have nothing to do with your artistic intentions, you're in trouble with your work.

My antidote to this, which is probably Pollyanna-ish, but I really believe in it is, let the Nonprofit Industrial Complex go ahead and do whatever it's going to do, and participate to the degree that you feel comfortable doing it, but figure out a way to get earned income. Figure out a way to have a direct relationship with the community you live in so that a significant share of the resources that you need to do your work is coming from people who find what you do incredibly useful. That, to my mind, means broadening the definition of what you do and who you do it for. One interesting thing about that study that we did was, we asked a lot of local arts agency leaders what their definition of their constituency is. There's right now a very slow-motion but persistent shift in mission for local arts agencies in America that I think is game-changing. They are moving from arts-centric—meaning we're an Arts Council in Blacksburg and our job is to nurture and support the arts in this community, which has been a traditional definition and mission—to community-centric. So, the question is, what does “we” represent and what do the artists and arts organizations in our community have to do with the ongoing big story that is happening in our community? And to my mind,

when I mentioned sort of that 40,000-year history, this new trend is just going back to those roots, because that's what we started as, not some peripheral extra, but actually right at the center of asking the question: Where does this community need to go in order to thrive? Period. End of debate.

**Murray:** Over the course of your scholarly work, you have documented artists working in communities under an array of different circumstances: post-trauma, in the middle of crisis and rebuilding. Can you speak to where you have seen pitfalls or dangers in artists going into community, perhaps a warning of where their efforts in the past have created more harm than shared meaning?

**Cleveland:** So, the impetus for all of the training work that I've done actually started with Bob Leonard. We had a wonderful colleague named Alice Lovelace, and another, Diane Wiley at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. And they developed this incredible program that is still going on. It's the Arts Extension Service, so it's basically arts administration training as a part of the University of Massachusetts, but it's national in scope. And they were doing A.B.C.D. training for arts administrators, and what was happening, it was one of those boomlets.

Remember I mentioned there were sort of at least five in the field during the last 30 years coming and going? Well, it was one of those. What was happening was that there was this assumption early on, "Oh, you're an artist. I guess you know now we're having artists go and work with senior citizens. Here's your referral slip. Go knock on the door of a senior citizen center and just go work. Do whatever wonderful magic stuff you do."

And what I have described is exactly what happened a lot of the time: neither the people who were hosting them, nor the artists themselves had any real sense of what it meant to come into, particularly institutionalized, environments that had their own vocabulary and their own definitions of success and had their own, in some cases, corruptions, and somehow become a useful partner and make sense of it: the politics, the efficacy of the work and where you could help. And, certainly, nobody was assuming that you could do harm, because of course art-making is such a peripheral, trivial thing that the worst that can happen is that people don't like your work, right? When in fact, here's a really short story: During the CETA

[Comprehensive Employment Training Act (1973)] program that I mentioned, there was a pretty well-organized program of dancers going into senior centers to work with their residents.

And they designed these two-week residencies for frail elderly. These were people in wheelchairs, who were often shut down because of their isolation from society, from community life, non-communicative. And a group of dancers created a curriculum for working specifically with these folks as a way basically to reintroduce them to their bodies, as a way of reintroducing themselves to the world. And they went in, and they did their two-week residencies, and the before and after stuff was striking. It was amazing. When their cycle was through, because they went to many senior centers, there was a meeting of the activity directors of all the centers and the artists, and the artists were there to celebrate. But the meeting had a completely different subject matter and that was that the short-term impact was tremendous, and the long-term impact was horrible. And that's because you brought a new elixir, a new drug, an amazing new resource into the lives of these people and they connected to it and it made a difference and then you just pulled it out.

And so that story, really, is the first ripple in a current that continues to this day, which is this whole idea of, we live and we work in the arts in a place where episodes actually, in many cases, define the work. In straight working in art, you know, the play is the play, the play happens, you strike, you're out, you're finished. It's a new day. When you're engaged in messing with other people's lives, that's not the story that you're in and there's a difference in the work.

The reason the training was so important was literally to say, at that point, for artists: Time out here. You're entering into a different force field. There are two different things at play here and it's really important for you to, number one, decide if you want to be involved with those kinds of stakes. And number two, if you are so inclined, to ask, what are the skills and strategies that I have to use in art to behave ethically in this kind of environment? That's critical. And I have to say there are so many people out there doing it. Unfortunately, there are funders, too, whose criteria for good work are to give you a pat on the back and that's that when the money runs out and say you had done a good job with it. And that's unfortunate.

**Lyon-Hill:** Are there ways you can suggest to practitioners, because honestly, a lot of what you are discussing relates to the nature of funding. It is very much set. They're asking for this cause- and-effect during a short-term period, you know. At best you have maybe a year or two to implement your program and say, "Oh, look at how all of these amazing impacts happened!" Are there ways that artists can approach the work to ensure that it is at least in some respects sustainable over time?

**Cleveland:** Well, number one is, it's interesting. If someone asked me to design a car that could get me from here to downtown Blacksburg, with the least amount of money, the least amount of fuel, we could probably put together something pretty quick and dirty with a lawn mower engine and some tires we might find. We might even get some people to push us from here to downtown, especially as it is only a matter of blocks.

Now, I think we all agree that, that we wouldn't want to use that same strategy to try and get from here to California. So, it basically begins with design standards. If in fact, number one, you're fully aware that most opportunities for resources are not going to support the 10-year window that most social scientists are saying is a minimum for producing sustainable community change. It's also important to know that this is a debate in the funding community. People are calling the question. But we recognize that. We don't want to be Pollyanna. We want to know that that's there. But on the other hand, we want to operate ethically. What I will say is, design for the 10-year frame. And I don't mean design a 10-year program, but in the same way that if you were building a house, if you knew that you could only do one room at a time, build a foundation that will eventually, after the iterations of your building process take place, still be able to support the house that you've built. So, that has to do with building partnerships and community, basically establishing a definition of success that is accountable, demonstrable, and has data to prove it, even though you know that your initial effort will not get you there. You're building to the future from the beginning, the minute you start designing. So that's, to me, that's an ethical practice for doing good work.

The other one is that with anybody that you're engaging, specific community members and partners, be completely transparent about the reality of the environment you're working in. We only have a year's worth of money. Our intention here is to create a permanent change in your community. The

resources we have will not do that. Will you join us in a sense of venture capital sweat equity, and with the hope that we will get there and help us design as though we're going to win? So that's number one.

Number two is, we all have, in the nonprofit world, an unconscious set of kneepads that we carry around. We assume that the conversation is about the authority of the resources. I am a supplicant. That means I am trying to convince you that what I'm about to do is worthy of your investment. I have another metaphor, and that is, in the most respectful, exciting, energized way, to be able to engage a funder across the table and say, there's a train in the station. We've loaded it with fuel. There are only so many cars. It's going to this incredible place. We have our act completely together. We know how to do what we do. We are the experts in our work. We would like to invite you to join us, and if you aren't interested, that's fine. That's perfectly fine. We are taking this journey. And to my mind, the kneepads start to fall off when you understand that you are the people doing the work. You are the experts in what it is you know how to do and the people with the resources are privileged to be on the train with you.

**Audience Member:** Thinking about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, do you see community-based theater as sort of a section in the pyramid or something that encompasses every aspect of the pyramid?

**Cleveland:** If you think of it as a D.N.A. spiral, there are pieces of cultural practice that are involved in every single step of that need. We're not really conscious of some of them. The thing we call art, which is way out here as a sort of peripheral thing, is at the core, at the center of the neural and physical evolution of the human species, to the point where that hierarchy is every single one of those needs is either directly or indirectly related to the human behavior of art-making, imagination, and creativity. So, yeah, it's right there.

**Audience Member:** You talk about nonprofits and arts institutions that are suffering from a kind of identity crisis of pleasing different funders, needing to find their own sources of income and broadening their definition of their work. Do you think that creates a different kind of identity crisis, if you were

created to do one thing and now find yourself engaged in others? What do you think are the repercussions of broadening one's service base?

**Cleveland:** Actually, I don't think of it as broadening. I think of it as doubling down. Anybody who's going to be in arts leadership or any kind of management, any group of humans that get together to try to do something together, at some point is going to go through something that bears a resemblance to what some people call strategic planning, which is, what are our assets? What are our challenges? What do we want to accomplish in the world? How do we do that? So, my sense is that if you're kind of dragging what I would call the tattered history of institutionally defined art-making in the 20th, 21st century along with you as sort of this unconscious whispering over your shoulder, "This is your mission, this is your mission, this is your mission," you're really going to have a hard time turning the corner into this idea of, "If we're part of this community, what is it that we offer? What is the usefulness of what we do in this community?" To me, that's the question. It must be.

And it may be that you're not broadening at all, you know. It may be, what we do is Shakespeare. That's what we do. We love it. We're passionate about it. And the obvious question is, why? And there's a process I go through with people a lot, and it came from a guy named Robert Deming who went off to Japan and actually learned it from the Japanese in their industries, called the five whys. So, you ask a question like that. Why are you interested in Shakespeare?

But by the time you have gotten to the fifth why, you've probably reached the place where the intense, narrow focus of your passion about Shakespeare has a direct connection to the five priorities that exist in your community as articulated by your city council.

**Audience Member:** I wondered if you could talk a little bit about trust and the importance of that in building community relationships? Also, when we're talking about community, we often have an overall community and then we have nested communities within it, and some of them overlap and do really well. Some of them abut and oppose one another. So, when you bring in groups of any kind, whether it's dance, music, theater, or whatever to come in and help build and bridge, can you talk a little bit about how you

build that trust and how you code switch and work between those groups so that you can get them working together toward a common goal?

**Cleveland:** Here's one of the things that I think we do. There's a moment in every artist's life when they're faced with the idea that they have to translate what they do to someone else who doesn't know much about it. And this is particularly the case with people who are highly sensitive, who are highly empathic, and are given to service, and that is that they go overboard on who is it that they are speaking to and they assume that they have to almost become a voice that translates best to that person. This happens all the time. We write grants. It's like we sit around in a room and we could talk for days about the importance of the work and then somebody gives you this piece of paper that says, convince us that you are important, your work is worthy of support. And you end up looking at what you wrote and it's like some Martian came down and captured your brain and who would want to give money to this thing, right?

This is maybe a long way around to talk about trust. First, trust yourself. Second, what you are accountable to is yourself, your colleagues, the legacy of your discipline or disciplines, or of your work, and of your relationship to whoever it is you are getting to invest in what you're doing. So, there's an accountability thing that starts out. And when you speak about the work, when you represent yourself and the work, do not abandon your expertise, what you know and what you believe to be true. And if, in fact, you find it hard to say, well there's an art form. It's called writing. It's called communicating. It is hard to translate the things we do to other people who don't understand them. There's that.

The next piece is, don't abandon the work itself. I'm involved in a process of trying to create a course at Arts Extension Service that will bring the work of arts-based community development into their curriculum. They only deliver online. Arts-based community development is partnership. That's all it is. It's relationship intensive. So, I said to them, do you guys have a basketball curriculum? Online basketball? [He and the audience laugh]. No. Could you imagine having an online basketball curriculum? Not really. Maybe, you know, the dribbling part. After that, passing would be hard to practice online. So, I said, OK, now we know the limitations of the online environment for relationship-intensive work. When you are trying to forge partnerships, physical human partnerships, the work is at the center. Don't

talk about it. Do the work. And by that I don't mean, OK here's a script. At the most basic level, every theater company starts out usually in a circle and what do they do? They bring people's consciousness from being outside in the world into the circle so they can be present. Help people be present. That's the first step to creating trust, using the work to build trust.

My theory of trust is that trust is based on three things. Number one, what we say we want to do together. That's the easy part. You're setting down what's in the grant application. We're going to be partners and it's going to be fantastic. Number two, when the rubber meets the road, we start working as partners. We make a commitment up front that we know we are going to hit the rocks, and our commitment is that we're going to work as hard on trying to get out from under the tyranny of mistrust, as we are passionate about the work that we think we're involved in.

And the last part is to stick it out long enough to create the arc of trust. Human trust, in the 21st century, and this is my own theory, and I've been doing this calculation for years, and it's a combination of physics and calculus: Human trust takes 8.5 times longer to generate in the 21st century than it did in the 18th century. Now I made all that math up, but basically the reason is that we don't have anywhere near as much experience practicing, exposing, and doing it, literally, today as once we did. We don't dig our own ditches. I don't help you with your roof. All those places where Joe said he'd show up, he showed up. I trust the next time he says he's going to show up, he'll show up. That's what trust is, right? Trust is basically built on the crucible of working together, and in theater, we know that. You don't have a play in theory. You have a lot of rehearsal.

**Max Stephenson:** I want to thank you, Bill, very much for your insights. This session was terrific.

# Chapter 3: Liz Lerman

**Liz Lerman**, Choreographer, performer, writer, educator, speaker

**Date of Interview:** March 20, 2015

**Interviewers:** Max Stephenson, Sarah Halverson-Fried, and Sarah Lyon-Hill

**Max Stephenson:** Liz, I think it might be well to start off just to ask you how you became interested in dance.

**Liz Lerman:** It's funny, I haven't thought about the origin of that for a while, but I think I'm fairly typical of most human beings. Moving is a part of life, especially when you're young. My earliest memory of dancing, it's just splashing in the puddles in the backyard in Los Angeles, because it's just this way that we express ourselves. I happen to have been born into a family, especially my mom, who really appreciated art, and I told people I wanted to dance. I just said that's what I wanted, and she went to work to find me the most interesting teacher she could find. So, I was lucky in that it was recognized by somebody around me, that I was really, really interested in this. But, when I reflect back about it, I find it so interesting that I'm the dancer, that I'm the performer that I've become, or the thinker that I've become because initially what I had in my mind was ballet because that's the pictures you see. So, I pursued that, but left it in my teenage years.

**Stephenson:** So, you were classically trained?

**Lerman:** I was classically trained, and I performed for President Kennedy, so I was part of a group of high school students, I was the youngest from the National Music Camp, that went to the White House that summer. Mrs. Kennedy had a series of young people's concerts and we performed on the Mall. We had dinner at the White House. It was spectacular, and it was also my last ballet concert, because I went home to Milwaukee and the civil rights movement was kicking in. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the country and my father, being the social activist that he was, pulled us out of school and enrolled us in Freedom Schools. We were marching. And I was at that time learning the Bluebird variation, and somehow, I didn't understand what to do about the collision of those ideas. And not too many

people around me knew, either. There's a long, long history of political dance, but that wasn't necessarily understood or evidenced in the history books. So that was the beginning of my leaving classicism, not dance, but leaving the classical form.

**Sarah Lyon-Hill:** You founded the Dance Exchange dance company and unlike many traditional dance companies, you had a lot of different dancers from many different age groups, a lot of different backgrounds. Would you discuss the reason behind that decision and what kind of impacts it produced on the work?

**Lerman:** I think you're right to relate it to that first story about what happened during trying to understand the civil rights movement through my body, which was to say that I began seeking a way to combine artistic process, which I loved, and the world, which I also wanted to be a part of. And at the time I was coming up, there was a certain isolationism. You spent a million hours in the studio. You worked to refine things and then you created things that you put on the stage. Then, people came to see you. Somehow, I felt we were missing something in that construct. I didn't exactly understand all of what we were missing. I just felt bereft when I was in that world, like I was missing something from the outside.

It took the death of my mother from cancer in the mid-1970s, and I was becoming a choreographer at that time, to prompt me to reflect. I had this sense that the only way I could understand the world was by making something. So, I wanted to make a dance about what happened to her and the swiftness of her death, and I decided to put old people in it. So, this is really the thing that set up the Dance Exchange because first, I had to find old people. I know now, of course, we're everywhere, but at the time we were aging in isolation. You didn't see old people out, or, I like to say, it was pre-jogging. It's not like you saw people out on the street exercising, either. We're just so used to a different relationship to our bodies now than we had then. So, I went to an old people's home, and I began to teach dance there. I sort of thought of it as community organizing. My father had been a community organizer and my sense of it was, OK, you go, you meet people on their own turf. You acknowledge what they already know. You support their own systems, and meanwhile, you begin to give new information. And in time you figure out what you can do together. And that was kind of the process for the work I did with the old people.

And once they performed this piece with me about my mother's death, it was really interesting because they led me all the way. Then, I thought we were done. Project's finished, over. I'll go back into my life as a dancer, and they came to me and they said, "Well, now what's next?" Like, we're not stopping. And so, I spent 10 years at that senior center, but within that time, that group of older people began to be part of this thing I was doing with younger people at the same time. And that produced this idea of, "Wait a minute. Let's look at how many things we can do when you have a mixture of people on stage." You can just do so much more. In addition to that, once people heard about the old people, then I started getting calls from, well, Children's Hospital [in Washington, D.C.]. They came over and said, "Hey, look at this. You want to come see? Maybe we could use you at the hospital." And so, I found myself artist-in-residence at Children's Hospital in the morning, and then I would go in the afternoon and rehearse the company and go perform. So, it was like an organic development of my own musings in that capacity as an artist.

**Sarah Halverson-Fried:** I'd love to hear more about your decision to work with old people, in particular. You mention it had to do with your mother's death, but can you talk a little bit more about that connection?

**Lerman:** Well, yes, and one reason I like to talk about it, besides the fact that it brings me such pleasure to relive all of that, is when I think about the desires now of universities and most nonprofits in the art world that are trying to figure out how to have a relationship with communities, in fact they haven't. I like to suggest that one of the great training grounds is the older people because there's something, at least in my case, of the history of my relationship that has helped shape me. I like to say, yes, I taught them to dance. but they taught me how to do it. They completely absorbed all of my mistakes and all of my not understanding. So, I had this image from my mother. When she was dying, I went home to be with her, which was remarkable that I could go home for those last two months. Now that I've been around old people and dying people, I know this. I know how to recognize this, but this was the first time I'd seen it. But she did a lot of life reflection. She was talking a lot about people that I didn't know, and for some reason, I thought of them all as old. She was only 60, so it's hard to picture, but in my mind, that house was just full of these floating old people. And I wanted to try to create that on stage. That's what got me thinking. And I

wanted them to welcome her. I had this idea that somehow the spirits would welcome my mother, then that would be part of the dance. So, it was the urgency of that.

I don't know that I would have had the courage or the strength to cross my profession that much. You have to understand, there's zero about old people in western dance. It's not true if we look at dance globally, if we think about dance writ large, old people dancing is part of every celebration, every ritual, every everything. It's just we had forgotten all that and that's partly the issue with classicism, an issue with western ways of knowing, the way we have come to think about art. The other thing is that when I started dancing with old people, what art people were telling me was, I was becoming a social worker. And I said back to them, "Oh, if I waited tables for a living, I could be an artist, but if I do something useful with my art form, I'll be a social worker?" And that's why you find me writing all the time. I want to be of use. I want to be purposeful. I want people to see that these artistic practices can mean something in the world. And it goes back to this enormous frustration that I had, that somehow, we would be more purely an artist, not that waiting tables isn't a good thing, but better to use art in relationship to things that, because I was at the hospital or teaching older people, where you could see the miracles. They were happening all the time. In fact, some of my early writing talked about why we would call them a miracle, and I could see them, literally people who couldn't, you know, couldn't do something. Like a woman would say to me, "I can't zip my dress up." And then she would come in two weeks later saying, "Oh, I can get dressed." Or this was one of my favorites, there was a big guy, a former naval commander, who was in the little group of dancers and one of the things I had begun to explore with the older people was how to make dances about their lives because the question becomes, what should we be dancing about?

And we began this process of storytelling, which you see as a link in so much community-based practice. Well one of the guys, he was in his 90s and he had been a lumberjack in northern Michigan, so when we did the show in the schools, we would get all the old people standing up on the front of the stage, and I was just learning to choreograph at the time, so he'd say, I was a lumberjack, and he'd go, "One, two, three, timber!" And then all the old people would fall down, which the kids just loved. Well, this guy [the former naval commander] comes up to me, a few months into our work, and he said,

“I want you to know, Liz, I took a bath.” And I said, “Well, that’s good, John.” But I started to realize that when people want to tell you something and they bother to come up to you, pay attention. So, he said, “Well, for the last I don’t know how many years, I’ve only been able to shower, but since I’ve been a tree falling, I can get in and out of the tub.” That’s a pretty powerful story. First, this is a guy who’ll never go to therapy, so let’s understand that we’re not talking therapy, and he wouldn’t go if we did. What made it possible? I often reflect about this, it’s because he got to be in his friend’s story, because he got to embody something so powerful for his friend. What happened? He learned how to get up and down, and that’s just huge for an older person. So that began to tell me that I was on to something, even though my profession was telling me, no, you’re not.

**Lyon-Hill:** When you’re encountering people who put a frame around your work, saying, oh it is therapy, or this is a tool or something, versus other artists, they’re saying this is very aesthetic, art for art’s sake, that sort of thing. How do you deal with that and how do you approach that?

**Lerman:** Well, I had yet another discussion with Max about this while I’ve been here, because I have a formulation for sort of my initial response and what way I’ve tried to live. I want to say that most of the time I find resistance interesting, that when you get people saying things to you that you don’t believe in, I don’t mind sharpening my mind in relationship to that. But after a while it gets boring, because it’s the same arguments and I don’t understand why we’re still having them. And that gets us also to the policy question: how you create change, because I am still having this argument and this is 40 years now, 40 years of saying, “Look I have one foot in the professional art world; I have one foot in this other world, or many feet.” But one way I’ve said this is that I’ve encouraged people to try to hold more than one idea in their head at the same time. That’s part of it. Part of the struggle is, it can only be pure, or it can only be community, and I just say, “That’s crazy. It’s multiple.” And that’s why I have this hierarchical thing that I sometimes I do with my hands where I might demonstrate, here’s the work in the concert halls at the top, and the work in the communities at the bottom, although some people just swing that around and they put the work of the community at the top and they see the concert hall work is nothing. And I’m saying, no, no. Put it sideways. Because I love the rigor of the concert world. I love what you’re going to see if you come to *Healing Wars*. I mean I want to do things like that,

but not instead of, or in opposition to all this other stuff. And they link, they come together in so many ways. This is very exciting. You're catching me in a period where I'm less interested in the art for art's sake argument and trying to communicate with them about it.

**Halverson-Fried:** So, Liz, how is *Healing Wars* based in your community work? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Lerman:** Some of my earliest work around community was the idea that you could build community and that art and art-making was a way to bring people together outside of their normal pathways and have an experience together. So, in my early work around community, it was all about community building and you could see that in the way I would work in the senior center, like what kinds of things changed at the Roosevelt Hotel for senior citizens because I was in there, because we were making art together. And you could observe changes occurring over a period. Maybe it's true that the activists are the ones that came to dance? Or is it possible that the dance built them into activists? But they became leaders within the center. I think it's in part because we rehearsed together. We got to know each other. We had ways of supporting each other, so there was that form of community. And then there was the form of community building where I was teaching at maybe six or eight different locations in Washington, D.C., and then I would make a big piece and all those people would come together. So that private school kids would come together with the Department of Justice people, would come together with old people, and then this professional corps of dancers, who held it all together by the skills they were building.

That was a form of community that was pretty interesting. We kind of pursued this: Me as an outsider visiting other communities, coming in, doing one of these kinds of projects, often based on subject matter that grew out of the community we were visiting. We were a catalyst, I think. We made it possible for people to see each other in their worlds differently, possibly because we were outsiders, not caught up in the inside stuff. I think the project that really turned everything, or maybe made me rethink it all, was the *Hallelujah* project, 15 communities, across three years, asking people what they are in praise of, making participatory dances, which anybody could be in that responded to that question. The dance company toured with that. We had some repertory that we would do as part of it, some pieces we had built around these ideas about what hallelujah meant, which

I thought was the celebration after hard times. Very often when people wanted to reflect on what they wanted to be in, as I say, the celebration, which allowed us to go deep into some issues, but also keep coming back to this frame of almost a festival. That was an enormous undertaking and I have a million stories from different communities about the kinds of people that participated and what we all learned and what we danced about. And we did bring everybody together at the end, everyone who was in it, anywhere in the country who wanted to, could come spend two weeks together. We did a *Hallelujah* kind of event in Washington, D.C., for everybody. Out of that I came to see that there were so many ways that people participated besides being on stage: the boat builders in Eastport who made the lanterns that the community took out to sea the night before the dawn of 2000. Or the people who cooked the meals for the performers in Tucson, Arizona, where we worked with all the religious groups there, which cut across all the ethnicities of that town once we decided to work through the Church and the synagogue and the day schools.

Meanwhile, my own proclivity for what I began to call creative research grew. You see a lot of different languages over time, the word community meaning a bunch of different things. Right now, though, this idea of creative research for me is a big umbrella for the description of all the ways that artists work to build the material that they're going to share. And that that's where, if you investigate *Healing Wars*, you see all this stuff happening that engages people, even though they're not on stage, although some of their stories are on stage, and some of their ideas are on stage. So, we came here to Blacksburg, and I came by myself and met a lot of people and then I brought some performers and based on who I had met and who I talked to, we got to work at that psychology and neuroscience institute in Roanoke. For two evenings, we met with veterans who were on campus here at Virginia Tech whose stories were incredible. Two of their stories are in the piece. So how is that community in relationship to that? I feel it and our work is changed because of it. I honestly don't know if they feel it. And that is a question about the nature of this work. I think in the *Hallelujahs* we were sure. We got everybody. Everybody was there. But in this case, a lot of the veterans have gone, have moved on. I know that one of the dancers in the company in this group has stayed in correspondence with one of the vets for quite a while and I know he's been invited, and there's stuff going back and forth.

**Stephenson:** You said something at the Community Voices [program] the other night that brings two strands of this conversation together. You indicated that imagination is experience and we've been talking about this sort of disjunction in the field of dance where classically the argument was that it couldn't have a purpose. The aesthetic was the aesthetic. And yet, you're arguing for a different kind of aesthetic imagination, it seems to me, and the other night you indicated that you do that based on the idea that experience is imagination. I found myself reflecting on that and wondering if you could expand a little bit on what you mean by that. In some sense the critic might say, then how do we get these leaps of new thinking if we already are basing imagination on the concept of experience?

**Lerman:** Actually, that was my question to Mike [Friedlander] the neuroscientist, because he's the one who said experience is an imagination of the same thing. So, I've been testing this. And the way I have been testing it is, when I give keynote talks, after I talk for a little bit, I stop and I say "Okay, what's the picture in your mind right now? What do you picture?" And you see everybody just shakes themselves out, like what is she talking about? Then I say, "Okay I'm going to say the sentence again, but I want you to pay attention to what pictures are emerging in your mind and then I'll collect them." And then the thing that happens is, most often people will picture in their mind their version of my story. So, for example, I say, on Friday nights my family would have dinner together before we were allowed to go out and socialize. I say that. I'm pretty sure if I asked you what pictures are in your mind when I say that, what comes to mind?

**Halverson-Fried:** When I think about it, I think about my parents' dining room table and how we would have dinner together every night.

**Lerman:** Right, you see your house, and you can visit me in mine. You're making that connection, but you're personalizing it. So, on one level, the part of this that I like the most is that when I insist that you can make dances about subject matter and that it doesn't have to be personal, that I can make a dance about the Civil War, I can make a dance about the defense budget, I promise you that the imagination of the people in the theater will personalize it. Because that always irritated me: it's all right to make a dance about love. How many of those do you need to see? But I feel about the planet Earth, about these subjects that I take on, I feel personally about them, and I do think about them that way, but I also know the public does, too. But when

Mike said that it made me wonder, isn't that even more of a call on the part of artists to create enough clues so that you can take leaps of imagination or go places maybe that you haven't seen, because, yes, that would be sad if you're only reliving your own experience.

I think when people see *Healing Wars*, I'm guessing, but I think the part of people's personal experience that they will draw on when they meet us in the theater is possibly their relationship to family members who've been at war, possibly they're concerned when they open the newspaper and read another story about P.T.S.D. [post-traumatic stress disorder] and then they close the paper before they even finish because they don't want to think about it. They will think about it. And it will be populated, perhaps by a car accident they had a long time ago, or it will be populated by the young man they see on stage who only has one leg, and that becomes their experience. He becomes their experience. I'd like to think that, but I don't know if that's true.

**Lyon-Hill:** In the past, you basically described art-making as transitioning between living in abstractions and sometimes concrete imagery and sometimes in many places in between. Would you say that part of that kind of leap in imagination is how you get to your audience, and how a lot of community theater, community dance is really based on trying to reach your audience and having them participate, or incorporating them into this experience?

**Lerman:** I think if we accept the idea of multiplicity, which I hope we do, I think we just get into trouble with singularity. I've been talking to my rabbi about this. Maybe just the idea of one God is the problem. It's the whole problem because in a way it's what we keep fighting over. It's my God, your God. So, in this case, I believe in abstraction as an activity that every human being involves themselves in all the time. Language itself is an abstraction. We're making symbols, we're constantly translating. That's one of the things that we do. We bring meaning to these symbols, so I as an artist, I feel that this is a little bit esoteric and I hope it's still interesting, but when I purposely abstract something, it's a lot of work. I don't go for the abstraction. I go for the thing and try to understand how I am going to best express this thing, and what feels most true to life to me, like when you and I are looking at each other right now, so I see you, you see me, but meanwhile there's a gray wall behind you. There's a room full of squares of light. The repetition of these microphones is all around us. There's a lot of elements of abstraction as you

and I are having this conversation. That's the world I'm interested in. It's the back-and-forth-ness of those things.

What I fear in my art form is that people have been taught to jump to the abstraction immediately, without any of the steps on the way to why you would abstract, or with any of the concrete material that brings abstraction to life. What I did feel though with old people is that once I put old people on stage, it's like bringing more clues to how to see the thing that's in front of you. And finally, let me just say that if my life were only stage work, I would not be happy. So, having people come to the theater to see *Healing Wars*, I want them there. We need the audience, but, and we also put three and a half years into building it, so I believe that we've sorted and filtered through a lot of ideas about war, about our current wars, that if an audience comes, something will happen to them, that's of value. I can also teach a workshop based on the thing and they can also experience it in another form in another way. Those things are of equal value to me. They're not one is better than another, but they relate to each other.

**Halverson-Fried:** Liz, why do you think people are going to see *Healing Wars*?

**Lerman:** I'm not sure, but I feel that those of us who are not in service now, but living in a country that's at war, we are spending so much of our energy not thinking about it, that actually it's a relief to go somewhere that's going to be safe, somewhat comfortable, settle in and think about it for 90 minutes. And I think that is, that is what attracts people. When we first started performing the piece and showing it in works of progress as we were building it, I couldn't understand why people seemed to be almost slightly ecstatic when it was over because the subject matter is tough. And I finally decided it's because it's just such a relief to be able to say I am a part of this. This is my country. This is what we are doing. This is what is happening in this world right now. And I think even in light of the current events and what just happened in Tunisia, it's helpful for us to spend time wondering about the costs of war, and how we're confronting these very scary things, which this piece does, partly because it wanders between the civil war and the war in Iraq. You get to be almost nostalgic in the midst of something that's very current.

**Lyon-Hill:** You talked a little bit about the process of making *Healing Wars*

and talking to scientists and the effects on the brain, and also talking to veterans. Could you talk about that and what goes through your head when you're working with these different groups and what that experience is?

**Lerman:** That's what I mean about creative research, and I wish that we as artists spent more time articulating the processes, as your question suggests, because I really believe that the processes themselves are available for anyone, artist or not, and that it's an interesting way to research. In fact, if you talk to people on campuses, you see that interviewing is a massive form of research at the moment across all disciplines. In this particular case, there were so many strands, I just wasn't sure where we were going to land. So, part of the research is translating what you're hearing into a theatrical mode to see if you can make it stage-worthy. That's a really good way to edit. There are so many good ideas, but only some of them can get translated. So that was one thing. The second thing was that I was very driven by the characters I'd selected to pursue in the piece and what their relationship was. For example, I fell in love with Clara Barton and there's just not enough I can say about what an incredible woman she was, and how much more I wish we knew about her, and why she isn't on Mt. Rushmore, I don't know. I mean, she was just an incredible, incredible human being. And I also was interested in trying to understand who her counterpart would be in today's world, not so much a major nurse like her. You know, she was a bureaucrat. And that's because she organized. You cannot believe what she organized against all odds to do the work that she did on the battlefield, and then after the battlefield.

So, we knew we were going to do her, and we knew we had a contemporary figure, but without a name, so when we went to the neuroscience psychology Institute, we talked to all the counselors. The woman playing this character got to spend all this time with these counselors. And as I asked her again just the other day, I said, "What was that like? What did you find out?" And she said that it wasn't their work life as much of their off-work life that interested her, trying to understand what it was like to absorb all of this, and that's what helped her figure out, even though every question that comes out of her mouth on stage is from the handbook that they use. Apart from a character who's a spirit, everything that's said in this piece is verbatim from history or came from other people. We didn't write the words. So, that's an example. The other is, I just want to say talking to the vets that, we sat in a

circle for two nights and this one young man came up to me after we were done, and said this to me, “You know my father served and my uncle served, and my grandfather served.” And I was thinking, “I’ve heard this,” so I figure I know what he’s going to say next. He completely surprised me. He said, “So, one day I woke up in Afghanistan up in the mountains and I’m wondering, how did I get here? Like I never asked, how did I get here?” Now this is the same young man who was adamant about not enough people serving, but allowed himself this moment of, wait a minute. Could I have stopped this? Did I have a choice, you know, did I have a choice? It was just incredible, and of course, it happened. It’s like I said earlier, I learn how to pay attention to what’s happening. It’s not always the thing that’s in front of you. Sometimes it’s the stuff that’s going on outside. And I would say that was true for almost everybody, when we came here and talked to the vets, and continued to be true. We would sit down in circles and do these formal things, and then afterwards, there’d be this outpouring of stories that we wanted.

We also heard the amazing story about how they train medical people, which involves a pig, and we were shocked. We didn’t videotape or audiotape any of this, so, I went online and sure enough I found two more verbatim descriptions, which is what we ended up using. But it was instigated by hearing it from an individual just telling us what his training was. It turned out to be a profound moment for all of us. So, I guess the other thing I wanted to say about all of this is that I was not interested in making an anti-war piece. I’m not even sure I am anti-war, but this is a question about the nature of this kind of work, what point, how much of a point-of-view do I want to have and how much do I want to lay out ideas and let people find their way? I knew I wanted to make a piece in which people who have served, are serving, are coming out of having served, could feel welcome, but I also didn’t want to say, “Bravo, bravo, you’re all fantastic; isn’t it great,” you know. It wasn’t that either. It was how to find a way to lay out some of the pieces of this so that civilian and service people could belong in the theater together. That was important. And so, it’s being able to listen without judgment. It’s really important and therein lie some interesting questions about, what are you actually trying to say, and at what point do you actually say, this is what I feel about this?

**Stephenson:** It’s sort of the nature of the enterprise at its most basic level, I think.

**Lerman:** Yes.

**Stephenson:** And that, it seems to me, there's a debate in the field, your field, about just that. Some people want to proselytize for a specific point-of-view and other people are saying, "I'm going to harness what I like to call the aesthetic imagination to help you open a space to exercise your own point of view, or to put it in more academic jargon: agency or sense of being able to do it yourself." And I think it's a critical question in your field, and one that you would wrestle with in any production that you might put up, and particularly, probably when you're trying to enliven the folk with whom you're working, to have some sense of their own possibilities as you did with the seniors, and as you often do when you move into a community of whatever stripe.

**Halverson-Fried:** Similarly, it makes me think about people's reaction to this work and maybe it's just the way we're conditioned to think about things. We'll say, well that's anti-war or that's pro-war. We'll really put it into a category.

**Lerman:** They will. Singularity. And we're trained that way. I also believe that's an outcome of the hierarchical thinking that we do. As I said, it's either this or they flip the hands. I just think it's way more complicated than that. I will say, for example, I just heard an interview with a man who's the editor at *The Guardian* in London, who's leaving his post. And they're going to do an intense series of stuff on the environment before he leaves, because he realized if he had any regrets, it's that he didn't do enough about the environment. And so, he was asked, well, newspapers do both sides. And he said, well, look, we are going to make it clear that there's lots to talk about, but we are not going to talk about the science that suggests there's nothing happening. We are not giving voice to that. That is not true. So, in that sense, he's taking a stance, and in some ways, I would take a stance. But then, within this other way, this context of let's look and see.

**Halverson-Fried:** It's just such the opposite of what we normally get. I get my news from different sources, but I normally don't watch the news, and I happened to watch it last night, part of it, and I was just amazed at how divisive everyone's speech was and how much we're putting people into categories, putting ideas into categories: pro, con, for, against, whatever it

is. So, I really wonder how pieces like *Healing Wars* and work like yours can change that.

**Lerman:** Well one thing is, and now I'm back to creative process. So, for me, this idea of multiple names for the same thing, which I've been talking about. And actually, Max, I hope you and I can get into this question, even of policy, because there are multiple ways to think about what policy is and what it means. The corollary of that is that you take things, and you file it in more than one place. The problem with this divisiveness is that you're either here or there when most stories belong in more than one. That's what I like about tagging, to be honest. It begins to suggest that things live in more than one place. What I enjoy, and to me this is absolute creative process is that, if I take the pig story, I can put it in a story about animals and I can put it in a story about violence, and I can put it in a file about caring, and I could even put it in a file about how we train medics. Now if that story, which is a violent story, lives in at least four files, then you can look at what other stories live in the file with it. So, in the animal one, "Mary had a little lamb" is in there, and so, there are a lot of little sweet stories, but there's also this. That reality is truer to me than if you said it's either this or that. And if you go to the violence one and you see the pig story in the violence one and then you also see violence, abuse issues, you start to see these unusual connections, but you only do that if you take the thing and put it in more than one place. That's what I'd like to train people how to do, and then I don't think they could stand there and do what they're doing. I just do not understand contemporary media right now, and why it's working like that. I love to take the subject of bullying, for example. How many stories have we heard about bullying from them and what are they doing all the time? All they do is bully others. That's all they do.

**Stephenson:** Well, on a different level, isn't it very human to want to make sense of the world, to simplify it in these ways? To be as concrete and specific as we can be about matters, "I believe this and not that," and are we dealing with something very human, apart from the media and apart from the way the media frames these questions, as well? I wonder what we're really wrestling with underneath this question.

**Lerman:** Well, I know that I live in a more complex sort of way of holding ideas, and not everybody likes that. In fact, I think it's scary for some people. What is interesting to me is, when my mother was dying, I went back to ballet class. Why? Because in ballet class, you're right or wrong, mostly wrong, but

you know what you're working on. I was so appreciative of an orthodox world to visit while the rest of my world was falling apart. So, I appreciate that. I appreciate that there is a time where you want the rules, but I'm suggesting that we might want to question those rules and protocols and constraints on a daily basis, as opposed to setting up an entire worldview that you then cannot stray from. Creativity is liberating yourself from constraints in your thinking and then re-imposing constraints on your thinking based on what's happening today, not on the stripes on my sleeve, not because of whatever assumptions we have. I realize that's a little bit chaotic for a lot of people, and one of the things that's hard for people is how to manage that. So even if you look at the Dance Exchange and its history with management, I mean, we consistently tried to apply rehearsal techniques to our management process as opposed to the other way around. And I think we were successful, and I think when you look at these nimble, mobile kinds of communities of workplaces where you see that, you see a lot of what I call good leading and good following.

So, for example, everybody at Dance Exchange was trained to be a leader and trained to be a follower, including me. I love that. I think we should have followership institutes, as I often joke. We have too many leadership institutes. We need some good followership institutes. But because just because of this, because we need to be flexible. But I agree with you, Max. Now, my daughter, she liked to watch the same movie over and over, so I began to develop an entirely different idea about what was good or not good: Could you watch a movie 20 times? So, we were in the 20th time watching *Fiddler on The Roof*, and the time comes when the sheriff comes and says to the family, you must leave, and my daughter says to me, "Is he an evil man?" And she was like 5 or 6, or something. So, I said, "Well, let's think about this for a minute. Let's think, he has a family." And she interrupted me and said, "Mom, sometimes people are just bad." I think that's your answer, Max.

**Lyon-Hill:** When you're going into these different communities and you're going to face people who you're trying to work with, but they have a singular idea of what's going on in the world, or singular idea of what your approach to art-making is, how do you deal with that?

**Lerman:** As I said, I really like resistance, especially when the resistance is authentic and coming out of a place where people have really been struggling with something. So, I have two quick stories, or not so quick. We

went to Japan. Japan got very interested in our work with older people because they have a real problem with not enough people to care take of their older people. They were fascinated by the idea that we were promoting the fact that regular old people could become performers, not masters, because they're totally willing to accept an older master. So, they had us come over three or four times to do community-based residencies where we would work predominately with older people from the community and young artists who wanted to learn and be part of this. I was all excited about that. And I had come across this reference to something called *senninburi*, which were these charm belts that were built in World War II, and each belt had 1,000 stitches, and each stitch was put in by a different woman in the community, and they were handed to the soldiers who went off to fight World War II. I found one reference and one book about this, and I was so moved by it from this community perspective. Building community, what would it take? How did they do that? Oh my God, this is amazing! We're going to make a piece about *senninburi*. So, I go over, I'm all excited, going to do research, and I have a group, an intergenerational group in front of me. I said, we're going to work with *senninburi* and all hell broke loose. The younger artists started saying, through translators, "Are you kidding? This is the stupidest idea. Why did they think a charm was going to save these people? You've got to be kidding." They were furious. The old people were embarrassed. Totally embarrassed. So, I had some choices at that point, which is, let's forget the *senninburi*. We'll go do something else, but I was so interested. Obviously, I touched something. I said, "Look, everybody, go home. Talk to your families. Find out what was going on. See what you can find out. We'll decide if we're going to do something about this, but we may not. But let's just give it another day." So, everybody went home. When they came back the next day, it turns out that these young women had talked to their families and two of them had found out they weren't just any stitch, that the women pricked themselves with blood, and put their blood in, that they put hair in, including pubic hair. That this thing was, in some cases, it was a form of protest. In other cases, it was like, I'm giving you everything I have. So, the young women were startled about it and the older people, the embarrassment wasn't about the belts. It was about living with the war and what happened. So, we ended up, we did a piece in two parts. The first part was, protect the original meaning of things. And the second part was, protect us as we change the original meaning of things, because we were caught in this moment. Then there was one section of the dance which we did

verbatim. Something like this sentence I gave them: “Isn’t it strange that—” and then they could fill it in. And what we got a lot of was, isn’t it strange that an American who won the war comes over and tells us we should think about this? Isn’t it strange that I’m supposed to find out about this belt from an American I don’t know? Of course, it gave all this room for people to communicate and then that was performed through a series of conflicted choreography. So that’s an example of where the art itself allows us to reopen a problem, but always for me, when it’s like that, make sure people understand that they have time to say no. Let’s investigate, but of course we don’t have to do it. And that is really important, I think.

**Stephenson:** Your good friend and long-time colleague in Urban Bush Women [Jawole Willa Jo Zollar] said there’s a deep psychosis in the American attitude to history, and yet here is this American bringing history to Japan, in some way, and letting them think through the implications of their own history. Are you as unusual as your colleague is suggesting in your own understanding and treatment of history? What’s been your experience in this sort of artistry over the years in terms of our culture’s attitude to history?

**Lerman:** Well, history is one of my, probably most favorite subjects, and there’s a long piece of really troubling, troubling work I made called *Shehechianu*, which comes from the Hebrew prayer that I read translated to mean, “Isn’t it amazing, given our histories, that we’d be sitting at this table together?” And what I was interested in doing was looking at situations in 20th-century American life where our histories crossed, because my experience was, my father, for example, taught Hebrew school, but he was fired by the synagogue when he stood in front of the kids and said you know your parents are slum landlords. Go home and talk to them. And he was cheerful about the whole thing. My mother, that was just one more stab of anti-, like no, we’re not going to be Jewish. But it often struck me that I could take pride in a moment in which I might be meeting an African American and they find out I’m Jewish and they might say, well, you’re a slum landlord. So, our histories crossed and we were both bringing our histories into that moment, so I got interested in working on that. So the first section of the piece was taken from the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, which is when the new field of anthropology, so excited and so enlightened, decided to put indigenous tribes from around the world on display in order of their civilized selves, so you literally could go and see tribes from the Philippines and from

other places on display. Also, the pygmy, Ota Benga, was on display. And they thought it was great. So here we are again at this idea, could I make a piece in which you could say, the anthropologist is like, wow, and yet from our eyes, at this point, what a horrible thing to do. I was able to find some microfilm from that fair and there was on the midway there was a name, a Jewish name given to a woman, and she was called the Palestinian Jewess and she did an act with putting a chair in her teeth and you know twirling, so we did that. And we made her have a huge thing (nose), so the whole thing started to be about stereotypes. So, we toured this for a while, and we got into so much trouble. So. Much. Trouble. Including at Jacob's Pillow, where I was never asked back after this, and what turned out at the board meeting was that the Jewish people in the board meeting were so angry for her having a big nose, and it became clear that it was okay to exoticize other people, but not our history. Not, why would you put our dirty laundry out? Why would you do that? It's interesting. So, now we can come back to the question, whose responsibility is it to work with the audience, so that something can happen for them that isn't only just, oh my God, I can't believe that it happened. Soon after, there were more attempts on my part to engage the audience either before or after. In *Origins*, for example, we had the tea. You saw in Act One was about how things begin, including CERN. Act Two is tea, people sitting at tables. There's a scientist and an artist at the table. The dancing continues. People get to sort of think things through, and we've got a National Science Foundation grant for that to study what happened. That was pretty profound, what giving people a chance to spend some time together did for them. And in this piece, *Healing Wars*, we reversed that. That is to say, something happens to you before the piece starts, that gives you a way into the material and into your history and into our history, so that you can settle into the piece, as a whole. So, the big question, is it my job as an artist to do that? I don't know, but I really need to be doing it, and I find it interesting. But *Shehechianu* was the one piece that just really disturbed, just was so disturbing. The last section of that dance was an idea that I had about what my question was: Did we have to give up history to be in the present? Do we only wear our scars? So, a big question about victimhood and if we build our identity on being a victim, then what happens when we're no longer a victim, which is a really good question for the Jewish community, I think, in America. So, we imagine a museum in which you gave up your skin and the more scarred your skin was, the more beautiful it was, but you could put

your skin up. I don't have an answer, and obviously there are no answers from it, but I think it's a big question about how we live with it.

**Stephenson:** It's a big question in many post-conflict situations in peace building. How do you continue to memorialize those people who were lost? For a book I did a couple of years ago with a colleague, we were in Srebrenica, on the day of commemoration, and it's stunning to see all those coffins, and the international community continues to support the identification of remains from the massacre, but it raises the question, and it continues to divide the community: Who are we memorializing? And it continues to reaffirm the distinct identity that created the conflict in the first instance: My people that died are better than your people that died, or your atrocity was worse than my atrocity. It is a compelling and difficult moral question. I think it's a good thing that artists can raise it for us, but it's a challenging question.

**Lerman:** It's really difficult and honestly, in a way, this is why I come back to the structure that I have of hoping that people witness each other's work, come and see the work I've spent three years building, but also be in workshops where you can embody the question yourself, because I think it's in the embodiment practice, like when we did the shipyard thing.

The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard is a toxic dump. So, this shipyard was attempting to deal with its toxicity, but the environmental movement thought they were ridiculous. We could not get those two groups together. We tried. We couldn't. The environmental group would have nothing to do with it. In a way, it goes back to the purity question: who's going to be pure and when, and that's why I'm such an advocate for breaking down purity, because I just don't see the value in it. But we did have a day of reckoning. We had a Five Days Festival and each day had another sort of theme and one of the days was reconciliation, and it was around the question of the toxic dump. And it was each day the performance off the yard and on the yard, and the one off the yard was in a church, and what we did was let people hear the voices of all the different sides, but for people who did the workshop and the actual physicality of changing your shape like, in order to understand you, I actually have to turn my body and face you, even that starts, at the least, to give you some embodiment practice and some flexibility, but in these cases of genocide, that, oh, yeah.

**Stephenson:** Liz, thank you so very much for sharing some of the rich experiences that have informed your artistic research. Your stories about the many diverse publics you engage so thoughtfully make your work come alive.

# Chapter 4: John Ferguson

**John Ferguson**, Director of American Voices

**Date of Interview:** April 24, 2014

**Interviewers:** Andrew Morikawa, Eric Hodges, and Naphtali Fields-Forbes

**Eric Hodges:** Can you tell us a little bit about American Voices and what it is that you do?

**John Ferguson:** We started in the early 1990s. I had just moved to Europe from North Carolina. In North Carolina, I had been working in a community arts program sponsored by the state government called Visiting Artists. That organization placed 58 performing and visual artists all over the state at community college campuses, and our job was to work in those communities. I did a whole lot of community organizing work through the arts. I even got Baptists and Methodists to sing in the same community choir, which came in handy in Iraq when getting Sunni and Shia Muslims to play in the same orchestra. That was a four-year position, so I decided to continue my studies and went to Europe to Paris, France, to study piano and earn an advanced performance degree. And I arrived in Europe just in time for the Berlin Wall to come down and that was really a formative time for American Voices because our first cultural diplomacy events—and they really were cultural diplomacy, instead of engagement—were to appear at festivals in places such as Latvia and Estonia and eastern Germany. So, we got our start in Eastern Europe and over the years expanded our geographic range to include Central and South Asia, Central and South America, a lot of work in the Middle East, and especially now, across Asia.

**Hodges:**What exactly does cultural diplomacy mean?

**Ferguson:** Cultural diplomacy is high-profile one-off events: concert appearances, for example, at festivals or special events. We manage a program that's really a cultural diplomacy program for the State Department. It's called American Music Abroad. It's the great, great, great, grandchild of the old Jazz Ambassadors program of the 1950s that sent Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington to places like Egypt and Tunisia and Japan and Korea.

It's not so much focused on creating long-term relationships with a certain section of youth, but connecting with larger audiences, working with the media to amplify the message, rebroadcasting events and then [offering] short workshops that serve as inspiration for musicians who maybe don't have the chance to meet with famous American musicians very often.

I recall when I was in high school in Houston, Texas, and Isaac Stern [the American violinist] came to visit and he was there for one hour, but I will remember that hour forever. So, I think that's the kind of cultural diplomacy program that is very successful in the states, representing the vitality of American culture abroad, and reaching out to both under-served audiences as well as general cultural and concert-going audiences.

**Naphtali Fields-Forbes:** You've contrasted your work with cultural diplomacy with your work in engagement. Can you be more specific about what kind of engagement you do internationally?

**Ferguson:** As time went on, I became a little bit frustrated with having only the cultural diplomacy model in our back pocket, and at the time, I wasn't even thinking in terms of diplomacy engagement, but what I really wanted and saw the need for was more long-term connection between teachers and students and transmitting knowledge and resources. So, I formed a summer conservatory program we call Youth Excellence on Stage, or YES Academy, and we go to countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Thailand and Malaysia, and Sudan recently, with programs ranging from beloved American genres, such as musical theater or jazz to Western classical music. We have string orchestras, composers, conductors, pianists and we also do a lot with hip-hop. We also work with rappers and DJs and MCs and break dancers and poppers and lockers and the whole gamut of hip-hop culture and more. And we're doing work with theater, especially social and physical children's theater, as a way to give young people the tools to use theater to help them address problems in their community or in their country and try to move the dialogue forward.

**Fields-Forbes:** Talking about the YES Academy, I was wondering who your faculty are for those academies, what the curriculum is, and what the duration for the sessions is, and what happens to those youth after they participate in an academy?

**Ferguson:** Our faculty is really diverse. We have never run a nationwide audition asking for faculty. We have in general formed our faculty through people that have been recommended to us by other faculty and other contacts. It's not like you need Yo-Yo Ma [American cellist] and Isaac Stern to go teach at that academy. You need people with public school experience who can go in and engage with kids in an energetic, enthusiastic way, or work with young people who play music that's way over their heads and bring them back to a level they can handle, and then move them forward from there. So, a lot of our teachers have a public-school background and maybe they've moved on to playing in a symphony orchestra or teaching at a university or something like that, but they have a lot of experience working with the 101-level activities in their field, whether that is in theater or dance or music.

We also have a lot of freelance people like our Broadway guy, Michael Parks, who sang for years on Broadway in “Les Misérables” and “Phantom of the Opera.” Like many of our teachers, he grew a bit frustrated with the career options that are here in the States. He likes the kind of international engagement and the challenges of putting on the first Broadway show in Vietnam or Kazakhstan or Sudan, for that matter—all of which we have done.

Our hip-hop instructors, too, often come from backgrounds of working in peacebuilding in their communities and youth development and education, often working in after-school programs and working in challenging environments where people don't get along, gangs or whatever social issues we have here in the States. That background is helpful when you get into a country that's separated by religion or by ethnicity or by race or whatever. We spend a lot of time talking to teachers before we bring them on board. We like to look at the work in the projects they've been involved in, and I would say, in general, once they've done one of these projects, they're hooked, and they want to do more and more because it's very rewarding work. It's difficult and it's often hot and sweaty and dusty and sometimes a little bit dangerous, but it's very rewarding work.

**Hodges:** John, what would you say are some of the biggest challenges your organization faces regarding the cultural differences between the students of different countries and dealing with the government and the bureaucracies that are present in those countries?

**Ferguson:** Well, some of the biggest challenges we have are just securing a place to work that has electricity and running water and things like that, so just the things we tend to take for granted here in the States, like electricity and toilets that flush and classrooms that have lights that go on, and a place where you can plug in a computer and obtain internet access. We almost never have that. I've been doing this for so long, I was confronted with a Smart room for the first time about five years ago at the University of Texas and I was like, there's this lectern with all these places to plug and I had no idea what it was. I really hadn't conceived the whole thing in my mind. I didn't know they existed. And again, I think in an American university or high school, a student would take PowerPoint presentations for granted, but we can never work with those because often we don't even have the power to run a laptop.

Then you're dealing with language differences and kids that are used to receiving information more directly than through something like a PowerPoint presentation, so the basics like power and utilities and so forth, places to teach, clean, functional, well-managed places to teach are very hard to come by. In Sudan recently, we had to paint and resurface the floors of an old warehouse that had some different rooms in it and create a space for hip-hop dance and a space for theater and so forth. And we had to hire a team to do that work on a couple of days-notice because what had been promised to us was a "sparkling facility." When we got there, it was just a big old dusty warehouse.

Corruption and indifference, I think, are big problems. We have been working with government institutions, and especially in corrupt nations. It's a huge problem in The Middle East, in particular. Where we work in Kurdistan, teaching positions or political appointments have nothing to do with someone's ability even to teach the subject at hand. You would just be shocked at the kind of people that are put in front of a classroom. Teachers don't show up, therefore, the students don't show up, or if they do show up, they mill about with nothing to do. So, often, students are kind of shocked when they come to our program and we work 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 hours a day because we have 10 days to prepare a show or 14 days to prepare a show. If they don't show up one day, they are warned about that and then they suddenly realize they're in deep trouble because they've missed 10 percent of the program by missing one day. And in the culture

they're coming from, it's OK to miss class. It's OK to not show up. It's not a problem when your teachers don't show up. That kind of indifference comes from countries where government is everything, government manages every aspect of education. And that just does not work when the whole system of government is very nepotistic and based on politics and who's your friend and who's your cousin, and who's your uncle. That makes working with ministries and working with institutions very difficult because the people in charge of those institutions don't share your vision for lifting up the level in the performing arts and engaging with students because they basically don't care about their students. They farm those students in their institutions for cash for their pockets. It's hard for us to imagine here, but there's a lot of that out there and that's one of the things we fight with all the time.

The other thing is just the dynamics of working in a poor country. Everybody needs money, and when a bunch of "rich Americans" come to town, they look at us as like we are walking A.T.M. machines and you'll get presented with bills and screaming, crying dramatic fits that we should pay for this or, you've done this and now you must pay for this. It's kind of shocking the things you must deal with, just people trying to get \$50 out of you to go home and buy food for their families. So, it's challenging working in the developing world or worlds, places coming out of conflict or isolation. You're not coming from the same economic level. You're not coming from the same commitment to the goals of the program. The students meet you halfway, but often the problem is their administrators and their teachers.

**Hodges:** I think this is something that we do take for granted in the United States, the importance of the performing arts in our society and how that may not be valued in other societies. What role do you see the arts, the performing arts specifically, playing in our democratic society?

**Ferguson:** Well, I don't live here. I've been living outside the States since 1989, but sometimes I come back and I feel like the arts are becoming less important and that audiences are so atomized now that often someone will follow the arts organization that their brother or sister is involved in, or that their best friends are in, and so they'll go to this theater for performances because their best friend is always in the shows or something like that. Audiences are getting smaller and more focused, so it's not like you have one symphony orchestra in town and everybody goes to that orchestra because that's the thing to do. Now the people that go to extra concerts are people

that are very passionate about orchestral music and that's a smaller group than it was 20 years ago. I see a lot of Americans that are less involved in the arts than they might have been. It also worries me that in public schools, apparently from what I'm hearing, as a result of No Child Left Behind programming, arts programs are getting squeezed out or made into before-school or after-school programs, so jazz band rehearsals happen at 6:30 a.m. before school starts and that sort of thing, once a week instead of three times a week. Then, at the same time, there are so many more new genres, some subgenres and interesting things going on, new ways of doing things and all the options of following things online or participating online, so things are going in a bunch of different directions at the same time in the States, which is very different from the way it is, say, in Iraq, where it's more like the States was 30 years ago, with a lot of kids studying in government institutions giving a limited number of concerts per year that are really the only option on the plate for audiences there. So, in that sense, when we come to do a show, it's a huge deal. It's a huge event. We had 4,000 people in Khartoum in Sudan turn up in a parking lot because for three years there hadn't been any sort of high-profile American cultural event. And people were curious to hear rappers and watch hip-hop dancers and see what the actors were doing and listen to the vocalists. When you're the only game in town, it's a completely different game than when you're one of 20 games going on that particular night, but we were the only game in three years. So, there's a very different dynamic working abroad, which is fun for us because you get much bigger audiences, much more enthusiasm, and you feel like you're making much more of a difference than you usually can in the States.

**Hodges:** That fragmentation of U.S. society that you're talking about is one of the themes I think that runs through throughout the Community Voices [CCC] series and something that we've been looking at from multiple perspectives. It's almost ironic, in a way, that in the countries that are less developed, it seems like there's a greater sense of community, as you were discussing it, around these art programs, than there is in the United States. Is there anything that can be done, maybe from the arts perspective, to try to reunite the communities that have been fragmented through American society, or is it just a bigger structural issue?

**Ferguson:** Get poor and live on top of each other. That's my advice. And I'm not being flippant. I mean, if you are working in some of the neighborhoods

we work in, people are crammed together, information passes around very quickly, mouth-to-mouth, because it's a human transaction and not a tweet or an email. It's like, come on, let's go, grab your friends and go or grab your family and go. So, families participate in events together and then larger networks of friends participate. I like to call American and Western European societies overly evolved, in the sense that evolution is a great thing, but at a certain point it starts having diminishing returns.

And how to deal with that, I don't know, because I don't live in the States, and I almost never deal with this dynamic and we're much more involved in bringing these performing arts experiences to countries that almost never get them. When we did Jazz Bridges in Kabul, we were the first American event in 27 years, so that created a lot of buzz. Now, Kabul doesn't have a huge audience of jazz lovers, but it does have a huge audience of people and many of them were curious about seeing Americans live on stage.

**Fields-Forbes:** I'd like to ask you, what exposure do youths in these various countries have to American culture? How much do they know about jazz? How much do they know about Broadway or hip-hop before they come to your workshops? What brings them there?

**Ferguson:** Well, You Tube University is one of the biggest sources of information in countries that have enough internet to support YouTube videos, so, amazingly enough, in Sudan, which was the site of our most recent Academy, the hip-hop community was right on top of the latest trends and the latest things. Now, they didn't always understand the context of where hip hop came from and how it started in the 1970s, basically, in New York City in the Bronx. But they knew about the latest thing because they saw all the latest music videos that were out on MTV, again mostly through social media, because it was hard to get something like MTV on Sudanese TV. But, thanks to the internet and thanks to Facebook, things are discovered and shared, and our hip-hop dance teacher was amazed at how well these guys danced, considering they never had a teacher before.

And then, we had a big band of 25 players. They were familiar with Duke Ellington. They were familiar with all kinds of trends out there in music, so they know a lot. They just have never had the chance to really study and work closely with an expert, so the expertise hasn't been transmitted directly. Musicals, Broadway musicals, people know through the musicals that make

it to film, so something like “Grease” or “Rent” isn’t shown in Sudan, but the sort of harmless musicals like “Grease,” for example, would be seen on TV. And in Pakistan, for example, there’s this huge theater community, but it’s mostly spoken theater. They’ve all seen musicals and they all want to do a musical, even though they can’t sing or dance like they can act, but they want to learn. So, it’s just a result of our culture being disseminated globally through a variety of means, through TV and radio and the internet and so forth.

**Fields-Forbes:** I’m really interested in the connection between American Voices as cultural ambassadors, in that you’re teaching and presenting American art forms such as jazz and hip hop, versus, you said in some communities you’re starting to do things like more socially focused theater, for example, that I imagine deal with local community issues. Do you do that in any communities around music as well, where you support local music development?

**Ferguson:** In our music classes we’re often really focused on trying to get professional skills developed and, we have the deadline of a show approaching. So, our YES Academies in music are very much focused on the final product that goes on stage. In the theater programs that we recently did in Sudan, all the material came out of the participants, not from the teachers. We didn’t come in and say, we’re going to do this skit about this, and that skit about that. We got the university theater students together and said, “What would you like to create a vignette about and stage and costume and act?” And we got a play that was made up of 20 short vignettes that were the youth unemployment office and problems at home with families and all kinds of day-to-day issues that Sudanese youth face.

**Hodges:** John, if somebody was interested in starting an organization like American Voices and not necessarily from a performing arts perspective, what sort of advice would you give them as far as getting support for the program and how to go about choosing places to go in developing it?

**Ferguson:** Well, first, just a warning, which is that funding for these kinds of events is limited. There’s a lot of philanthropy in the States. There’s a lot of foundations and so forth, but you’ll find that they’re mostly focused on a specific community or a specific art form or a specific state or a specific demographic or something like that. So, finding an organization that’s willing

to fund a theater group from Blacksburg to go to Zimbabwe might be a challenge. I think these Kickstarter and Indie Go-Go campaigns are great. For that matter, if you had a theater group from this university, for example, that wanted to travel abroad, I think self-funding is the way to go for these kinds of things.

And don't expect to make a lot of money from doing this kind of job. The trick is to fund your travel and your visa and your living expenses, and then try to find local partners to work with who can, as much as possible, meet you halfway. So, find someone who can help you with home stays. Find someone who can give you the theater for free. Find someone who's willing to provide the sound system and these other things that tend to cost a lot of money when you're working abroad. There are ways to do it but, I wouldn't expect a Rockefeller to fall from the sky with a check for \$100,000 to fund your projects.

**Hodges:** So, the primary mission of American Voices is sort of the cultural diplomacy and bringing American music and theater to post-conflict countries, but do you see having a larger mission, a larger impact as far as social change goes or peacebuilding or something along those lines?

**Ferguson:** Things like peacebuilding and greater acceptance and tolerance are kind of a byproduct of work we do because when we run a nationwide program in Lebanon or Iraq, you automatically have the whole religious mix of Christians and Muslims and all the religions in between, like Yazedis and Zoroastrians, and so on. So, of course, it's a very diverse group. You have a decent gender balance, although it's hard for female participants to get permission to leave home to participate in a residential program where they stay in dormitory rooms, but I would say, as a byproduct, there's more tolerance and understanding of each other. I know before we start our program in Iraq every summer, the Kurdish kids are sniping about the Arabs that are coming in and the Arabs are saying, "We're not sure we're going to feel comfortable with the Kurds," and stuff like that. But, once they get there, the teachers are there and they're all focused on some common goal of playing the Mendelssohn Sinfonia or getting 20 minutes of hip hop choreography done in 10 days, then that stuff just disappears. I can't guarantee that it disappears forever, but at least they've experienced that feeling of tolerance and respect for each other, and they, I think, in theory, know how to recreate it amongst each other.

**Fields-Forbes:** Is there any post-performance evaluation session with students or something in which they express that, going through that experience you just talked about?

**Ferguson:** We do evaluations, both online and written. Actually, we don't give them their certificates unless they do an evaluation, so we're very conscientious about getting everyone to evaluate. I'm hesitant to bring up those issues in writing because I'm afraid it gets you the opposite of what you're looking for. And it's almost better to do these things without saying too much about it. But we do talk about it a lot with some of our more involved students, our more advanced students, and often I point out to them, remember, you hated Arabs before this program started and now you're best friends with so and so in Baghdad and stuff like that. So, there's plenty of examples you can see. Again, Facebook is a great way to find out who's doing activities with someone who's not from the same ethnic group or the same city or whatever.

**Hodges:** John, can you talk a little bit about the scholarship program that you all have?

**Ferguson:** Our deputy director, based in St. Louis, is Mark Thayer who's a violinist who used to work with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He's been our violin teacher for years. After the first program in Iraq, he devised a community-based cooperative program in St. Louis to invite two students over for a one-year program. So, they come over, St. Louis University provides two absolutely free tuition scholarships for E.S.L. {English as a second language}, so they work on their English, hopefully to get it to the point where they can take the TOEFL test [a test of English proficiency many U.S. universities require], and after a year of study, leverage that into entry into a degree program. But, during that one year that they're there, they're studying English, they play in the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra, they take private lessons with Mark Thayer, they have host families and home stays who provide them with their living expenses. And they perform as well, so they kind of give back to the community in the public schools and at the International Center. So that's basically the program and over the years some students have been able to take that one year and turn it into a full scholarship to a degree program. We have one violinist now at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville, who will be transferring to [the University of Illinois] Champagne-Urbana soon. Another student is at the University of

Missouri, St. Louis. It's not easy and not all of them want to stay longer than one year, but some of them have. We have a cellist who's in Buffalo, New York, but some of them really rise to the occasion and are now in degree programs and in a few years will go back to Iraq or Lebanon or Syria wherever and become teachers.

**Hodges:** How do you choose the scholarship winners?

**Ferguson:** We don't have an official application process. It's sort of like the MacArthur Fellows Grant. Suddenly you get a notice that you've been chosen. We watch them for several years and just watch how serious they are, what kind of extra motivation and energy they have, how talented they are, how much potential they would have to thrive outside of their home country. There are some kids who are really talented, but we know they wouldn't make it in St. Louis. They couldn't be away from their families. They're married and their families would never let them leave their wives and kids for years, so we basically make choices based on observing kids over several years.

**Fields-Forbes:** John, if there is a musician or an artist who wants to get involved with American Voices, what would you tell them to do?

**Ferguson:** We're at [www.facebook.com/amvoices](http://www.facebook.com/amvoices). There's a lot of American Voices organizations, so don't get us confused with another one. You can also find us on Facebook through my name, John Ferguson, or [John.Ferguson@americanvoices.org](mailto:John.Ferguson@americanvoices.org), or send us a tweet to @americanvoices. And we'll get back to you. Just for fun, you might enjoy searching Facebook for things like YES Academy Kurdistan, YES Academy Iraq, YES Academy Sudan, YES Academy Thailand, and just browse through the photos and videos there and read the student postings that are in English, or use Google translate to translate Arabic into English or Thai or what other languages are going on. We do have an internship program for our summer academies, so we're often looking for interns, especially in the fields of theater we do. We're always looking for theater assistants to help us work with the kids in the summer, as well as people to come as interns to help us with administration.

**Hodges:** How do you choose where you're going to go for your YES Academy programs or for the American Music Abroad programs?

**Ferguson:** Well, we've tried for the most part to choose the countries that

we feel have the greatest need and where we historically have a track record, so Lebanon is a country we've been going since 1998. Again, starting with more cultural diplomacy one-off programs, but again, there was an urgent need for engagement there, and education. There are all these string players in Lebanon, but there's not a youth orchestra. It's really crazy. Like there's not a youth orchestra in Lebanon, so we have the only youth orchestra in the summertime. We're running programs for Syrian refugees in the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon this summer, for theater and rapping and deejaying and emceeing. These are countries that have sort of chosen me over the years and have a great need. We're not running these programs in Tokyo, Berlin and Singapore, but really focusing on places like Lebanon and Iraq.

Sudan was a new opportunity. We saw some calls for proposals a couple years ago through a special envoy for Sudan's office in Washington and applied for funding for YES Academy and they've funded us for that program. And in Thailand, where we run an office, we run the big YES Academy Thailand program, which reaches out to kids all across southern and Southeast Asia, so we have participants there not only from all across Thailand, but also Pakistan, Nepal, India, and Asian countries like Malaysia and Laos and Vietnam.

**Hodges:** As I've been listening to you talk, I've heard you say something about human rights issues that you may be encountering, and some of the countries that you're going to and one theme that has jumped out to me is this notion of women's rights, because I've noticed that you've often said in the some of the countries that you're going to, that women are not allowed or the girls are not allowed to participate in your residential programs. I wonder what your experience with women's rights has been in the countries that you've been going to.

**Ferguson:** Well, ironically, you would think that Iraq is some horrible environment for women. The difficulty comes down to one thing, which is families don't like it when their married female family members are away from home without another family member. More modern families from Baghdad don't have a problem with sending their kids, male or female, to a summer camp and staying in dormitories, but, in the more conservative parts of the country, say Kirkuk, which isn't far from Kurdistan, especially the Kurdish families, will not allow their girls to stay in the dormitory. One of

the solutions there is to suggest that a family member come with them, or that a teacher come with them, so that's one of the ways we get around the problem. There are more opportunities than you would expect for women in Iraq and Kurdistan, but there's still a lot of room for improvement.

It's not a problem to do the performing arts. The problem comes for women to get on stage. There's a social thing about women being on stage, especially, after the age of 13 or 14 or 15 years old. It's considered not proper for a woman who is of marrying age to present herself on stage. So, it's just a social thing. If girls choose to participate in the program, but not be on stage at the end, we respect that, but we also have some tricks up our sleeves, like using baseball caps and make up. We did a hip-hop program where boys and girls were dancing on stage. That was not a problem with anyone involved in the program, except for some of the kids' parents, so everyone, the boys and girls, did a big face painting thing and wore hats to cover their faces because television was filming it and nobody could see who they were.

**Hodges:** I guess that brings up the question of what are the normal demographics of the people who attend your academies?

**Ferguson:** Well, the interesting demographic I always like to remind people of is, that in the Middle East in particular, often 60 percent of the population is under 25 or under 30, and sometimes more than that, so there are huge numbers of young people, and they want something different than what their parents had. They want to feel like they're more part of a global vision for their lives. They don't want to just be for this little village because they've been exposed to the internet; they know what's out there. They want to see things. They want to meet people. They want to do things. They're not as burdened by tradition as their families were.

So, our programs are really designed to work with those young people who want to learn something like hip hop or breakdancing or jazz or musical theater or whatever. And some people, in a kind of knee-jerk way, just assume that we're forcing something on kids that don't want this, or forcing something on audiences that don't want it, but I guarantee you, for maybe as many people that think it's a bad thing, there's an equal number of people that think it's a good thing.

Working in Kurdistan, which is a very traditional conservative place, we've

never had anyone complain about what we do on stage, about hip-hop dancing and boys and girls dancing together. It comes down more to parents and fathers not wanting their particular daughter to be in that situation. But the Ministry of Culture's policy is much more supportive.

**Fields-Forbes:** I remember seeing on your website a program called Hiplomacy, which I thought was great, and one of the things you say is that Hiplomacy supports positive self-expression. Could you speak to that a little bit? I know through dancing and all the different forms of dancing, but I assume that rapping is something that is taught as well. How do instructors encourage positive self-expression instead of, as so much of the rap music that gets exported from America, something that is not super positive?

**Ferguson:** Well, you'd be surprised that the predominant trend we see in hip-hop is not gangster rap. Hip-hop is a positive social movement and a language and culture for youth to communicate, so we've had very limited cases of rappers coming in with tons of four-letter words. Usually, we don't have a problem at all. So, for people that worry that America's exporting gangster rap to Iraq: Yes, those kids know what it is and maybe some of them listen to it, but it's not what they've chosen for themselves, and there's this sort of underground, what I call positive hip hop movement, that seems to cancel out the whole gangster thing. And none of the countries we work in have this problem with gangs like we have here in the States, so you don't get kids coming into the program who are from opposing neighborhoods or gangs or anything like that. So, we're pretty lucky in that sense that what audiences associate and what participants associate within our art forms here is clean and we don't have to worry about that.

**Hodges:** John you've done some work in conflict zones, I guess Iraq during the recent conflict there, and Afghanistan and South Sudan. What's it like doing your kind of work in an area that's riddled with conflict?

**Ferguson:** Well, what I like to say is, the most dangerous place I go is Houston, Texas, where I come from, and where the threat of violence is scarier because it's random. If you're in a conflict zone, you usually know how to avoid the people who have a conflict with you in theory. So, if you're in Afghanistan, you stay away from the hot spots where you've got Taliban attacks and so forth. We've done large-scale programs in Afghanistan in the cities of Herat and Mazarii-Sharif, which are, again, safer than Houston,

Texas. You don't have any random violence going on there. You have the occasional problems that pop up, but in general, it's not nearly as unsafe as you think it would be. We wouldn't go someplace if there were a real risk of getting attacked at any moment, or it's not safe to walk the streets. So, we tend to work in environments where you can move around freely.

So yeah, I guess my message there is, things are not as bad as they seem on the news and sometimes things are worse than they appear on the news, especially when it comes to Houston, Texas, or St. Louis, Missouri. In fact, this is one of the first things our scholarship students must learn in St. Louis: they cannot just walk anywhere at night, at any time of night. They should try to be home before 9 p.m. or take a taxi back. You don't have that in Iraq. You can, and I know I walk around at 3 a.m. in the morning after a long night out of drinking tea and playing dominoes with kids. You don't have to worry about anything.

So, there's a difference, I think, between random social violence and political violence, and most of the countries we're going to are dealing with political violence, and societies are very, I don't want to say tightly controlled, but there are social norms that are enforced by family structures and village and city structures. You don't have all the randomness and problems with loose guns and people driving cars crazily and the sort of things we have here in the States.

**Fields-Forbes:** As you look forward to the future of American Voices, what do you look forward to doing?

**Ferguson:** Well, my passion is really the engagement kind of programs, the education programs, so I would love to see the four main programs we do now—Iraq, Lebanon, Thailand and Sudan—have their longevity assured for another generation. That's one of the things we're looking for, some way to endow those programs through sponsors and donors so that those programs can continue long after I've retired. And I think we would always like to be open to new frontiers for these kinds of programs. I know one country I'd be very interested in trying to work in is North Korea, which has this remarkably repressive government where people aren't allowed to think a free thought, but at the same time they have a huge cultural infrastructure.

They have orchestras and marching bands and dancing troupes and all of

that sort of stuff, so there's a lot to plug into there and we're looking forward to that the day when we can visit that country. Iran would be another one we would love to work with. You think of Iran as the Ayatollahs and black capes and women in veils, but there are symphony orchestras and flute players with doctorates from Iowa and it's a very cultural place. Persian culture has always been one of the leaders in the Middle East. So again, I think we get a sort of limited view of these countries from our media. I'm a big fan of *Al-Jazeera America* because I find they're very good at bringing programs about parts of the world that we only get negative news from and trying to shine some light on what's really going on in day-to-day life there.

**Hodges:** I think these are some really important lessons that you're pointing out about possible misconceptions that Americans may have about what it's like to be in Iraq or Afghanistan or similar places, and I wonder, is there anything that we can do in the United States to try to help dispel these misconceptions? Obviously, there's nothing like being on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan, but I think it's detrimental to our society, these misconceptions that we're having, and I just wonder if there's any anything that you can think of to dispel those?

**Ferguson:** Get a passport. Travel. Go see the world and don't go just to Paris, London and Berlin. Go to Istanbul and then dip your toe into Kurdistan or Beirut, a great place to visit.

I think Facebook is a neat thing. I once did an exercise with university students in Greenville, North Carolina, East Carolina State University music students, and they were completely bored by what I was talking about and so I said, "OK, everyone get out your tablets or your phone or your laptop go on to Facebook and make a friend in Libya." And they were rolling their eyes, thinking, you know, God how do we do that? And I said, "Well, you've got a search function. Type in Libya. Type in university. Type in English Club. Type in band, clarinet, whatever. And they did that, and you know, quickly Libyans were like, oh, an American wants to be my friend. So, I recommend you just go out and surf on Facebook. Follow things that are interesting, like an English club at a university in Libya. You can do a lot of things now with Skype. Teach somebody English through Skype. You don't necessarily have to leave your home to see the world anymore.

# Chapter 5: Joanna Sherman and Michael McGuigan

**Joanna Sherman**, Founder and Artistic Director of Bond Street Theatre

**Michael McGuigan**, Managing Director of Bond Street Theatre

**Date of Interview:** October 23, 2013

**Interviewers:** Andy Morikawa, Lyusyena Kirakosyan, and Sarah Lyon-Hill

**Lyusyena Kirakosyan:** You were among the pioneers of community-based theater and cultural diplomacy, and you have helped to frame them. How has your journey been for you personally, this journey of the last three decades?

**Joanna Sherman:** I'll tell you about our epiphany moment in the history of Bond Street Theatre. In 1984 we were a kind of a street theater. We did indoor and street theater, sort of a socially oriented theater company. We were invited to Israel, to the Israel festival, which was a very prestigious festival, so we were very pleased about that. They asked us if we wanted to do this big community program with representatives of the indigenous ethnic groups that were in Jerusalem at that time, so that in addition to the Jewish population, there were also the Palestinian population and other Arabic groups and Yemenis and Ethiopians, and they wanted us to do a big street pageant that would open the festival. It was a big process, putting this group together because a lot of them wouldn't participate if the other groups were going to be a part of it, but it turned out to be very successful. There were 60 participants, and we did this big street pageant of earth, air, fire and water, and no language, but these giant puppets and going through the streets and these little scenarios would occur on the street corners. It was a beautiful event.

And we saw that the people were working together in peace and harmony because they were so busy making sure that the dragon moved in the right way and that the firebird worked this way that they were working together. We thought, oh my goodness, you know, this really does allow people to work together because they are doing so for a greater good. It was an aesthetic

greater good, but then it was also a big meaningful symbolic gesture for Jerusalem, and it spawned the first interethnic theater group, I think, in Jerusalem and it lasted for many years. I think it lasted for a decade. So, it was kind of this epiphany moment in our mind that, theater really is very powerful and could be put to a lot of different uses in communities.

**Michael McGuigan:** I think you asked about our personal experience. I'm going to totally answer it as a personal journey. When I was a kid, about 12 years old or something, there was a book that had many different stories about heroes and other great people. One of them was on Harry Houdini, the escape-ologist, the magician, and I got really kind of fascinated by it, partly the idea of magic tricks, fooling people with decks of cards and that kind of thing and the idea of escaping and what not, but there was another part of the story that came out. There were back in that time a lot of spiritualists or spirit mediums. These were people who would say, "Come to my seance, pay me \$50 and you'll talk to your dead husband or brother or whatever." Harry Houdini made it a point to go around and expose a lot of these fraudulent individuals and I got fascinated. I don't know why, but as a 12-year-old, I got fascinated with the whole idea of the line between spiritual understanding and show business, and what's real, what's not real, and from what point-of-view can you tell what is real or what is not. And I think that really influenced me, but I didn't realize how much until we started doing more of this international work where we're constantly dealing with different cultures with different ideas, with different spiritualities, with different senses of community and different uses for props and objects. That's the idea of what a theater person does: What does this ring represent? What does this architecture represent? I had no notion as a 12-year-old kid that I would be so involved on these levels. At one point I thought, oh, I'll just be a magician, but I didn't realize it was going to lead me to this path of really asking questions about life and performance, and commerce, even this exchange of \$50 to talk to your dead relative or to see a bit of entertainment. It's all so wrapped up in such interesting ways in this work.

**Kirakosyan:** What kind of change do you think you bring when you go to these different communities at different stages of their own development, especially when so many of them are in post-conflict situations?

**Sarah Lyon-Hill:** Do you see yourselves as agents of social change in a way?

**Sherman:** I think that we have in mind social improvement, and one would assume that that's change in some regard. But, speaking realistically, we know that we cannot really create social change. You can work at a very personal level, and I think that's where change occurs first, on a personal level.

Just in speaking to someone today, for example in Afghanistan, it's very, very difficult. We're not going to change that culture or change that mindset, and I don't really want to. We're not the foreigners coming in to change people's minds, but I think that we're introducing to people their own capacity. For example, working with the girls in Afghanistan that are held back to a large degree from education and from being able to speak their minds and speak out, giving them the opportunity to express themselves more freely within a safe and controlled environment and then being able to write their own plays and present them to a public, even if they're only performing for other women. That's great that they're performing for other women and starting that dialogue among the women about what kind of changes they want to see and how they are going to do that. So, I feel like we're opening a door to a certain degree. We can't institute change, but we can give them the tools to open the door to institute the change that they want to see, and that's the most important thing.

**McGuigan:** To point out what we're doing, one of the projects we're doing now is an Election Project. We have a men's theater team and a women's theater team going into their respective communities and talking about the elections: why it's important to vote, why people should be involved in voting. On one level, everyone thinks that's a good idea, even though whether you call it democracy or whatever, it's hard to move the concept forward for a myriad of reasons, but everybody's behind the idea that we should educate the electorate. But there's also the idea that women cannot perform on stage. That's what we've heard. That's we've been told. That's what's out there. You cannot have women on stage. But once we show what exactly we're doing, and we're taking steps within the culture and that the women are performing for women and they're not dancing or playing music or things that might also be more suspect, and once we invite the local official or the local mullah to come and see the work, and once they see what it is, they're like, "Oh, well, that's OK. That's a good idea. Women can be on stage." The only thing we've really changed is their perception of what

we're doing. It's not like women onstage were not acceptable and now we've changed it and made it acceptable. We've just kind of changed the view of what the tool is that they're using.

**Sherman:** Yeah. Redefining the term theater because I think that it's not something that people are familiar with in the same kind of way everywhere in the world. Theater means something very specific to us here. Usually people think, "Oh, you buy a ticket, you get a seat, and you watch something very distant on the stage and it ends and then you go home." What theater really is and can be in the world can be just a storyteller showing up at a marketplace or a puppeteer showing up somewhere. I mean, this form of art has a lot of different manifestations around the world. So, I think that when we say theater in Afghanistan or Pakistan, we have to make clear that it's not Bollywood, or particularly in Afghanistan, it's not singing and dancing. They do get foreign films and believe that those frequently present things that are not appropriate for the Afghan culture.

So, as Michael was saying, it's just showing them that this is what we're talking about. This is what that term means. And now they have more TV dramas, and then they call those "dramas," so that's another term that has another definition now, so it's just opening up to different ways of looking at things.

**Lyon-Hill:** Have you had issues where there are cultures that have values that just don't match or don't work with how you want to conduct your programming or your theater, and how have you had to adapt to that situation?

**Sherman:** I think the main thing is that you always must be very sensitive. We must be always open, and we learned this a long time ago. You have to be really very open to what people are offering you and what you're offering them, and this is one of the reasons why we always start with a collaboration with local artists, because we sit down and we kind of speak the same language because the language of theater is, to some extent, the same everywhere. And we meet with the theater company that's there and we say, well, what do you want to do? We often get the response, "Oh, I don't know. What do you want to do?" And we say, "Well, we warm up like this, and we do this exercise." And they go, "Oh, well, when we warm up, we do this exercise, and we do this dance." "Oh, well, we do this dance, and we do this

thing with sticks at weddings.” “Oh, we do something with sticks like that.” And we just start sharing and you find a common vocabulary and that’s like our starting place.

So, I think wherever we go we always have local collaborators, and they help introduce you to the local population so you’re not making a major faux pas. It’s really peer-to-peer. That’s how we see it.

**McGuigan:** And we do understand that when we are working with local artists and peers and they’re taking us around, I am aware that they are, of course, taking us to the connections that they have, so they are bringing us to the safe places. And I don’t mean that we don’t go into some other communities or try to reach out, but those with whom we work generally don’t get us in trouble. They know where the boundaries are and how far we can go and, as Joanna says, we’re sensitive to that, but we have certainly heard stories of the occasional street theater troupe that decides to go to another culture and country and just set up in the middle of the marketplace without any notion of what’s going on or any preparation, and that can lead to some trouble.

**Kirakosyan:** From what you’re saying, you have a long history of partnering with local theaters from Haiti to Afghanistan. How do you build sustainable relationships with them?

**Sherman:** Facebook. [LAUGH] No, email. I would say that most of the companies have email and Skype. We have constant Skype conversations with people and it’s very commonplace. Just last week, I talked to Afghanistan twice and Kyrgyzstan once. It’s very easy now. It didn’t used to be so easy just getting what you need.

**McGuigan:** To give some background, our interest in Afghanistan came after 9/11 [the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks]. Who are these Afghans? Who are these people? If our country is going to be involved in a war with them now, we want to know more about who they are. So, we just got on the internet. We started emailing NGOs: We are a theater company whose members can do workshops with populations in schools or can also provide public performances. Here’s what we can do. Who can we associate with? One German NGO that builds schools for Afghan refugees in Pakistan answered the email and said, “We don’t have any money, but if you can come

over and help, this is actually going to answer a bunch of questions.” So that’s how we got there. We used our own funds to get there the first time just to gain experience.

Basically, we were paying for the plane fare. Everything else was relatively inexpensive: the hotel and things. We were there for two weeks, and they helped us with the translations because their local staff would take us around. We were giving them shows and they gave us sort of the ground support for those. Through that project we went to one of the community centers and there was a guy who was running a program for the children, Mahmoud Salini, who had his own theater company called Exile Theatre, and that’s how we met those involved with it. We just came in to do a show for those kids, and he’s like, “Wow. I speak good English and I’ve got this theater company and maybe we could do a collaboration.” And we’re like, “Oh, definitely.” And then he said, “Hopefully when the war and the fighting is over and the bombing, we’re going to be back in Kabul next year. Maybe we can start a collaboration.” That was how we got into it and then we came back.

Now, once we’ve already shown that we have a track record, even that one trip using our own resources, people at the embassy said, “Oh, these guys seem like they’re serious.” They gave us the travel money to make the next trip. And as that started to grow, we met again with Exile Theatre. We worked with their actors. We decided to put a show together with them, *Beyond the Mirror*, and it started from there. We don’t always go in with a plan. We don’t know who and how the associations are going to work necessarily, but once we get them started, a lot of it is gut feeling. We ask ourselves do we get a good feeling from this company or this NGO? And a lot of it is luck, what happens to come along. But that was how we started in Afghanistan. That started pretty much a six-year relationship with them, and then like a ten-year relationship. We keep going back to Afghanistan.

**Lyon-Hill:** Is that like your other country experiences, where you meet a person who is from there and kind of end up making this relationship?

**Sherman:** We usually have one scouting mission to any country that we’re interested in going to before we go. First, we have to decide where we want to go, so we do a needs assessment and we have certain protocols that we follow to decide where we want to go. Right now, we’re looking

into Yemen and of course the Syrian refugee situation. We're looking to the different countries that are accepting a lot of refugees, since we have a lot of experience working in refugee camps. We're also looking at Sudan and South Sudan. So, we're doing a needs assessment in these countries. One of the big questions we ask is, can we make an impact? Can we, effect some positive change in some sort of way? Do they have any kind of facility? You don't want to be taking up resources that they need, so would they be able to handle additional people?

And then we usually have some small plan to start and then we accomplish that, and then it becomes easier to grow, and then we know a little bit more about what we want to accomplish, and we make a more comprehensive plan. Usually, part of that process is contacting local people, and maybe they're not going to be a local theater company. Maybe it'll be a local journalist or a local university or some other organization that might be able to introduce us to the theater community, if there is such, which there almost always is, so they'll be our kind of liaison and then we'll sort of branch out from there. Meeting Exile Theatre in the refugee camp was really just happenstance. It's not usually quite that simple. It usually requires planning and corresponding with several different people.

**Lyon-Hill:** Have you ever had any instances where you went into a community or a country and realized that what you do would not necessarily work in that climate or work with that group of people?

**Sherman:** No. We've never had that experience. Usually, before we go, we've got a plan together and we've done the research to know that, yeah, this is definitely going to work out, and this is something that is beneficial. I don't know what other companies make that mistake, but we certainly know better than to do that.

**Kirakosyan:** In refugee camps and other conflict-ridden communities, what kind of goals or functions of theater do you think of when you go there?

**Sherman:** Interestingly, sometimes we know we can offer some uplifting entertainment, and sometimes that's already great. That's already something really good, because one thing about refugee camps is, they're boring. Nobody really thinks of that because the circumstances are sad that the people are there in the first place and people tend to focus on that fact. But

there's nothing to do, and when there's nothing to do, problems arise among the teenagers and among the guys, and so the minute we walk into a refugee camp, we're surrounded by, like, a thousand kids who just want something, some attention. So, just doing performances relieves the tension or doing little workshops in some sort of way.

**Kirakosyan:** But how do you do a workshop with a thousand people?

**Sherman:** It's quite difficult, but I think at the same time, we do offer some therapeutic help. We did have a situation of working in Kosovo in the refugee camps where they immediately said, "Oh look, you are performers. Can you please come work with the traumatized children? We have a group over there of kids that are heavily traumatized." And we didn't have any previous specific experience working with traumatized children. It's not our training, but we just did what we felt came naturally, sort of doing group games with the children, and some of them were very closed off and not participating at all. They were severely debilitated by the trauma, and little by little, they opened up during the process of just playing these imagination games and playing with the rest of the group and getting their minds off things. Any kind of game that has to do with self-expression is very healing, so little by little, we also learned about what are the most effective healing exercises to do with kids that are traumatized, or kids that have such problems.

**McGuigan:** Sometimes we come up with situations where we basically say to ourselves, we'll try something, and later we find out how good it is in these other fields. Partly, I think, our job is just trying to throw this stuff out there and let the experts in urban planning and communication and development and this and that figure out what these exercises are good for and then they can use them too. We did a project with families of victims of 9/11 and it was a workshop program and we were known for doing some of the theater games and circus skills and stuff, but there was another workshop period. And they wanted us to do something different. We were like, what are we going to do? I thought, let's do the mask-making workshop because it'll really kill some time and it'll be an activity they'll enjoy doing. They asked, what's it good for? I had no idea, but let's just do it. So basically, it's only the first part of a mask-making session. The person whose mask you are going to make sits in a chair, they put their head back, and you put Vaseline on their face and you take plaster gauze—it's the stuff that in those days was used for making a cast—put it in warm water, and you put it on the face and all this

plaster gauze is on the face of the person who's got to stay still, the thing gets very hard, and then you can pull the mask off, and you've got a perfect negative on the inside. And it's usually something of a positive of the person's face on the outside, depending on how thin you make the layers. So, it's a rather elaborate process and we just figured; this'll be good. It was amazing how well it worked. There was one family in particular, the mother said, "I am astounded that my child has sat there so long for you to put this stuff on their face because, you know, he lost his father and already has a lot of issues going on, and he's been very wild and rambunctious." The mother thought, there was no way this child was going to sit still for this, and he really surprised her and then you had a very beautiful passive face of this boy.

**Sherman:** Like a serene replica.

**McGuigan:** So, the second part of this is, and we did this with adults also, and they had to sit down, and we said, now paint the mask. We brought all kinds of paint in and said, you can paint the outside as you are but paint the inside as you want to be, whatever that means to you. We had shown them all these pictures of different artists and arts and varieties and things. There was one burly guy, he had been a fireman and he had lost many friends, and he was talking to nobody in particular. Somebody came in and said, "You've got to move on to the next workshop. Come on everybody, let's go." And he just said, "I love art therapy." And at first, I wondered if he was being sarcastic and simply disliked having to move around. But then I listened, and I felt that he was really being very honest about it, and I felt both very good and very bad. One, I felt very good that we seemed to be really reaching him. Even so, from my point of view, he was not doing art therapy. He was doing art. He was just doing art. Why did this have to seem like, oh, art for sick people. And so, we have that issue where some say, "Look, art is really great, and art really touches people and art can have this effect and it is just what it is." But at the same time, it can be used as different tools and I feel that a big part of what we're doing is just trying the stuff out here, seeing what it can be used for and getting the response from people, but being mindful. And I think what our culture really needs more is to listen to the artists. Not just us, but the artists in the communities, too, the artists that we're working with, they have a value in their communities, the actors and actresses in Afghanistan and Myanmar. They can really help in the same way.

**Sherman:** We do know that some of these things work now. We've learned

over the years that some of these things are very healing and do work, like the mask making, for example. We've done this on a number of occasions in India with the young people that escaped the Maoist Movement.

**McGuigan:** Oh yeah. The UNICEF program.

**Sherman:** The refugees. Yeah, and it's very soothing to have this (mask-making) done to your face. It's like getting a facial and you're left with a serene image of your face. So, you already believed that it worked, but the surprises are when this big burly fireman says, "I love this art therapy." And then you realize, he sees it as therapy. So, OK, it's therapy and that's great, but that doesn't mean he's sick.

**McGuigan:** Right, and going on what you're saying, once we make a discovery like that, we certainly do capitalize on the effects that these exercises will have. Of course, there are these exercises that we've tried, which we are sure, this is going to really work, and then it's like, ehh, they didn't get better.

**Lyon-Hill:** Can you give us an example?

**Sherman:** I can give examples of some cultural faux pas we have committed. Every time we go someplace, I'm not embarrassed to say that we do make at least one cultural faux pas. [Turning to McGuigan] I was thinking of the situation with the bread.

**McGuigan:** That's a good story.

**Sherman:** Well, in one of the shows that we were doing back in Afghanistan we were doing a little scene with chefs and plates and food, because this is something quite universal. Everyone likes food. So, we're doing this little routine with plates, and we throw the plates around in a very nice kind of way, and we thought—

**McGuigan:** Juggling.

**Sherman:** A juggling thing with plates and we notice in this particular town, they have this round bread that is just the same size as a plate, and we said, well, let's use the local thing here. Let's use this bread and it will be great. We'll sort of like come out with the bread and we'll throw the bread around a certain kind of way. And so, we waited for it to get a little stale so it would be stiff enough that we could manipulate it, and in one show the bread fell

to the ground and broke into a lot of little pieces, and somebody from the audience came up and started very carefully picking up all of them. So, we figured they don't really have the same kind of understanding about "this is the stage, you stay where you are in the audience, and we're up here on the stage," and we're like, "OK, we're fine with that." But in the car going to the next place, the fellow who was sponsoring us said, "You know, bread is very sacred. Bread is very sacred in our culture. We don't let it touch the ground." And it was like, "OK, so that's really not good when it falls on the ground." And he said, "Yes. We don't throw the bread away. We keep it separate."

**McGuigan:** Now, we don't play with the bread.

**Sherman:** And I said, "Why didn't you tell us five shows ago?" We hadn't dropped it until then. So, as we got to the next town, of course, we're all like butter fingers. We can't hold onto that bread at all. And we switched back to the plates. But these are the things that you don't think to ask, and they're too polite necessarily to say, and so, now we can have it is a nice story. But at the time we were really kind of devastated that we made this, like, this big blunder. But this is also part of this idea of traveling to different places. They also make blunders when they come to our country. We make blunders when we go to their country. It's, hey, it's OK. There are certain blunders you definitely do not want to make, but this was a safe blunder.

**McGuigan:** There were other things, too. There was one exercise, when we were working with women in Jalalabad, one of the women's groups, it was one of the first, maybe the second workshops, and we were doing an exercise called Pass the Impulse. It's an Acting 101 physical theater thing.

You're all standing in a circle and you pretend that you have a ball of energy and you throw it to the person across the circle, and they take it in, and then they toss it away. It's a way of engaging your spine because you have really to move your spine. As you might imagine, the impulse comes to you and your back arches and then you throw it out. Now, it's not necessarily like you're holding an invisible ball. Ideally, this energy is something that goes inside of you so, again, because we're manipulating, we want to engage the different muscles in the spinal column. It's an anatomy thing in addition to this imaginative thing. So, these women who have had no experience with this kind of thing at all were working on it and we go slow. We're just throwing little impulses going from one side to the other. They were kind

of playing the game, as it were. One would take it and they'd giggle a little bit. Who do I send it to? And then they'd send it to their friend across the way and then they'd giggle a little bit and send it over and finally it came back to me, and I just decided to take it to a little bit of another level, and I really threw an impulse to this one woman off to the side which just hit her like a ton of bricks. And she had it and everything stopped for like what seemed like hours, but maybe 10 seconds, where she didn't know what to do with this impulse, and she's looking around trying to figure out, "who should I throw it to, and how big do I make it, and I don't know what I'm going to do," and then she just burst out crying and ran away. I should not have sent that. Fortunately, we had with us an Afghan-American woman, Sohar, who spoke Dari and she went over and talked to this girl immediately. I was afraid she would not come back to any more of the workshops.

But she did come back. She joined the circle after she pulled herself together, and not only was she there the next day, and the next day, and the next day after that, but she became one of the main actors in the show that we did. She just totally got engaged in it. So that's part of it, too, why we do this, because of those little, tiny miracles that happen and the resilience that we see in the people and the bravery that that she demonstrated as she dealt with an emotional roller coaster ride.

**Sherman:** What seems like a little barrier to us is maybe a big barrier to somebody else. You have to kind of go at their own pace and be sensitive to that.

**Kirakosyan:** What are the differences between the audience here and audiences in Afghanistan or Haiti or in other places in terms of energy or expectations?

**Sherman:** I think that American audiences are pretty vigorous and in a lot of other places they're vigorous too.

**McGuigan:** I don't know that there's really much difference. That's an interesting question. I hadn't really thought of that.

**Sherman:** I was thinking of France, going to the festival in France everyone in the room was very politely clapping. And it wasn't even our show, but I was at a show where the Americans in the audience were like rolling on the ground. It was a comedy show, and we're like laughing and rolling on the ground, and

the French people were like, “Oh, ha, ha, ha.” So, I felt like they were being very reserved in France.

**McGuigan:** You know, one thing that’s interesting is, we’ve had situations, I’m thinking of the girls performing at a high school in Afghanistan. The girls were doing a show, and there were about 1,000 students in the school, and of course, if they are only going to do one show, all of the students have to see the show. They brought out all 1,000 of these students, and they filled a courtyard. And we were concerned, they were not going to be able to see anything. I mean there were trees sort of in the way and the sound system they had was awful, but the students sat there and watched the show the whole time. I don’t know how much they got out of it, again, because the women were performing in Dari, and I couldn’t talk to them afterwards. I’ve seen very large crowds, and in the schools, especially, they bring all the students out and they seem to be polite and engaged far beyond the vocal range and the audio range to understand what’s going on. But I don’t know whether that’s because there’s a sense of them having to do that, or it’s such a new form that they’re finding it so interesting to watch. I’m inclined to think that they’re interested in the forms that they don’t ever really get to see. So, they are really interested in live performances. Audiences in the United States are so used to our technology and our seating based on our ticket prices that they would not put up with that kind of situation. In the last grant we wrote to support this work, in the selection process, the theater companies with which we worked, even though we had put the budget together and did not account for it, they all asked for sound equipment. We heard, “We need a good speaker. We’ve got to spend \$500 on a good speaker and microphones because we’re going to be hitting these larger audiences and what’s the point in having us tell this message if they’re not going to hear us?”

**Sherman:** That’s a good point.

**McGuigan:** And it’s OK, we’ll cut from here and put it there because that makes sense.

**Sherman:** I should say doing workshops with kids. Kids are much better behaved in other countries than in the United States. Kids are very much rowdier here and they have higher expectations, and they are much more spoiled, shall I say, in general. I mean, everything is definitely a generality,

but in many other cultures they're certainly much better behaved. They do what the teacher says.

**Lyon-Hill:** If someone wanted to go and do what you do in your work, what advice would you give them? What are the some of the main things that you've learned throughout these years that you've been working in other countries?

**Sherman:** That if you have a plan, be willing to change it. This is really the biggest thing, because you never, never, never know exactly what's going to happen. And especially going to a country that's an iffy sort of situation, you must be prepared to come up with an entire plan. You think that you're going to have 150 students that are going to be at the school at this specific time, and something completely different may happen and so you must be open to any possibility, because the best laid plans will not necessarily happen.

**McGuigan:** And I think also—

**Sherman:** Flexibility.

**McGuigan:** What we've had to do, which is that we funded our own first couple of trips, is keep it very simple. Definitely have a local contact working with you, especially the local artists, whatever the arts work that they're doing, visual arts or any kind of art. Heck, if you're a plumber, go hang out with the local plumbers and do a project there. But if you can self-fund it, and we have the crowd-sourcing thing now and all, it relieves you of a lot of issues. For one thing, you don't then have to worry about where the money is coming from. You can do it on the cheap and you're reporting basically more to yourself, and that gives you a lot of relaxation to learn because you really want to make the first trip or two a learning process. And then also, you give yourself some credibility, because then if you're sure this is a career path for someone, and it's a tough one, but it's possible, then you at least have some experience under your belt that then allows you to go find other sources of funding.

**Sherman:** I would reiterate that local partnership is really very important. People who just kind of wander into a place, "Oh, I should go there," and just go. That's not a good idea. You must do your research and you must find a local partner on the ground to give you advice. And do your homework to

find out whether you're using up resources that otherwise are necessary for someone else.

**McGuigan:** I know a lot of the thrust of us here with the university is in community engagement and community involvement, and that is something I've been saying. If you are a plumber or electrician or mechanic or whatever, then why not go to those countries where they just mostly need the companionship and an exchange of skill sets? And if you go there with an open mind and open heart and just go there to meet people and also to share the skills, find out how they do things and how you do things ... man, you not only learn a lot, but you also really start to help the countries that need the help and the people. I should say it's mostly about people. It's not countries. It's not politics. It's not borders. This is really a people-to-people thing, you know.

**Sherman:** People to people. It's kind of a good idea because you know it's not just one-sided. For example, in some parts of Afghanistan, they have this kind of dome roof and the architects that came over had designed something completely different for them and they didn't realize that the local people could have given them some very good advice on why they had these dome roofs, because they reflect the sun in a certain way in the summer when they don't want to get too hot inside, and then they gather the sun in a certain way in the winter, and so they make it warmer inside. So, if the architects had asked first and said, "Well, here's a good design for you guys out here in this dry climate." Just coming in with, we know the best way, is always a very bad idea. It always should be a give and take.

**McGuigan:** I remember that. I remember that conversation because that had another side to it, too. Those same architects then went, oh yeah, dome roofs, what a great idea, let's do that. And they went to another community where the people were appalled by the idea of a house having a dome roof because that's what the mausoleums have, and that's where the dead people live. You don't want to have that for your house. Are you crazy?

**Sherman:** So, you've got to check with your local partner.

**McGuigan:** Listen to the local guys.

**Sherman:** Always listen to the locals.

**Kirakosyan:** How important is knowing the language wherever you go?

**Sherman:** You know, because you go to so many different places, and I used to try to learn each language, and then I finally just gave up because we keep on going and we don't know where we're going to go next, and now we're going to be going to work with Syrian refugees in Turkey. OK, quick, I'll learn Syrian and Turkish. I mean, we really do accent the nonverbal communication. Of course, we have translators wherever we go. But we really try not to have to rely on language and instead rely on nonverbal communication to a large degree, and it's not as hard as people might think. People really do understand, because once they understand that you're trying to communicate something nonverbally, they'll get it. You know, if you have a sore tooth, and you go into the store and you go, "Ahhh," [pointing to tooth]. It's like, "OK, there is something wrong with the tooth. OK. Here take this."

**McGuigan:** Getting back to having a local contact in the field, when we do really have to get a theatrical program going, we're dealing with a local artist who does inevitably speak English and one of the company members will be our English-speaking contact, and so we almost never hire a translator who is not a theater person because theater does kind of have its own language and we've had real translation problems with a regular straight-ahead translator who maybe works with the military, who just doesn't quite get the imagery of the arts. *Beyond the Mirror* was the show we did with the Afghans with Theatre Exile, and it was all about events that happen in Afghanistan and one of the issues that came up was land mines. They're very dangerous and many children are being hurt by them every year, so we wanted to portray that in a scene, and again, it was going to be nonverbal. So, we took a blue cloth and folded it up in such a way that it looked like a little baby. Anisa Waha was a fantastic Afghan actress who came out first on stage and was singing a lullaby, and she sat down on the stage, and she ended the lullaby with her hands open, her lap open and nothing there. Then two puppeteers came out and manipulated this cloth so that it looked like a child crawling across the stage, and we had to teach a kind of a puppetry skill to the Afghans to do that. It was an Afghan and an American performing this and the puppet made its way across the stage to a small object, and when the child-puppet touched it, the lights flashed, the sound of a cymbal crashed, and the child fell. Then, the two puppeteers gently picked up this cloth figure

with the shape of a child and floated it through the air across the stage very softly in a kind of spirit way, and then placed it down into the lap of the woman.

Anisa was still sitting there with her arms open and then she began the lullaby again. It was an extremely powerful and touching scene, but it really helped tell the story of these tragedies without having to use any words. And of course, that's not the only way to do it. My brethren playwrights and sister playwrights out there can really get more in-depth with words, but we find that there's a physical language that can also really touch and get in deep without having to use words.

**Sherman:** And sometimes when it's a very difficult issue like that, like children and landmines, it was more powerful, but at the same time it was watchable because it was not done in a realistic way, so handling something in a symbolic and nonverbal way is sometimes more powerful. Words have a different kind of effect on people, and it's not better or worse, but it's different if you tell your story than if you act out your story. And we find again, working with children, that telling the story of an animal, instead of telling their story directly, in which they're telling a story about a mother bear and a baby bear, and telling that story can help them share difficult experiences. So, in that way storytelling can work very well. Language can work very well, but they could also do the same thing and act it out with little puppets and that's also another way that they could do it without any words, too. So, there are different ways to proceed, but I think that symbolism is very important.

**Kirakosyan:** You engage a lot with your audiences during performances and they become partners of a sort. Can you share with us how you engage your audience members and what impact doing so has?

**Sherman:** Oh, you mean, like the post-show performances? This is a very important part of our work and the groups in Afghanistan are writing their own shows about their own issues and we're helping them write the shows, just helping them, giving them the tools to write the show, but teaching some of this feedback work, like the work of Boal, where they're creating the show and the solution, but there's also alternative solutions to these issues. So, we're presenting one solution, then we open it up to the audience: What was this show about? Just talk to your neighbor about it, what did they think

about it? Just talk to the person sitting next to you about what you think some of the issues in the show are. You could take some answers from the audience: “Who in the show would you like to speak to? What would you really like to tell them?” And then they can come up on the stage and act out the scene with the character that might offer another solution to the issue, of say, an abusive policeman or husband or something like that. They can step into the role of the protagonist, not the antagonist, the protagonist, and act out another solution. Though, sometimes, their solution isn’t so good. There was a situation once in which a little girl decided that she was going to step into the role of the woman who went to the abusive policeman and, as he was telling her off, she chose to haul off and whack the policeman across the face.

**McGuigan:** The actor was laughing.

**Sherman:** The poor actor. It was an all-girl show, so it was, of course, a girl playing the policeman. So, it was very funny, but at the same time, you can’t negate her solution, so you have to take it back to the audience and say, “Well, there’s a solution that she could do. Now what would happen if you hit the policeman across the face, what would happen next?” And then we would take it to the audience. They answered, “Well, that’s not a good idea.” And then we asked again, “What might your solution be?” So, you allow the audience to come up on stage to act out their solution and then take what their solution is and offer that to the audience. Basically, what we’re doing is starting a dialogue, because maybe somebody else in the audience says, “Well, why don’t you go to the Human Rights place, which is around the corner,” and the other person says, “Oh I didn’t know that.” “Well, yes, it’s right around the corner and down the street there.” And you find that within the community sometimes there are a lot of solutions, and they just haven’t had the opportunity to share that information, so we’re providing that forum to share that information at the end of each show. Present the problem and then they help you with the solutions.

**Kirakosyan:** Thank you so much Joanna and Michael for being here, for sharing your story. It has been a very fun conversation.

# Chapter 6: Lisa Jo Epstein

**Lisa Jo Epstein**, Artistic Director of Gas and Electric Arts

**Date of Interview:** March 26, 2015

**Interviewers:** Andy Morikawa, Becca Ligrani, Sarah Lyon-Hill, and Lorien MacAuley

**Andy Morikawa:** Lisa Jo, I've been fortunate to hear you speak on several occasions and I've come away each time impressed by your passion for theater's vital role in personal and community change. What got you started? What is it that moved you to leave a tenured appointment at Tulane University to move and found Gas and Electric Arts in Philadelphia?

**Lisa Jo Epstein:** Well, Andy, I am honored that anything that I could offer in the many times that you've heard me speak has led you to that discovery about myself, and I hope that anything that I have said has been able to open doors for you to reflect on the passions that you have, because clearly you have been able to direct your energy and intelligence and skills in really powerfully productive ways. In terms of myself, I just want everybody to do theater. I'm going to start with the notion of passion because I think that we do not value passion as a productive place to begin our activism. I think there's a lot of attention that is spent on the known and commodifying the known, and little concerning what's down below and really running the show. And theater comes out of a place of passion, so somebody can't write a play about racism as an abstract issue to which they want to draw attention. It must come from an aching place for the theater piece to be of value to the creators and the audiences alike. And over the course of my life, I have experienced a tremendous amount of institutional oppression that worked to negate my passions. Theater, particularly participatory theater, and Theater of the Oppressed, created a space for me to ask the questions that I was at first only asking myself, but now can explore with communities of people. I firmly believe that the theater work that drives me, the passions that drive my theater work, are about identifying the borders so that we can interact without them. My passions drive my commitment to making this

kind of theater because I am driven to make visible the invisible, so that we can then tackle it.

My passions drive me to create collective inquiry, where individual questioning takes precedence. I love theater because it is both an embodied and collective act, and I never know where it's going to take us. But over the years, I have worked on applying my skills as a theater director and as a seer, as somebody who sees in a way that is about the group and not just what I am seeing. There are some directors who already know what their play will look like. I have visions that are nourished and redirected and changed and grown by the contributions of everybody who is in the room doing the making. So, theater becomes a place to stop our lives and to hold attention to that which has not been given attention.

**Lorien MacAuley:** Lisa Jo, I think that is such a beautiful approach and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind describing what you do on the ground so that we can understand better.

**Epstein:** That's a great question to talk about process. I spent three years in Paris, France, at the Center for the Theater of the Oppressed with Augusto Boal in the early 1990s, where I trained in a wealth of participatory theater techniques that are designed to animate dialogue in community—where monologues typically prevail. I now am a practitioner of the form of theater that Boal created, but I have developed my own approach to it because I have experience as a theater director in a sense that most people would understand, where you have a script and you work with a community of actors and designers and develop something that people go to, that's the traditional version. The thing that's not traditional about Theater of the Oppressed is that rather than directing the work towards spectators who come and watch, this participatory model for theater is directed towards all of us and considers all of us spect-actors. While a spectator sits back and watches and then goes out afterwards and has a drink with their friends and talks about what they liked or disliked, or whatever, a spect-actor is somebody who is given the responsibility to act directly on what they see.

I like to think, too, that as spect-actors, if we see injustice and we don't make the choice to act, we nevertheless have to take responsibility for what we see. The process involves working with a community of people. We use these techniques to look at ourselves with compassion and not with guilt,

to look at the way in which we have been conditioned to see the world, not how the world is. We use improvisation-based theater “gamesercises.” They’re called gamesercises as a combination of game and exercise. You’re flexing the muscle of your imagination, but you’re also having fun at the same time. We use theater techniques to re-see ourselves, to identify how we have come habitually to use power, based on how we’ve been conditioned, how we’ve been socialized about what status, what social groups we are members of, and when are we advantaged because of that social group membership and when are we disadvantaged, and to recognize that we all exist on a continuum of oppressed to oppressor. Once we can see that we as individuals perpetuate an oppressive system, that is, when we become aware of, as individuals, the patterns of behavior that we unconsciously perform every day, once we identify the borders that have been constructed by society and that we have built ourselves, if you will, then we can begin to reconstruct that world in a vision that is more just—and it’s all done through theater.

I spend a lot of time with non-actors who wouldn’t identify themselves as professional actors, who have never thought about acting. And over the course of the work, not only do we all talk about how we’re doing theater, but before even doing it, we also identify the conflicts in our own lives. Theater is all about conflict, and we can use it to redefine the character of conflict and come to understand that it is a natural element of our daily life. Once individuals can see that they don’t have to look at conflict as a negative thing, it can emerge as a place of possibility, not danger, and theater can encourage that change in perspective.

There’s a moment in forum theater, the name of the technique in which the audience as spect-actors stops an improvisation and takes the place of a character who is experiencing injustice, and they jump on stage and improvise a new idea, and the other characters, other actors have practiced who their characters are so they know who they’re playing and what they want and what they don’t want, but the audience member jumps in and tries something that we’ve never thought of, and it’s all done through improvisation.

Then there’s this beautiful theatrical debate with the audience about what the spect-actor tried and how and whether or to what extent they

succeeded. We ask what their tactic did to shift the dynamics of power, from power over to shared power or power with.

Part of what happens in the process is, there's a lot of storytelling, and something that I've learned from years of working here, primarily in the United States, is that we are not taught to hear people's stories. We are not taught to listen deeply. We're not taught to hold space for another person's story. If you were to start a story, Lorien, or Becca, or Sarah, about something, immediately if something you say sparks an idea about something that I've done, I'm going to jump in and say, I totally get that. I've been there. And we think that we're being empathetic, right? Well, on some level we are, but on some level, we have curtailed the teller's possibility of getting to the end of their story, which might be quite different from our own. And so, over the course of the theater activities, everybody learns how to hold space for each other, and in doing so, everybody comes to recognize what their role is in their community, what their relationship really is to another person.

**Sarah Lyon-Hill:** So, in doing this process, you're defining these borders, you're identifying these systems of oppression, so how do you move beyond that? How do you deal with that without necessarily victimizing the community members that you're working with and of going down that rabbit hole?

**Epstein:** I never use the word victim. We talk a lot about social roles, that what we're doing is re-seeing our stories as the product of an oppressive system. And what I seek to do with the techniques is to open the door for each participant to recognize their inner core, all their strengths that have been devalued, and to allow them to surface. The stories are never, we're never portraying a single individual story. It's never about re-presenting a single person's story. There's lots of storytelling that's happened, so we start with our reality, but how it gets synthesized through the process of devising theater is that what ends up being shared with the audience is never exactly what happened to any one individual.

So, we're making fiction out of nonfiction and it's not about your story, Sarah. It's not about my story, Lisa Jo. It's about how we see our stories in each other's stories, and then can put them out there. It's a very Freireian process, if you will, one in which you are able critically to observe your reality and

then objectify it. You're collectively making it into a theatrical object. And then you see that theatrical object and you recognize that you don't have to respond the same way that you did a million times before, that you can break the cycle of oppression by trying something else. So, as opposed to revictimizing, it removes that label. Many of the folks with whom I work have been labeled victims, have been labeled X, Y, and Z. And I'm all about identifying that they have been labeled and that they're not their trauma. They are much more than that.

So, while the situations resonate with the public who are coming to the pieces, it's supposed to be provocative, but there's a tremendous amount of humor, joy, and relief when you see something that resonates with your own life in a theatrical version. Then you're given license to interact with it, to play with it, to do something that you never would have imagined, or have your neighbor do something that they would never ever imagined. So, it's like re-seeing yourself, re-seeing what's been normalized, re-seeing that "I'm not doing this." And then recognizing, "Oh, I've been normalized and that normal doesn't feel good and I need to do something about it," and realizing that you can do something about it. And the more people who are part of that collective dialogue, about what we can do differently, the greater the likelihood that some social action could be taken from the ground up.

This is really theater for social justice that cares deeply about theater and cares deeply about social inequality and using the theater to work towards justice because the theater part enables us to see that our perceived realities are all socially constructed. It allows us to see that we are playing roles, even when we haven't known that we were playing roles, because once you become aware of it, then you realize, "Oh, I'm falling into that mistake again. Well, I can do something different this time." And I can tell, I always make mistakes. I continue to make mistakes, but if I didn't make mistakes, I wouldn't be working at developing myself. So, I think it's an American and Western concept that we must be perfect, but life is messy, and I just want us all to embrace the messiness and identify that sometimes fear impedes our creativity. If creativity is an act of defiance and fear is impeding it, we are cutting ourselves off from our creative impulses. And often people find that once they do jump in, once they do say stop, that suddenly it's, like wow, like it's a relief. Even though they feared, "Oh, I'm not going to go in, I can't do that, I'll just tell you about it," and then we applaud, and we bring the people

on stage, and they try it out. Then, it's like, "OK, I can do it, even though society has told me that I can't."

**Becca Ligrani:** Can you talk about what people have done after they've participated in a forum theater, what effect that experience has had on them?

**Epstein:** Sure. Change always happens, always. Regardless of where I've done it, regardless of the borders that have been circumscribed around that community, change always happens. For example, I've been working in Chester, which is a small city right outside of Philadelphia, and in 2012, I worked with Don Newton who is the executive director of an organization in Chester called Chester Arts Alive. And we built an intergenerational ensemble of residents, some of whom were actors, some of whom were not, who came into the room for different reasons. Lots of different reasons. There were a couple of people who were grandparents, and they came into the room to make sure that their grandchildren, who were 20 and 21, 18 to 21 stayed in the project. Of course, since I didn't realize the grandparents were coming into the room just to be chaperones, I ushered them into the playing, and over the course of two months, I took them through this process of the gamesercizes and identifying social roles and naming the issues of the community, and this particularly revolved around violence and its roots in the streets, and some of that was identified as coming from family.

And at the end of their forum theater pieces, all 12 of them spontaneously testified concerning how they had changed, and I wish we could have gotten that on tape. They just spontaneously testified to the power of the work. The grandfather of the bunch said to me, "I didn't know I had anything left to change, I'm so old," and gave me a big hug. And his grandson joked about the gamesercizes, because there's a lot of improvisation with sound and movement, and it sounds really hokey, no pun intended, you know. We called it whooping and hollering, and he said it really helped him see things differently. And his relationship with his grandfather changed drastically because they each came in very clear on their role: grandson and grandfather. And grandfather had done a lot of social activism in the 1960s and wanted change to happen and didn't want his grandson to be involved in violence on the streets, and there's a story with a gun, and the grandson had some charges that he was facing, and all this stuff. And the two of them came to recognize the roles that they had started to perform that prevented

them from having dialogue. So, they were having simultaneous monologues, and now they were able to break through those borders and have dialogue about the situation. This particular young man beat his charges. The theater process and doing forum theater changed him, and he enrolled in community college, and he fought the charges. He has a job and he's just doing really well and there's a smile kind of from the inside out, that is now of his own making, that's not a performance, that says "I'm fine."

Another example is the granddaughter. I keep focusing on the grandparent-grandchild thing. The granddaughter was like, 18. She came in and she was not very vocal. She was very closed off, but she wanted to be there. And during the course of the events, during the process, she got more comfortable with her own body, and being in her own body in a group of people of various ages and sexualities. And at the end, she was pretty feisty. Her character on stage was able to say things in character that she may have wanted to say in real life but would never have done so.

She said that she played a character that wasn't necessarily her, but she was still infusing that individual with her own experience. It just warms my heart because after that time she sought out work as an LGBTQ organizer and has been working with a nonprofit doing that work, and prior to then, she was afraid of her shadow. But she did the work and it mattered to her. I create a space for them to do the work and I ask a lot of questions and I state what I see and I blunder along and I don't know where we will go, but I do truly believe that we are all more than our trauma. We are not our trauma.

There was another participant, not in Chester, but I work with an organization in Philadelphia called Youth Empowerment Services. This is a fabulous organization that works with, I'm going to call them young adults, and a young adult is anywhere from 16 to 25. And these are young people who, for a variety of reasons, have been kicked out of school, they dropped out of school, they have not progressed through the school system, if you will. And they have decided to go back to get their GED. And Youth Empowerment Services pairs the GED curriculum with some arts training. They usually do digital media and visual arts, which are sort of like the known arts. And this one summer, because the staff member who taught literacy and writing had taken one of my workshops and really found the tools effective, she brought me into Youth Empowerment Services and we worked with a group of young adults for six weeks, five hours a day, four days

a week, using theater of the oppressed and related social change strategies. And they made a forum theater piece about their lives that they then shared at the culminating event at the end of the summer. There was plenty of drama, of course, as there always is in any group with which I work, but this is a story about change and transformation and what happens in the process to participants. So, there was this young woman who came the first day, and in no uncertain terms, she let me know that she didn't want to have anything to do with any theater games. She told me she didn't have to do anything, and she let me know that fact frankly and audibly and then she returned to her texting device. And I said, I appreciated knowing where she stood. And I took a chair, and I placed it near the circle, because she was on the way other side of the room. She's like, "I said, no uncertain terms, I'm not going to do what you're asking me to do." Now I forgot to say that the nonprofit had raised money through grants to pay the young adults, as summer interns so, if she didn't participate, she was not going to get paid, right? So, she wasn't participating, so I'll put her here in this chair. And the group had not jelled. They didn't know each other. They had landed here and some of them weren't even sure why they were doing theater or what theater was, because this is a form of the arts and creative expression that was absent from their lives.

And during the summer, I kept moving her chair and I would ask her questions while we were working on something and she would offer her opinion, and we would then play out her view and whatever it was that we were doing. She moved closer and closer then finally she was standing in the circle, put her texting device in her pocket, and then we started synthesizing the stories, the true stories that had been told, into the theater piece that they would perform, and she became the anchor of the entire piece. I can see her in my mind's eye, just loving it.

Now this was quite a journey for six weeks, but it happened. She became the center of the piece. She played a single mother with two kids, two daughters, whose own mother had had her at a very young age. And one of the daughters, one of her daughters, had become pregnant with a young man who was not really a boyfriend. But the daughter who got pregnant was, of the two sisters, the one who was doing really well in school and was in her senior year and the school was really excited about helping her get a scholarship, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And the other sister was not as

strong academically and was always jealous of her older sister and overheard her sister telling a friend that she was pregnant and then the younger sister went and told her mom. Now there were many scenes that were part of this larger forum theater piece because we synthesized a lot of different stories. So, there was a scene with the pregnant sister telling the young man, and it took place at a McDonald's and when she told him, he was in utter denial that it was him and there was like, dead silence. The border was invisible, but we could all feel it, right? So, that was the scene. And then there was the whole life of the young man and what his situation was, and his father and his stepmother, and he had just been kicked out of school, and many of them had been dismissed from school for a variety of reasons, and they were on the road to recovery.

So, it was a whole series of scenes that added up as a play and Ebony was at the heart of it. But Ebony didn't show up for the final dress rehearsal, and the other actors were texting her because they knew that she's a text queen. Where is Ebony? She's not answering. Of course, as the director, I'm like, "OK, so we can re-orient this character for that character, and we can put this person here," and I'm thinking of all the sort of strategies for how we're going to perform this the following day, and I'm making lists and then my colleague Melissa, was helping me figure out what we needed to do if Ebony did not participate. Then, Ebony strolled in smiling and happy like nothing had happened, and everybody just like pounced on her: "Ebony, where have you been?" So, we were able to have our rehearsal because it was a four-hour time period for the final rehearsal, and she came in halfway through. So, it was fine. We got the final, I was like, "Whew."

So, the students did a final showing to showcase the different disciplines they had studied over the summer. The graphic design people showed something. It was not a talent show, but it was a representation of the work they had done, and my group just knocked people's socks off. They were the best. They were just the best, and I am biased, yes, I will say that.

However, the quality of work and the transformation that happened because of it, was evident. And the room could feel it. There was emotional contagion. The excitement that was sparked by what my students did just takes my breath away. But beforehand, there we were in a large room in the basement or on some floor of a very fancy business building. And it's an hour before curtain and Ebony hasn't shown up. And she doesn't answer the telephone

and where did all my ideas for options go that I had developed yesterday when she came to dress rehearsal late? And then she strolls in an hour late, and everybody was like dressed to the nines, and had done their hair and they were like really jazzed to go. Fortunately, I had set the call for the ensemble far earlier than it needed to be just in case something like this happened. She came in and everyone's like, "Ebony, where have you been?" She's like, "Oh I was getting ready." And the other people, all the other groups presented their work, and then we presented and what always happens when a forum theater piece is presented, at least in the way in which I facilitate is, that I get the whole audience up doing something before the actors are even there.

So, already I'm using a fun theater game to break the usual habits of attention. They're doing whatever it was that I had them do, and everybody's already laughing, and they're uncomfortable and smiling and it's really a great moment of possibility. See, I see possibility where other people see problem solving, and I really believe that often, it's just, how can we solve this problem.

Well, you need to fix systemic oppression to solve the problem. What are the possibilities? Let's identify how this is being perpetuated and look for the possibilities Anyway, and then they did the forum and there were lots of spect-actors jumping in. The scene that I described when the young woman tells the young man that she's pregnant. Well, so many people in the audience identified with everything in the forum, but that was one that was particularly attractive to the young adults in the room, and so there were various people who were spect-actors and tried different things, and little things shifted, just in terms of how much the young man spoke. Like we looked to these tiny shifts. But the young woman was still a solo act here.

And then somebody jumped in, and what you do is, the original actor steps to the side, and the spect-actor comes in and takes the place and there's usually something that identifies the person who's jumped in as that character, like her book bag, or her coat or something, so there's something that signifies to the audience that this is the character, that it's not the individual.

Again, we're always talking about the social role. And the spect-actor got up from the table, went around the French fries and gave the young man a hug. And he's blushing and the whole audience is like, Wow. Everybody's

got something to say about it. And then we have a conversation about well, what was that? What is fear? And then the audience, they were the ones who identified what was going on. So, I'm not imposing what I'm seeing. I'm asking questions of them, so I can learn what they are seeing, and hearing from them the possibilities for them. And so there becomes a conversation about intimacy and the fear of intimacy, even though there's a baby on the way. What is that exchange, what does that give you that you're not getting elsewhere? So, it's a theatrical dialogue with everybody in the audience. I'm just asking these questions and people have all kinds of things to say. We moved on to another scene after that because that was where they broke the cycle of oppression that existed between those two, between the couple.

**MacAuley:** Lisa Jo, this sounds like just such an amazing scene, and one in which people can get pretty emotional. My listening to you is colored by my own experience of having gone through this drama therapy workshop as an undergrad and just remembering our sessions where we were preparing for a similar play. This was with an LGBTQ community at Longwood University and things got a little bit, sometimes, really emotional and that's part of the process, but I am wondering if you ever had anything, where it was just so intense, you had to either, stop the session, or if you had any kind of experiences or stories, you'd like to share related to that?

**Epstein:** Well, you already answered that question, because there's a difference between drama therapy and Theater of the Oppressed. There are therapeutic qualities of theater of the oppressed, but we don't do TO, that's the way we refer to Theater of the Oppressed, when the aim is therapy. I have actually trained in drama therapy at Creative Alternatives in New York and have gained embodied understanding of its similarities and differences with Theater of the Oppressed. And with therapy comes different expectations and outcomes. And so, you're working on different things with different language when the goal is therapy. Theater of the Oppressed is therapeutic, but it is not therapy. It's a very different animal and things always get heated, but things always get humorous, too, because it's theater and there are no real consequences, because it's a rehearsal for reality. It is not reality and it's designed to dynamize our brains so that when we find ourselves in a situation like what was done in the forum, we can do forum with ourselves and think about what is it that I can do differently than I have habitually done when I have found myself facing this conflict? There's also, with Theater of

the Oppressed, I would say a more social and political realm to it that again differentiates it from drama therapy, because we're talking about the way in which the characters represent social roles and we're not trying to get to the heart of that young woman's challenges, behavioral or psychological. We're talking about how she has internalized ways of responding that have perpetuated her own oppression and making that which was invisible visible, so that as a collective, the community can work on it. Does that help distinguish the difference between drama therapy and Theater of the Oppressed?

**MacAuley:** Absolutely. It seems like you're dealing with more structural issues versus just individual issues you know, which I like.

**Epstein:** Well, it's the individual in the system, and the system and the individual. If I were to draw a diagram, we'd have the individual here with an arrow up to the system and then going around, so it's not avoiding individuals. It is asking us to recognize as individuals how we are carrying forward. What is it that we're carrying into the room and what else can we do? It's talking about the relationship of the individual to the system and the system to the individual, how individuals perpetuate systemic oppression, but how the system socializes us in systematic oppression, too.

**Ligrani:** A lot of what you're talking about seems like some other artists we've talked with who spoke about imagination and the real importance of imagination in this work. How do you conceive of imagination in your community work? What role does imagination play in Theater of the Oppressed?

**Epstein:** In my estimation, the role of imagination is a given, but I think that I said earlier that we have forgotten how to flex the muscle of our imagination when it comes to making change, when it comes to seeing ourselves. Imagination allows us to re-see ourselves and create differently. I think that I said that earlier where I was talking about how fear impedes creativity. If you replace creativity with imagination, creativity is imagination. How can it not be? But I think that particularly with my experiences in urban America, imagination is not encouraged.

We have to be vigilant in using our imagination because it's really easy to allow that to go to sleep. It's like having a gym membership. How many

of us have little tag on our key chain to let us get into our gym, but how often do you really go? When you do go, it feels great, and when you don't go, it doesn't feel great. I care deeply about these words, imagination and creativity, and I think that there's been a commodification of notions of creativity, that they are only a piece of artwork that's in a gallery or a dance piece that's presented in a theater or even theater in a theater, that you must have special skills, but I teach skills to people who don't consider themselves actors. I think we're a society about transformation, like there's all this, you can do it. Isn't that Nike? You can do it, that little expression? But there's something about the surfeit of information about transformation that has evacuated that term of meaning and it's just like diversity appreciation versus social justice education. Appreciation is like, we all get along.

**Lyon-Hill:** I'm OK. You're OK.

**Epstein:** "I don't see color in the room," that's one that I get all the time. We're all the same right? And "I like Black people." You know, like basic United Colors of Benetton, we all get along. That's appreciation, and a lot of universities have diversity programs that are teaching appreciation, but it's the digging into how some groups are advantaged and other groups are disadvantaged and recognizing our role in that equation. And that we don't have to feel guilty about it. I didn't build America, but I am white, and I have a Ph.D. and I know what I'm carrying into the room. Social justice education allows us to look at ourselves with compassion and without shame or blame. We're here to heal the pain. I love the word imagination because it contains image, and so much of my work is about using our bodies as intelligent clay, and making images of feelings that we have had, feelings that we cannot articulate, that language does not contain, can't contain. But we can put it in our bodies, and other people can see that image and we can embrace the plethora of perspectives in that image without you ever needing to know my individual story, so that the meaning of the image is the image itself. It's not what you were telling me it is. I can see what it is for me, and you can see what it is for you, and I don't have to agree with yours. We can both have a perspective. The role of image and imagination, humans think in metaphors. Look at our world, but if we embody the action of constructing images that reflect the world as we want it to be, then maybe we can start working towards that world.

There's a process of visioning, of using these theater tools to see ourselves

in the next frame, without knowing what that frame will become, but giving ourselves license to dream, license to animate our imagination, rather than curtailing the electricity that runs through our brains about what we want.

One of the members of the Chester ensemble told me a story, how he's a singer and he's also a writer, and he said that he was told by many people that he should not sing outside of church. He was also told that as a young Black man, writing was not what he should be doing. These claims were individual and institutional manifestations of horizontal and vertical oppression.

And during the process that we did most recently in Chester, I taught the ensemble members how to facilitate a story interview, which is a one-on-one exchange with one other person. So, the facilitator offers a couple of prompts to the person, the teller, and the teller is given space to recount their story, and the role of the facilitator is to receive that. And so, this young man whom I'm talking about, had the opportunity to conduct story interviews with members of his community from ages 6 to 90 concerning experiences with arts, culture, and creative expression in the widest definition of those terms. If somebody made fine oils in their kitchen or they were part of a fantastic crochet club and made blankets, these are the arts that are often not acknowledged, but just think, if all of those artists had a home in a downtown where they could sell their wares, where they could come and get advanced training, where they could be real, they could be taught to be art-trepreneurial, as opposed to being labeled another statistic in a city. Anyway, he was able to receive these stories. And they did story interviews and they also did story circles. Story circles are sort of a larger version of the story interviews where a prompt is given and every person around the circle is given a fixed amount of time to tell a story, so that all stories are weighted equally. He was able to receive all the stories and in the deep listening that he did, he came to value his own imagination, and in a way that no one had ever done, except his mother and grandmother. By having an experience of deep listening of stories, of arts and culture and creativity across the city, he was able to understand, or rather, not understand, but to see that he had a role to play in bringing the arts back to Chester, that he actually was part of a legacy that needed tending to move forward. And these were things that he didn't expect, this wasn't on the evaluation and outcome data sheet. These were things that he experienced just by going through this Artspace process.

I also like the fact that the word nation is in imagination, as in imagining our nation anew. And that it occurs in process. Every time I reflect on the role of imagination, I'm reminded that we are subjects in an unfolding process.

**Lyon-Hill:** That's interesting because I like the term that you use: in the next frame, like seeing the next frame, not knowing what that next frame is, but knowing that it's there, and the role of imagination can help you understand that you know that next frame is there and opening the opportunity and possibility for what is that next frame: what's there, what can we be outside of these systems, these systems of oppression and the social contexts that we're all in? The impediment to that is fear and how will you stop that? How do you address fear in your work? Or do you say, hey we're going to talk about fear this way? How do you work with that?

**Epstein:** I love that question. It's something I work on constantly. When I work with a group, whenever I work with a group of people, we go through this process of naming. We name what social change is for that group. And the way that we name it is, I use these giant Post-it pads that are empty, and I hand out multicolored Post-it notes, and I call them plants, and we put leaves on the plants. What is social justice or what is social change? All these little sticky notes end up on the first plant. Racism. Religious intolerance, you know, gender, age-ism, able-ism, all the stuff like that, you know, all of the stuff comes out. But it's the community that has named them, and we see all these leaves. So, let's say there are purple leaves up here on this plant and so already what we're doing is, we are naming it, to work on it. What are the challenges to making change? They're identifying what the challenges to making change are, and the plant, that would be the orange Post-it notes, so it's all different and each plant has its own color, rainbow of colors. What are the challenges to making change? People, depending on where they are in their lives, will put different things for all these things, but inevitably, fear shows up on that wall. Some people may talk about city council as one of the challenges to making change.

And somebody else might write fear, but it's the community with whom I'm working who have identified those issues, challenges to making change. Where does change need to happen? Then we're getting specific. It needs to happen in city council. It needs to happen in the home and needs to happen here, and so where does change need to happen and who is involved? Me, you, this, that, so there again, we're continuing to put outside of ourselves

that which we have been carrying inside ourselves, which is an act of imagination, because that's what art is. Art is the bridge between what is here in our minds and what the audience sees. It's externalizing the internal. Where does change need to happen and what does change require of me? And that's often, I need to face my fears, and I need to get a job. It's a whole range of things, but everybody in the room sees clusters of similar words. And it's such a relief that the plant that I was afraid to put up on a wall, suddenly there are 10 of them. And it's no names. It's just you with a Sharpie writing on a Post-it note and putting it up. To see rape written 10 times in a room. That tells me, as a facilitator, I know something's going on here that I didn't know about prior to entering that room.

So, you're asking, how do I tackle fear? I have the group identify what they fear. We make images of fear. We then create a space for that image because it's clay, it's intelligent clay we make. We use these activities to transform the image of fear into its opposite, or into its antidote. And then we talk about, how do you go from fear to its opposite? What is the antidote to fear?

Remember what I was saying earlier about how with every image, the meaning of the image is the image itself. So, when people are making different images, there's all different images of fear, and there's all different experiences of what people are fearful of, and what they fear, how they've internalized fear. Was it FDR, who said the fear of fear is greater than fear itself? I'm sure that was a terrible paraphrase, but it's the truth. It's the truth, and if you are in a position that is wound up and your eyes are face downward and you feel the tension in your body, and then you have an opportunity to express yourself in an open way, and you feel the air under your arms and around your hands and around your head, and your eyes are suddenly open, that possibility allows you to recognize that you can do that. If we identify the borders, we can tear them down. If we identify the borders, we can build a collective of people who want to break down those borders and dynamize the strength of the community.

# Chapter 7: Nate May and Andrew Munn

**Nate May and Andrew Munn**, *Dust in the Bottomland*

**Date of Interview:** March 10, 2016

**Interviewers:** Cheryl Montgomery, Jordan Laney, Dana Hogg, and Andy Morikawa

**Cheryl Montgomery:** Our first question is, what do you do and why?

**Nate May:** I am primarily professionally identifying as a composer now, but I guess I'm in a broader sense a musician and I also think of myself as a citizen, and I make music that engages with social reality. I also make music that doesn't explicitly engage with social reality, but I'm interested in the socially engaged angle.

**Andrew Munn:** I'm a singer and previously I worked as a community organizer and in central Appalachia. That does inform my ongoing work as a musician, but I would say I'm a singer and what that means for me: I sing opera, classical music, everything from the classical music canon to new music collaborations like *Dust in the Bottomland*. I do it because I love it. In the capacity here of being a collaborator on *Dust in the Bottomland* as new music, what really drives me in this aspect of my work is using music and performance as a way to explore and express complex issues that I think often might be related to in a quantitative way, like say, in *Dust in the Bottomland*, talking about mountaintop removal and drug addiction and transition in Appalachia. These are questions that I think we often relate to through numbers or through the way that it's thought of in the policy-making realm, so I'm really interested in the way that we relate to these things culturally, the stories that we tell about them. And I think that's a way to build empathy for others, for people whose experiences we do not have. So, that's something I try to do in my music-making, especially on collaborations like *Dust in the Bottomland*.

**Dana Hogg:** So, *Dust in the Bottomland* is an aesthetic piece of work, as a

composition of music and opera. Mainstream “America” has a very specific view of what Appalachia is in terms of aesthetic. Meanwhile, I believe people who live in Appalachia have their own appreciation for their aesthetic, whether it be the landscape or their cultural heritage. Where do you see that playing against each other and how do you see yourself fitting into that, or against that?

**May:** I think there are aesthetic narratives, just like there are economic and historical narratives in Appalachia and many of those have been determined by the popularity of certain genres and some of them have been shaped by other factors, including the influence of the recording industry, the influence of folklorists, and the influence of the media, who kind of desire Appalachia to be a particular thing. I think when you speak of the cultural heritage of Appalachia, it involves selecting one or more of those narratives and so I’m interested in basically looking at everything that’s happening in Appalachia and thinking about it as Appalachian and in 2016 as well as 2013, when this piece was written, or 2012, roughly around then.

There’s a lot that’s happening that’s influenced by the borders of the region, which are permeable now, and so there’s a lot of dialogue that’s happening throughout the region. They have always been permeable, but the choices of aesthetic are multitudinous now, so I’m interested in kind of pointing that out and expanding that notion of choice.

**Montgomery:** Can you give us a synopsis of what *Dust in the Bottomland* is and what it’s about?

**Munn:** *Dust in the Bottomland* portrays a young man who has left his home place in southern West Virginia and did so, basically turning his back on it, to pursue his interests as a computer programmer looking to the outside world and really trying to, I think, in a way, forget the place that he came from. When *Dust in the Bottomland* takes place, he’s returned home for the first time in 10 years. And that’s precipitated by his sister being in a coma induced by a prescription drug overdose. This story is really his processing what his relationship is to this place that he both, I think in a way, feels ashamed of to a degree, has tried to forget, but also has a persistent love for. But it’s a place that’s really changed, both by the way that his family’s been changed by his sister’s struggle with addiction and the way the landscape has been changed by mountaintop removal coal mining.

A significant portion of the piece deals with him going back to where his family home place had been, which has been changed beyond recognition by mining. So, the story itself is the coming back portion of this, but it's also a narrative of going away and coming back and how one changes and a place that has changed as well.

**Jordan Laney:** No matter what method of mining or extraction or what catastrophes are happening in the region, I think that that theme of return and guilt and hopefully, hope, resonates with many people in the region across time. There was a phrase in the play, and it's something like, "Maybe it could have been different if I'd stayed." And that deeply resonated with me, and for a lot of other folks, and I was wondering if you could speak a little more to that uprootedness, and perhaps the process of replanting oneself in the region, or, to the issue of guilt.

**Munn:** So, speaking personally, I didn't grow up in West Virginia, but I moved there after college, and I really found a sense of home and place in Central Appalachia that I'd never found before. I grew up mostly in my first eight years in California then my family moved to Pennsylvania, but in neither of those places did I feel, "this is the place that I'm from." Of course, I didn't feel that in West Virginia either, because I wasn't from there, but I found a sense of home and place, and I think I learned that from the people who were there and had that in an authentic, much more deeply rooted way than I will ever have. And then, in choosing to leave West Virginia to pursue my work as a musician, there was a period where I did experience some amount of guilt or internal struggle around, "I'm leaving both this place and the work that I was doing." Activist work explicitly justifies itself as being for a goal, so I was working to stop mountaintop removal, I was working to try to find economic alternatives to coal mining in the communities that I lived in. These are things that are virtuous, but opera, is opera virtuous? Is music virtuous? I think it can be, but in a sense, in a way I was thinking that it also felt very selfish to be leaving to pursue this music career, whereas in a way, activism, people think about activism as a selfless thing, and my experience of it was that it was also a selfish thing, like it was coming very much out of my need to do that work.

So, I think the guilt that I experienced was a very minimal version compared to what the character I portray must feel when he's turned his back on his home place, which I think is, in a way, doing wrong. It is legitimate to go out

and find a career, find work, find opportunity in places that you're not from. I mean, we live in a dynamic world where people travel, have careers in so many different places, but I think in West Virginia and Appalachia, there is such a sense of rootedness that is a very beautiful thing, but it also can be a limiting thing for people if it is something that makes one choose to act against ways how your own soul wants to express itself. And so, this thing, it's a limitation, it's a beautiful thing, maybe it's something that we would all benefit from if all of us had more of a sense of commitment to the places that we're from. But then, I think of my own story: born in California, lived in Pennsylvania, went to college in Michigan, moved to West Virginia, where am I from? What is the community that, if I were to organize in the community that I'm from, what community would that be? So, these are all questions that that image stirs up for me.

**Hogg:** You mentioned activism, that you're an activist. However, I have gathered that *Dust in the Bottomland* is not meant to be activist. It's not a call to action. How would you describe it instead? Or maybe you would describe it as a piece of activism.

**May:** I certainly wouldn't describe it as a call to action. It's possible that it could be construed within the bounds of activism. But I think, and this is something that I've had to wrestle with, and I'm sure Andrew had to wrestle with, and in our collaboration putting this piece together we have interests and opinions regarding the issues in this work, but those aren't what the effort is communicating. It's not about the issues. The piece is a work of art which carries with it its own power in a dimension that doesn't have any actual necessary associations with specific ideas.

So, the way I'm thinking of it is, basically as a composer, I'm putting together a powerful work and along with it, I'm introducing ideas that I want people to associate with that power, so I am hoping that when people hear this piece they recognize and start to understand the conditions that it comes out of, and that that will lead to a greater sense of empathy. I don't have concrete answers the way an activist does, and even if I do, it's not the place of this work to present those answers.

**Montgomery:** But were you thinking about activist work? Part of that is raising consciousness. Do you think at the very least your piece is meant to raise the consciousness of those who are unfamiliar with what's going on?

**May:** Absolutely. I mean, that's kind of an easy thing to accomplish because it presents these issues. And they're concerns that we wrote about, well, I guess I wrote about, because I cared about them, and because it's contemporary and it's urgent, and so I think that if people haven't heard of mountaintop removal mining before, or if they didn't know that there was an opiate epidemic in West Virginia before, then they will afterward. And given that there's so many directions it could go from there, you're right. That is part of what I want the piece to accomplish, but it's not the central goal of the artistic intention.

**Montgomery:** So, what is the central goal?

**May:** Well, when you talk about a piece of music, I think it's hard to talk about aims in words because a lot of people think of music as a language. And I don't really think of music as a language. I think of it as a form of communication that has some parallels with language, but is not limited by linguistic ways of thinking. So, when you talk about a goal with a piece of music, I think my aspiration is to inspire and to communicate a force to somebody that will affirm something in them, and I can't entirely control what's being affirmed. I would love to affirm the good things in my audience, the things that I think are wonderful, but my work, even if it achieves its goal of affirmation, the things that it affirms might be things that I disagree with, and so that's why I want the music to be affirming. And then the ideas are being kind of funneled along with that affirmation and so I'm hoping that they're both accepted to some extent, but to another extent I can't really control all of that.

**Montgomery:** Switching gears a little bit, at one point, when the main character is in Stephanie's flower shop and talking about his sister, he says, "She built this world when she was in control, when she didn't have to act, but the move changed that. It wasn't just a move; it was an uprooting. Memories were literally buried or blasted away, and she turned back to the things that she could once count on to make her feel human: pills." It almost seems like the main character, when he says that, even though he's talking about his sister, he's thinking about his own uprooting and how he uprooted himself to leave the region. How do you juxtapose the main character's uprooting with his sister's uprooting? His was a physical migration, but hers was more of a mental migration, to use pills to escape her reality because she

couldn't physically uproot. Did you wrestle with that when you created this piece? What were you thinking?

**May:** I think Andrew would have some interesting things to say about that. I do want to point out, though, that she was geographically uprooted as well, because the land that her family lived on was purchased by the mining companies, and so they physically had to move to a different place, and that's what kind of precipitated this return to prescription drugs. So, there was a literal sense of uprooting in both cases.

**Munn:** I think with the line, memories are literally buried and blasted away for my character. At the point at which that happens, those really are that land and the home place to him is just a memory. So, it's his childhood, it's his memories that are being demolished. Whereas I think for Stephanie, for his sister, it is a more physical immediate thing. After the land around them has been degraded to the point that it's no longer viable to continue living there and it's time to take what the company offers them and buy the house that they can buy in town, that's witnessing the destruction of a place that you lived in only a month ago. So, it is a more immediate loss that she experiences, and that's not to say necessarily one loss is deeper than the other. I think then, with that, there's the choice to uproot, where he chose to uproot because he wanted out of there. I've never been an addict so I can't really speak with authority as to what the experience or motivations of someone who becomes an addict are, but it is a way of altering your reality, a way finding a different reality, maybe alleviating the pure psychic pain of loss and depression. I think it is also a transporting experience, a psychological uprooting of sorts, a way out.

**Montgomery:** Yes, so when you think about that, you're thinking about agency and choice. What do you think about somebody who would say that Stephanie was expressing her own agency when she chose to start taking pills, which turned into an addiction? And how do you deal with that in a dignified way?

**Munn:** Absolutely. So, I mean, so there's never a moment of pure agency because we're always influenced by the forces around us. And so, societally we talk in the stories about what that is. Some of the narratives are quite vicious, I think, that are blaming people for their addictions, or in a way that is not acknowledging the real situations that they're coming out of. So,

I think, of course, there is an element of choice to take drugs, but it's also happening in the context of other people making that choice with you. It's fun, probably. It's like she's probably having a great time for part of it, and then, physiologically, addiction robs you of agency, and so I think that's like you're trapped and then your agency becomes even more intertwined within the agency of this chemical thing that's being manufactured for profit, so you're always tangled up in the forces that are influencing you and forming a reality.

**May:** And the circumstances of the origin of her addiction I think are worth noting, too. She had an accident, and she was prescribed Oxycontin as a pain reliever as she recovered, which is something that has happened a lot, because there was a big movement to push toward more prescription of especially Oxycontin, to relieve all kinds of pain. And that has been the origin of addiction for a lot of people, even if you look at opiates before this version came to the market. That was how a lot of people developed these addictions.

In her case, she was already taking Oxycontin and then she had this moment with her high school boyfriend who showed her how to crush up the pills, and so there's this very strong element of expectation and pressure, and at that point, the addiction takes over and then, like Andrew said, the agency is much more difficult to understand. People speak about addiction and talk about it like a beast or animal that's apart from them.

**Hogg:** Could you talk a little bit more about the parallels between mining and opiate addiction, and the relationship between the two?

**May:** Yeah. Well, I can't really comment on any kind of causality. I think there are people who have ideas about that, and there is certainly a correlation between areas of mining and areas of opiate addiction.

**Munn:** Well, I'll hazard a further observation. What you have is this: Mining is a dangerous profession. People are injured. People then deal with that fact. Even if they aren't injured, they might have chronic pain just from the way their bodies are used in the process of mining, whether it's sitting in a dozer all day and chronic back pain from that or hard labor underground. So, people get prescribed pain painkillers, and I think that has been a path into addiction for some people.

And then, there's a lot of it available in those areas because in places that there's a legitimate need for pain management or painkillers, it floods the market. So, there are studies that correlate areas of mountaintop removal and areas of prescription drug addiction. Some of that I think has an economic dimension. Those areas with mountaintop removal are more impoverished and that form of mining hires fewer workers than underground work. Mountaintop removal guts the community fabric and is part of the process of community disintegration. When I was working as an organizer, I mean, I just I always noticed that very frequently when talking with people. I'd begin with a questionnaire about mining, what they thought of it, any problems that they might be having with the mines and, very frequently, the conversation would ... because we were talking about what was happening in their community and asking what they wanted to work on and wanted to change, very quickly shift to prescription drug addiction, which then left me out of my element. That was not something I knew how to work on, or how to deal with, but it was something that frequently came up.

So, going back to the studies and the correlation between it, like Nate said, there's not a direct causal link that's been proven, but there are all kinds of poetic links I think that happen, in the ways that activists choose to talk about the issue. So, in the movement against mountaintop removal, I think often, prescription drug addiction gets addressed as something that mountaintop removal causes, because it's a link that can be rhetorically made and kind of hits the heart, I think. We make that tie some in *Dust in the Bottomland*. So, there is a relationship in, and an interplay between, the two things that happens both rhetorically and, I think, in the places in which it is unfolding.

**May:** There is a causal link in the piece, in the opera, because she overdoses because of basically the trauma of being relocated due to this mining that's going on, so that's kind of as cut-and-dry a causal tie as it gets, but that's not necessarily representative of the entire region.

**Laney:** So, these are very place-based issues and a place-based performance. Connecting that with the fact that this is a collaboration makes it really cool. How did the community collaborate with you, or how did the place become part of this work? And I know you weren't in the same place, probably, when

you were creating it? I think that would be interesting to hear about as far as process goes and the ways that places shape performance development.

**May:** For most of the composition of the piece and developing of the text, or maybe all of those, Andrew was living in West Virginia in Fayette County, and I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I grew up in Huntington, which is also in West Virginia, but it's distinct in a lot of ways from Fayette County, and so going into this, we determined early on that I needed to be on the ground there to get more of a sense of the place. And so, I went for a few visits and Andrew took me around to meet some people and to see some places and to talk to folks and to get a sense of how we were going to craft a story that was typical but not stereotypical, and that could represent issues without making a claim to be the, you know, universal story for the entire region.

So, one of our first stops was a flower shop, where we spoke to the owner and talked to her about community and talked to her about drug addiction and we also spoke to a doctor. I spoke to a police officer and an actual drug dealer, too. You just try to get as many perspectives as possible and find a way to distill them into the story. But a lot of it was done remotely. And I was also reading books and watching films and so that process is kind of what led me to move to Fayette County. The week of the premiere of the piece is when I moved to Fayette County because that whole process, sort of added up on me [turns to Munn]. Any other comments about the process?

**Munn:** I think that covered it well.

**Laney** Do you mind sharing what you were reading and watching?

**May:** I read *Night comes to the Cumberlands* at that point. And it's an important historical document, even if it present things in a way that is problematic in a lot of ways. Very late in the process, I saw the documentary, "Oxyana," which is about Oceana, which is the very town that we had visited and were kind of imagining as the prototype for a community for this piece.

It happened that 80 percent of the way through the process of writing this piece that "Oxyana" came out. And, also, kind of on the other end of the spectrum, Elaine McMillion's documentary, "Hollow," came out around that same time, and so I was interested in that approach to more community-based storytelling and in hearing stories directly from people there.

**Montgomery:** So, in speaking with people in that town, what did you glean from their stories of displacement and how did you see that affecting their sense of community?

**Munn:** I'll speak to that, much more broadly than Oceana. I'll start by discussing the flower shop that we visited. I remember, the owner brought up prescription drug addiction as something that was affecting the town, although she raised it in a way that was very much about compassion for the people that were dealing with it and for their families. And then she also talked a lot about coal and we were a little bit incognito, in terms of, we weren't trying to make the piece about mountaintop removal coal mining, or we weren't leading with being against mountaintop removal coal mining, and she brought up that coal mining was really important and that she didn't see the big deal with strip mining and that it was something that she was proud of or thought was an important part of the community. So, to talk about the sense of displacement for people that have had to move from mountaintop removal, or people who have not moved, but whose places have been permanently changed, I think those are two different experiences of it.

And, I'm thinking of Maria Canoe, a very powerful activist who has been a great advocate for ending mountaintop removal. Her activism has been motivated by the fact that the mountains around where she lived in Boone County have been permanently scarred, have been reduced in elevation by 500 feet. She has also been flooded out multiple times, but she's chosen to stay in her home. But that's a choice: to stay in a place that is permanently changed. And she has, and that experience, I think, has fueled her activism. She does not want others to have to undergo the painful experience she has had to go through. It is a place in which generations of her family have lived and that she loves and to which she is committed. She wanted to save it, but she couldn't save that little part of it, and so she's dedicated herself to ending mountaintop removal, so the same thing does not happen to other people.

And I think of Judy Bonds, who was incredibly inspiring to me, and she was active in Coal River Mountain Watch in Coal River Valley. And she became a leading figure to end mountaintop removal after she had been one of the last people to move out of Marfork Hollow below Coal River Mountain when they were building a slurry dam just up the holler from her, stripping the ridges around. And she made the decision to move out of there when her daughter was playing in the creek, and she realized that she couldn't be living

in this toxic place with her kids growing up there. And that's a decision I can't imagine having to make, but of course, that's the decision that she came to, and then she had to move, but she didn't move far away. She moved about 20 miles away and dedicated herself to working with her community. And so, for both of those people, their experiences of displacement fueled really passionate activism.

I think there are also, for every person for which that was their way of reacting, there are many more who, did not become activists necessarily, but tried to get on with their lives. The reality of how coal companies buy people out now is that they will offer above market rate for the homes that they're buying in the town and then people will move to a nearby more urban center and buy a new house and try to find a new life there. Maybe continue their jobs, maybe not.

**May:** Or move out of state.

**Munn:** Or move out of state, but that above market rate thing is kind of insidious because it's market, so what can you get for a house in the middle of this toxic landscape that's being created? So, first it's destruction, and then offering above market rate and then the person moves. So, I can describe what that is, but I can't describe what that experience is for those people who have experienced it. And so, I keep coming back to: I think that something that's very important in my process as a singer and someone who's trying to portray these experiences is an admission of not knowing, and I think that's also very important to say to the broader society. It's that you don't know, and you can't know the experience of someone else. So, it's very, very important that you trust what that person is saying is their truth and then it's, how do you act based on that?

**May:** Just adding on to that, we can't know the experience of those people and being forced to move, but on the other hand, the conditions that they're experiencing, even just in the time I lived in Fayette County for a year, and I'm sure for Andrew's five years, too, those conditions were just part of our fabric of everyday living.

And I think one of the most common examples of that is water. The creek that runs through Fayetteville, that ran right by the house where I lived, now they're finding fracking chemicals in it. They're testing and they're

finding fracking chemicals in that creek. I've seen kids play in that creek and I've wandered in there myself. And then, friends are looking at buying land and they have to talk about mineral rights, and they must talk about the expansion of the mines and what's this property going to look like in five years when mining has expanded? So, while it's true that we have to challenge our sense of empathy to understand the psychological forces acting on a person, the actual material conditions they are confronting aren't hard to find if you just go there and look around.

**Montgomery:** So, when you think about the activism to end mountaintop removal or to end coal mining, it can be seen as an attack on the identity of those who have grown up in that area. How, in your experience, have you seen residents shift in the way that they identify themselves?

Andrew, with your five years living in the region and then also Nate, you growing up in the region, leaving and then coming back, how have you seen the identity of miners and homeowners change?

**May:** Well, the introduction of mountaintop removal mining was, I think, a challenge to the identity of miners in general because for one thing, it was this radical mechanization of a process that had been very labor intensive and had involved a large workforce. Now, suddenly, it involved machines that were 18 stories high and a very much reduced workforce. So that introduction itself was a challenge to traditional coal mining and coal miners.

**Munn:** Your question made me think of one individual story: Junior Walk, a young man living in the Coal River Valley who I worked with some when I lived there. And when I met him, he was working as a security guard on a mountaintop removal site. He was a couple of years out of high school and that was his job, and he would bring his computer up with him and sit in the car up there, and he was writing articles for the Coal River Mountain Watch newsletter while he was working up there. And then, Coal River Mountain Watch found a way to hire him, and he became one of the organizers and people who work for that organization and one of the leading younger voices against mountaintop removal coal mining. I think that's one of the more radical flips of which I am aware.

But, if I can draw some broad generalizations about the people that I worked with most closely in opposition to mountaintop removal coal mining, they

tended to be retired underground miners or retirees who remembered what it was like before that was the norm, and knew that it was wrong, knew what it cost them. And there's no consensus amongst the people in the coal fields about what mountaintop removal mining means to them, or their opposition to it. Everyone has a different type of opposition who does have an opposition, and the people for it are for it for different reasons and justify it in different ways. There are many people I talked to who were opposed to it, but were hesitant about speaking out, because it would be disruptive to their social relationships and that made sense. It's a sore, complicated thing.

I was there working as an organizer against mountaintop removal mining, so that was kind of the hub of the wheel through which I was relating to the place. I think also, for most people who are living in the areas that it's happening, it's not the center of their existence. So, it's not the thing that they triangulate all their relationships through. I think I was triangulating most of my relationships to the place through that issue because I was working on it. But it exists side-by-side with all the other issues that most people deal with, and just conducting one's life and having work and a home and family, and it's part of the backdrop in a way.

**Montgomery:** So, how do you determine whether when you perform, that it's been a success? Or do you even consider it to be a success or that you're just happy to perform?

**Munn:** There are a couple of different levels that happens on for me. One, just say, musically, what did we do? We go through the piece and did we, did I do justice to the score? Did I execute the notes and rhythms that Nate has laid out for me in a way that is suitable to him and also communicative to the audience? That's like the musical platform on which it happens.

And then we always follow it with a question-answer session and that's when there's more of a dialogue. And it's very nice. I wish recitals of Schubert's "Lieder" could have had a question- and-answer session afterwards. So, I just need to get that kind of feedback and know, what did this experience mean for the audience? What stories did it churn up and that people want to share?

I think I feel that's one way of gauging the success of it: what the energy of the question-answer session is, but then it's an even more intangible thing,

where I feel in performance if I can disappear into the character a little bit and just go with the emotional flow of the piece and the words and trust that feeling, then I feel that I've done my job and that's something that I go for in performance.

**Montgomery:** Disappearing into the character is an interesting way to put it, because when I was watching the performance last night, I noticed that you would often look up and out, but it didn't seem like there were many times where you fully connected with the audience, so I almost felt like a voyeur watching you wrestle with these issues within yourself. Is that something that you were going for when you all were composing this piece?

**May:** Yeah, we talked about that a little bit before performing it, and I think a lot of what he is singing and saying is really an internal monologue, and it's just struggles that he's having with himself, and so in a lot of ways it is construed as the audience kind of observing this thing happening. But in some cases, he's also sort of explaining what's going on, so it's a little bit unclear why he's on stage speaking and singing, but that's the case with every opera. There's a need for a suspension of disbelief, you know.

**Munn:** There's an element of, I can't totally forget that the audience is there, of course, because I must keep on doing what I'm doing very externally, so that the people in the back row can hear and get all the words, so I'm doing all these internal things in this very extremely amplified way. But then there are times I pivot into trying to do it externally, and there's a difference of opinion concerning whether it's good to address a single person in the audience or try to keep it emotionally specific, but generally directed to the audience. One, in choosing to direct something to a single person, that is, to a degree, excluding everyone else in the audience, but at the same time, it's almost like I can feed on that a little bit if I really choose a person to deliver a line to, then it's like I'm getting some of their energy, too. So, it's something that I like to play with when I'm performing. I don't really plan it. I don't plan, "Oh, I'm going to look at a person when I'm saying these words," but it's rather, I must feel it in the moment and act on it.

**Montgomery:** It seems like you come away from watching the performance feeling that nothing has been settled and it's very unfinished. Was that intentional?

**May:** Yeah, there's a school of thought that completely satisfying an audience leads to minimal engagement after the performance, and I didn't want to wrap up the story neatly and then people would be able to go home and sleep and just be fine, you know. So, I wanted this continued need to wrestle with things. And this, well, we shouldn't spoil the ending, but there are things that you have to wrestle with, knowing how the piece ends. But in a way, too, it's a reflection of the choice that is on the table for a lot of people in the region today.

**Munn:** Yeah, I mean West Virginia, Appalachia, the world, we're all in unfolding processes and there is always a temptation to try to wrap things up in neat narratives that say event A caused event B. We're going to do C to cause D, and that's something that I think is an important way of motivating action and reaching goals, but in a way, it also is not always reflective of the complexity of reality. Not that art can or necessarily should represent all the complexity of reality and the multitude of forces that are working in a place like West Virginia. I think it's more honest in a way to leave things unsettled.

And I think it also causes the audience then hopefully to infer their own conclusions, what does this mean for me? What does the character do? Hopefully, maybe it was a little irritating, you know, in a way that we don't know what happens. We don't know what happens and we all must be part of creating what happens next and we all are, whether we think of ourselves as being a part of what happened or creating what happens next, we all are part of that. And we're all intertwined in this.

**Hogg:** What are your future projects? Do you plan on doing a sequel to this? Are you working on something else?

**May:** We are both working on other stuff.

**Munn:** The main collaboration that is in this vein, that I'm working on right now, is not with Nate at this point. We have more collaborations together in our future, but what I'm working on currently is with the composer Nina Young and the Nouveau Classical Project to create a concert work about the advent of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a term that's been coined recently to describe the idea that we are in a new geologic era defined by pervasive human impacts on the globe that are comparable to any previous major geological event: mass extinctions, climate change, huge alterations to

the geologic formations of the surface. And this is a major change that has happened at an accelerating rate through human history, which is a very, very short period in the span of geologic time.

So, this is a work that tries to address that because it's an idea of something that we can quantify in a way, but it's not something we can really comprehend. Nina Young is composing it in, we're calling it a cantata, which is a form out of the sacred music tradition. Sacred music is meant to bring one closer to the divine, things that can't be comprehended thoroughly. We are embracing the fact that we cannot thoroughly comprehend the Anthropocene or the changes that are happening. Nevertheless, they are things that we must grapple with and try to figure out. What does this mean for us, as artists, what does this mean for ourselves as people? And trying to put that into a piece of art. I've been working on the libretto, the text for the piece, and we will be premiering it at some point in 2017 or 2018.

**May:** I'm also working on a piece. I'm using the term oratorio for it, which also comes from the sacred tradition. And this is a piece about the Urban Appalachian population of Cincinnati, where I now live, so I did some interviews with people in Cincinnati. Just to give some context, a large wave of migration took place in the middle decades of the 20th century from Appalachia to Midwestern cities and Cincinnati was one of the recipients of those migrants and so, and of course, there have been people coming in since then as well.

So, I spoke with some of those individuals and I'm setting their words, their exact words, to music, and it's a piece for a solo singer, women's choir and three percussionists and piano. It's about 35 minutes long. So that's my latest big project and it's going to premiere in just a few weeks in Cincinnati. It's called *State*.

# Chapter 8: Lily Yeh

**Lily Yeh**, Artist, Founder of Barefoot Artists

**Date of Interview:** September 3, 2020

**Interviewers:** C. Flachs-Surmanek and Lydia Gilmer

**C. Flachs-Surmanek:** Lily, it's so awesome to be here with you. I am wondering if you can speak a little bit to the creative background of your childhood, because I imagine that it informs a lot of your work now.

**Lily Yeh:** Yes. I guess my background is quite normal. You know, our parents and grandparents, who also lived with us encouraged my interest in art. Although the house was not necessarily harmonious, as there were five children, our parents put education as their top priority. Despite disharmony, despite financial struggles, it was always a priority. And they provided means for us to succeed. From early on, we were exposed to the arts and music. I grew up playing piano and learning to dance and my parents provided support for me to study painting when I was 15. And that kind of anchored the direction of my life and its impact is still shaping me today. So, it is all due to my parents' nurturing love and support, despite the problems that came our way.

**Lydia Gilmer:** Along those lines, I am wondering about some of the moments that led you to begin the trajectory that led to the work that you do now, some of the more community-based art and projects that you have undertaken. Were there some specific moments that led you in that direction?

**Yeh:** There was a very important, specific moment, but it was not about community building through the arts. Far from it. I went to very good schools. I graduated from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, taught, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Fine Arts, and then taught at the University of the Arts for many years. Viewed from the outside, my life was quite successful. I was a university professor and I had a wonderful family. I was raising my child and I was showing my work at the best art gallery in town.

But somewhere mid-career, I started to feel something important in my life was missing and I had a sense of emptiness inside. I started looking for what was lacking, and that prompted me to remember the fullness I had experienced when I was learning the beautiful art form of Chinese landscape painting. It is full of vitality, but it is serene and pristine and beautiful and full of dynamic energy at the same time. I have always felt comforted by that space. And so, I began thinking about what the Chinese call “the dustless world.” I decided I needed to return to that space, so my heart would be at ease.

As I was searching, by chance, I was invited by Arthur Hall, the late Arthur Hall, a very talented, visionary dancer and choreographer to do a project. His building was in the inner city of Philadelphia. Next to his building was an abandoned lot. And he said, “Well, I have an abandoned a lot. Why don’t you come and make some art on that?” I had no idea how to make art in public places. I had no understanding of inner-city situations, nor had I worked with African-American communities. But, since everybody else was writing proposals to do projects, I said, to myself, “Well, why not try?” And then to my surprise, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts provided half of my request, a tiny bit of money.

And that is when I felt frightened, because I had no idea how to do what I had proposed to do. When I asked an expert who did outdoor public art for advice, they said, “You can’t do it. You are an outsider. Children can destroy everything you build, and you do not have enough money. It is a drop in the bucket. You should just write a feasibility study and withdraw from the project.” And I began to outline a plan to follow the advice of the expert. As I was drafting a letter to the Council to propose a scoping analysis and to withdraw thereafter, my inner voice spoke to me saying, “If you do not rise to the occasion, the best of you will die. The rest will not amount to anything.” That was a very critical moment. I did not want to see myself as a coward down the line. And so, I mustered enough courage to take the first step. I said to myself, “I have no idea how to do this project, but at the least, I can begin working with children on Hall’s abandoned lot.”

That’s how it started. When I went forward with the effort, I did not go to help others. I did not go to build the community. I had no idea, really, what I would do. But I knew I was lacking. I was searching for something, and I needed help. So, I stepped into a broken landscape and a community in need

that lived nearby. Together in our brokenness, we had the opportunity to do something to help each other, to listen to each other. That was the beginning of community building. But certainly, it is not to my credit. It was the way it was set up, the way I stepped in. And then I realized that we must cherish our weaknesses.

Looking back, I certainly did not realize then that this project would endure for so long. Today, The Village of Arts and Humanities has new leadership in its new director, Aviva Kapust, and they have vision, they have energy. It's wonderful. It's living and thriving today. And I was able to launch another project elsewhere in the world. I think The Village was not built on my strengths, but on my weaknesses. I did not know how to bring it to life, so I needed other people to step in to help me realize it. When nobody would listen and trust that we could do anything, the children with whom we had begun to work stepped in. They sensed the energy of making things and collapsing and making again. There was a lot of joy in the group's initial activities. That is how it all started.

**Gilmer:** Thank you for sharing. That is a lovely story. Your awareness of those moments and yourself during that time are incredible. I was really interested, when I read about your work that you often begin your projects by working first with children.

**Yeh:** [As a society] we do not take children seriously. That was my attitude too, at first. I did not want to work with children. I was afraid of their wild energy. But that energy is the energy of enthusiasm for new discovery and for the vitality of life. When it is not guided, when we do not guide them in a way that allows each to grow and blossom, that energy can even become destructive. When a child misbehaves, it is not the child's responsibility. It is instead the responsibility of the adults caring for them, whether educators or guardians. We need to ask ourselves what we did not do to give them the opportunity to thrive.

I will give you an example. My first team members were aged three-and-a-half to 13-year-olds. That was my building crew. I was so grateful that they came and helped on the project. But imagine what it meant to the children. We often talk about building confidence, elevating children, and so forth. I learned [how simple it can be when we set a stage for their action. When you do, for example, they will make you mosaics that you did not know how to

create. None of us knew how, but we just started, and we made do. Was it perfect? No. But it had life, it had heart. It was authentic of that moment. We tried to figure out the solution together. And the mosaic we built still stands in the heart of The Village today. The children who participated became the guardians. Their contribution mattered in improving their community. They worked, they contributed like adults, and they mattered. What better way to build their confidence and pride and harmony and teamwork, than setting structures and processes up so that they could succeed? It all had to do with how we set it up. And how we set it up had to do with our attitude, with mental balance, and whether those of us who launched the project had confidence in ourselves and actively worked to ensure an atmosphere of kindness for those who participated, especially toward the children whose involvement made such a difference.

I learned that art making with community members is not just about others. It is so much more about the artists' inner well-being and balance, and that orientation allows those artists not to act for personal gain all the time, but for the service of all, including themselves. If we do not cherish ourselves, our strengths, our weaknesses, our light and our darkness, then how can we cherish each other? Life has day and has night. Our failures and our vulnerability and darkness can reveal a place in our heart that helps us find balance, so the night and day can follow each other. Activities and rest can balance each other, but they must be rooted in kindness, rooted in all humanity. And I believe that we are kind. A child will not just destroy things. The lightness and the creative energy and the time to start the revolution of kindness, of gentleness; is that not what the Pope [Francis] and the Dalai Lama mean? That orientation will lead us to healing and balance and cherishing each other, I think.

**Flachs-Surmanek:** Lily, that is such a beautiful answer and something I am wrestling with a lot in my work. I feel like I rarely see young people in decision-making rooms, in the rooms where people are making policy and planning decisions. I am curious about that invitation, the moment of inviting others into that kind of generative thinking and possibility, of creativity and imaginative thinking. What is your approach to inviting others into that process with you?

**Yeh:** A lot of thinking does not lead us to the result that we desire because it is framed in a structure of hierarchy, of distrust, of alienation, of leader and

follower. It is already framed by the idea that we are boxed in, in our analysis and search for solutions, to problems and trying to help others, by the idea of “me and they.” For example, if we approach a community and we say, “The community is broken. They have no wealth. They have no education. We’ll step in to help them.” We are already on the wrong footing. If you talk about equality, you are already wrong before you even step in, if you adopt the view that “they” need help. You need to set up a framework where everybody can come in on equal footing. It does not matter whether you have a Ph.D., whether you are high in the government. When you are in those positions, it makes it harder to let go of your nominal accomplishments. I think of Picasso, you know, one of the greatest artists in history. He said he always wanted to paint like a child. You must let go.

I will tell you another story about the importance of children, that occurred when I went to Rwanda. You asked me how I became a leader. I became a leader reluctantly and involuntarily. But I did become one. How? By following the energy of the children. In 2004, I was on my way to Kenya. I had a big project in Korogocho, Kenya. And I did not have Rwanda even in my mind. At an international conference in Spain, I heard somebody from Rwanda who spoke about the suffering of his people. I just felt my heart move. And I said to myself, “I will already be on the continent. Why not just go visit Rwanda and check it out?” The person to whom I spoke on that visit was Jean Bosco Musana Rukirande. We are still working together today. We have jointly worked to transform three to four villages from destitution to the beginning of building resources, having homes, and on the verge of prosperity. So, life calls us in unexpected moments. And that is when we must pay attention because doing so will lead us on an incredible journey.

So, when I went to Rwanda, I was somebody from outside, from America, visiting survivors [of the nation’s 1994 genocide] who lived in a village whose people were completely broken and devastated by an almost incurable grief and despair. No income. No hope. Their families were wiped out and neighbors did not know each other. There was no community and they suffered in isolation. As a person from outside, who would trust you? So, I did not go there directly, wanting to solve their problems. Frankly, I had no clue how to do so anyway. But there were children, little children, and they said, “Ah, mzungu, mzungu,” meaning person coming from outside. They started to follow me and I started to play with them. We just played clapping hands.

We started to run. We started to exercise, and we did all kinds of things. I surprised them. I would do a different kind of trick, and suddenly yell and then they would burst out laughing and so forth.

I learned the Rwandan phrase for, “Happy to see you.” And every time I saw the children, I would say, “Oh, happy to see you.” Thereafter, they would follow me and run around after me each day. Without me quite understanding it, in that frozen landscape of darkness, when I just played with the children, their laughter and their joy rippled through the air and reached the suffering hearts of the adults, like a gentle spring breeze.

This raises the question of how to work with adults? I never go to a project thinking about trust or about engaging people. Their involvement is completely voluntary, but I do set out bait. It is similar, really, to working with the children for whom you have all kinds of candy, beautiful colors and a ball with which to play. That's the bait. You invite them to have a good time. With adults, I saw that their houses were just rudimentary buildings without real windows, just shutters, without facilities at all, no water, no electricity, and no toilets, no floors, except the ground. They were just rocky, gray and gloomy. So, I said, “Let's paint them some colors.” We conducted an art workshop, and we bought some colors, originally only five colors: black, white, green, brown and yellow. I said, “Okay, we'll just start to paint geometrical shapes on your homes. Okay?” And in that frozen landscape of darkness, which was like the depth of a winter's night, when you started to put colors on the house walls collectively, when people began to see the changes in their homes, because each family had a different pattern on their walls and they helped to decide that pattern, that simple creative action was like lighting a match, lighting a torch in the night. It started to provide warmth and light and beckon people to join in and share in the project.

And that's how it began. After we left, the village residents continued to paint, much better than we had imagined. They painted a computer, helicopter, bicycle, mobile, mosque, and whatnot on their walls. Really, they painted their dreams. Most residents were refugees, and most were broken and destitute, but they told us that they felt now that it was not a transitory cave they lived in, but their home. But in Rwanda, you know, there is unrest. The authorities came and they reacted negatively, “Wow, the survivors' village, it's all brightly painted. It's not safe.” The authorities told the [largely Tutsi] residents, “You must paint all of this out so that the Hutu militias

will not attack you.” And the people became so strong, they dared to say to the government officials, “No, this is our village. This is our identity. This is our home. We will protect it and we feel safe in our newly colorful painted village.”

That is the power of art and transformation, and the power of children in bringing joy and hope and light. I would say, we all must learn as much as we can. In your position, learn as much as you can in this wonderful institution [Virginia Tech] that is concerned with the well-being of all humanity and, I hope, all living things on Earth. When you step into community, be humble and modest, and realize that anyone who does so is a student. Those with whom you will work have survived while you have not been tested. We see them as broken, without resources. But that is simply our prejudice, our lack of imagination. That is our not recognizing the potential of those with whom we hope to work. We need to go in guided by the idea that hidden human potential is our new frontier and can be explored together. So-called experts need to bring the best of themselves so that they can move forward together with those they would assist.

It really is so simple. Play. Enjoy. Be in touch with the passion and light in all. If you do so and it guides your behavior, other people will join you in your efforts. Art makes our work more visible. More people see it. But the important thing is to listen to life’s calling, become truly ourselves, be touched with that living energy because we are made of star stuff. We come from the stars. We return to the stars. We can tap enormous potential when we are connected with the life energy that can make the stars and the seasons rotate.

I was in the academic world, and I felt constrained. So, to do what I wanted to do, I had to explore what I wanted to do from a place of not knowing, from vulnerability, of not having resources, not having the expertise, of knowing nothing at all, but still wanting to take the first step to identify my life’s calling. So, I went to the furthest place from what people cherish, from what people pay attention to, because at the beginning, when you try to find a new structure, new language, and new value, new way of doing things that are not framed by the economic measure of G.D.P. [Gross Domestic Product], you find yourself asking how to develop a different way to measure wealth. And in every way, I learned everything I came to know about this concern by working in The Village. It was not so much that I helped those residents.

Instead, we helped each other. They were my teachers. And they made it possible for me to find a new way of doing and measuring things: A way to try, to fail, and to be able to get up again and to try again and fail and laugh, and then go back. Eventually we found our voices deeply rooted in our individual beings and in the being we created collectively. That's how you build a community: with vitality, with a kindness towards each other that can continue to nurture energy and shared intention. And that is what will sustain itself in a community, commonly incubated creative action based on kindness.

**Gilmer:** I think you are right. In thinking about questions for this interview, I noticed that I compartmentalized many of these processes. I would think about community engagement and community arts and community and economic development and sort of keep those things separate. But the way that you so beautifully tie them all together and make those processes so seamless is lovely and I would love to hear more about that.

**Yeh:** Thank you. People often talk about compartmental thinking, and I always feel it is difficult to define what I do because, yes, I am a visual artist. I make paintings, I make murals, and I do mosaic sculptures and all that. And I design parks and I helped to design and build a genocide memorial in Rugerero, Rwanda. So, it is difficult to describe how I have gone about this work except in an integrated way. For example, I believe that I helped to create all those things—paintings, murals, walls, whatnot—to sculpt space. And I wanted to create spaces that were poignant, nurturing, and energy filled. When I feel lost, I try to return to that space that I have long loved and longed for, and that I call home, the “dustless world” that exists in some of the most evocative Chinese landscape paintings. In 18 years of working, I realized that in the supposed broken lands of back-alley places, I found “life stepping on my feet,” to quote Langston Hughes.<sup>1</sup> I found the dustless world for which I had longed, in what many refer to as the badlands, the “broken places.” There, I felt its presence. I felt a deep sense of fulfillment, of anchored-ness. And then I realized that it was always right here, all around us. We can have access to it at any time.

You did ask me, what is the question that I always hope that an interviewer will ask me. I think that I would want to be asked the question, “How is the personal universal?” How can walking your own path affect community building efforts all over the world? If you look at the logo of Barefoot Artists,

you will find it is very simple. It is a huge flower in space, against the sunrise or sunset. In the heart of that flower is the world, and Barefoot Artists' mission is to bring beauty to seemingly broken places in the world. And didn't Leonard Cohen say, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light comes in."<sup>2</sup> Those lands, the supposed badlands are not just broken and forsaken. They are, rather, full of potential and new light that can enlighten all who wish to see it.

That has been my experience of how the personal can become the universal. So then, a question arises: How do I define what I do and what kind of art I do? As I said, I create murals, mosaic sculptures, parks, rituals, celebrations, and theaters. Under the auspices of The Village of Arts and Humanities, I have led the renovation and building of houses and even established a tree farm. Under the auspices of Barefoot Artists, I have worked with poor communities in many African and other countries. So, in poor communities, such as Rugerero, the survivors' village and in the Twa villages in Rwanda—the Twa were an indigenous population, persecuted and disenfranchised across generations. And today they are on the very fringe, only 1 percent of the Rwandan population. With Barefoot Artists volunteers, we set up micro-lending and husbandry programs. We also worked to create job training in sewing, basket weaving, carpentry, and solar panel assemblage. We developed educational activities for youth, teaching them how to install rain collection water tanks and to build toilets. We also built a pottery production compound and purchased agricultural land for villagers to farm and earn a livelihood.

How does all of this relate to art? It relates in this way: I define art as creativity in thinking, methodology, and implementation. This vision is to build a community in which people are well-connected with their families, are sustained by meaningful work, and are nurtured by and care for each other. In other words, our work strives to realize a community filled with kindness, meaningful activities, and hopefully, a shared prosperity. So, I call it, not just visual arts, performing arts or whatever, but the art of life. It is an open, inclusive vision that welcomes innovation. And hopefully, it is also welcoming to all to join on an equal footing in common efforts to reach equality and kindness for all. That is my art.

**Flachs-Surmanek:** I love that response. It is such a specific answer: Art as universal.

**Yeh:** [laughs] Just play. Just play.

**Flachs-Surmanek:** One question that I have is, what is your conception of yourself as a mentor for other artists hoping to encourage social change and to do socially engaged work?

**Yeh:** I never think of myself as a mentor. My passion is just to do a project. That's my passion. From one little, tiny mural, our project in Rwanda grew. And from the columns we first built. We wanted to plant trees, but we did not have money to buy trees, so we just used lath wire and built cement columns that we painted green to stand in for trees. We called them 'our trees.' And they all collapsed because we didn't know how to build them. The wires all rusted, and they collapsed. [laughs] And so, we built them again. We began to expand our efforts because there were many abandoned lots in the village. I said, "Oh, wow. There's another abandoned lot. Let's make another mural. Let's make it whatever."

And so, we eventually began to be good at it. And then we began to find our unique language. And what makes me the happiest is just to have a free space, those places without government requirements, regulations, and people's concern about planning and urban design and so forth. For me, I often found myself stifled by seeking to please all the regulators and the people invested in whatever ideas or constructs or imaginings. Accidentally, life just put me in Philadelphia and Rwanda. And so, you continue to grow. My happiest moment is when I find that there is available space, usually vacant and unused, and usually people don't know what to do with it. And then I suggest a way to use it, like a vision or some idea that could be undertaken within it. Usually, I start to organize a workshop, so people can come and contribute their ideas. And children love colors. So, if you set that up, that's my healing basket, you know: "Everybody come and make a big mess!" [she claps her hands as though applauding], "Great! What a beautiful big mess!" [laughs] So, there is no failure. Then, we all feel good and we start and slowly, step-by-step, everybody comes in on equal footing and we listen to everyone's voices as we together make a plan for the space.

There's a project I am doing now in Beijing that I worked on for five years before, transforming an old, raggedy, abandoned factory into a school [the Dandelion School for migrant children].<sup>3</sup> Now, the children are going to school in a new, post-modern building. Grand. Big. Dignified. Imposing. But

the students really missed the warmth, the gentleness, the colors, the story, the energy that connected to the earth in their old building. They really missed that, and they felt alienated from the new space as a result. The reason I took on this project is because in a way, that is what we all live in. Buildings get ever more post-modernistic, futuristic, technical, and those characteristics can feed a sense of alienation, a sense of compartmentalization. Where is the hope in such renderings? Where is integrity? How do we connect to each other? In the fragmentation we so often impose in an ever more impersonal and ever more modern technology environment, where is the personal to be found? Where is the warm space in which we can nestle, retreat, find comfort, reconnect, reflect, re-center and re-emerge? Ensuring that sense of belonging, that's what I am working on now in China. I'm taking on a place that I would usually run away from, but I felt, in a way, that life brought this project to me. And, it's not about individual creativity. It's about collective creativity and it's also about delivering the highest quality we can for a population that can certainly benefit from such efforts.

That is what I learned while working at The Village in Philadelphia. The ground, the root is in the community. That ground, in turn, is open and all-inclusive. Problem, no problem. Skill, no skill. Everybody can come along and find a part they can play that will allow them to contribute and be valued and be cherished. And yet, it takes experts to bring their expertise to work to encourage conditions to develop such possibilities, step by step, to build a result of the highest quality possible. That result is what transforms and stuns in its power and its nurturing ability. And this, I call urban alchemy. We all have our place.

In a way, I commend, I pay honor and I so respect the power of a statement by the artist, but in a very modest way. I try not to go into all the problems that separate us. I try to set projects up in such a way that they are not perceived as "problems." For example, the village meditation park in Philadelphia was really the first park in the neighborhood of its kind. We obtained funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to develop it and I was very nervous. I said, "Oh, we must get it right." And then I realized that I had to find the experts, I had to find the skilled workers to realize it. And then I realized that if I did that, it would totally wipe out half of our budget before we even began. It would all go into the foundation. More

importantly, local residents would never have the opportunity to explore, to make mistakes, and to find their space in contributing to their community in this way. So, we learned the skills we needed ourselves, and we maybe did not have enough capability or knowledge, but we realized that if we looked around, there were many individuals who possessed expertise in the many areas we needed it.

You just open up. And now there's the internet. There are experts everywhere. And so, we dug, and we all learned how to drive and operate Bobcat earthmovers and loaders. And we also learned to pour concrete. And that is how we eventually took on renovating and building homes.

I also know that people say, "Don't work with drug addicts because it gives a bad reputation to your organization." And I said, "Those are the people, the ones who could not find a job, who were willing to come and help me first. Let's not engage in our problems, our divisions, or things that separate and hurt us. Let's find our strength, find the space where we can work together." And in that way, we built on our strengths and when you do that, your color, your race, your income, your whatever did not, and does not, matter. And it becomes such an attractive pull that people from far and wide want to come in to experience such a community, one filled with genuine concern for the well-being of one another. That was our new wealth. We discovered many more "wealths" in the people in the community when we were open to doing so. I also have a question for you and your university, or universities in general. People ask, "How do you sustain the community energy, because people are come-and-go?" I reply, "Don't think about other people sustaining it. Ask how we sustain our energy, how we have the energy and determination to reach our vision." I think again, it is about the personal. You must find the passion of what you're about. And through that, you find authenticity. Then you won't be fazed by other people's ignorant comments about you being poor, being colored, being this, but not being that. You refuse to accept other people's prejudice and ignorance because their attitudes do not matter.

We are like train engineers who will always drive our trains towards our destiny. You allow people the freedom to get on and off the train as they wish. Nothing is imposed. But if a project is nurturing, more people will join. If not, we but have ourselves to question. Are we being selfish? Is there

personal gain in this? If so, those attitudes will lose people and our dream for community change in the end.

It is wonderful to see so many universities and colleges exploring ways to build communities. Communities' needs are multi-dimensional and long-term in character. That's why my successful projects engage for five years, ten years, or even longer. Not that I live there, but I keep returning. You know, I work to set up programs that run all year-round, and that draw on the too often ignored resources of residents and build partnerships with and among them. A community's needs are multi-dimensional, organic, and long-term in character. A university's purpose is mostly about educating the bright young people in its care and imparting knowledge to them, making sure they learn, and graduate. So, the students' engagement with community projects are, by definition, short-term. How do you bridge the gap between the organic long-term multidimensional needs of the community, and the comparatively structured and short-term university and student goal to help to build communities? Such interventions need also to be based on concern, kindness, and contributions to society. But structurally, there is a conflict. I want to know, have you explored that question, and have you found a solution? There is a way, there must be a way.

**Flachs-Surmanek:** This question is at the heart of everything I am wrestling with right now, especially in this tough moment.

**Yeh:** It reminds me of a metaphor. You know, if you teach children swimming, you give them lessons. Stroke one, stroke two, stroke three. Kicking out the legs. This is the frog style. This is the freestyle, the butterfly style, and so on. After all that, you jump in. Or do you just say jump in and somebody naturally goes freestyle, somebody naturally does frog style. Isn't that easier to teach, more fun, more spontaneous? You find the talent and inclination of each child, and it is unique, right? It's like that.

**Gilmer:** I'll just add briefly that I never really had a specific place that I called home. I moved around a lot growing up and now I'm in Blacksburg temporarily. And so, I think a lot about how to build a community where I am. I find that I try to obtain a sense of home whether I am in a place for a day or 10 years. So, I wholeheartedly believe in the jumping in mentality wherever you are and really immersing yourself in a place and engaging with anyone

and everyone as much as possible. It's just really talking with as many people as possible, engaging with as many people as possible everywhere.

**Yeh:** I hear you. That deep desire to connect with other people, to feel at home in the place you are, even though you moved a lot. I think you need to find that sense of home with yourself first, so that you do not seek connections out of need and or because you are driven by the need for accompaniment. Be natural and feel at ease with yourself. And when you reach out, it will be a gentler, more welcoming connection.

I remember a question you asked me: In the time of COVID-19, what do artists do? I was thinking it related to being at ease with ourselves before we can feel at ease and accept other people as they are and not what we want them to be. We all see COVID-19 as so devastating, so destructive, so negative, and dark, and tragic, and so forth. On the other hand, look at the destruction humanity is doing to the world. I feel that the way our economy, our way of thinking of success—and it's not just now, it's been brewing for generations—about insatiable growth, about height, spaces, competitiveness. All of that is driving our planet to the brink. The world is sick, in high fever. We do not wish to see it.

And now Nature sends us the coronavirus and forces us all to stop in our reaching and claims-making. If we do not reflect, if we do not look inward, if we do not reconsider what is valuable, and the meaning of life, our lives, what will become of our world? We should ask: What can we do to create a sense of home, sense of belonging, belonging to ourselves in this time and space, belonging to each other in allowing other people to be? That starts from listening, looking inward, from quietness. If we do not do that, if we keep on wanting to buy and buy and buy, and consume, we will have totally wasted this moment. Nature has sent us a warning, a desperate warning.

I mean, isn't that voice of the young people? We salute them, including the young Greta Thunberg and The Sunrise Movement.<sup>4</sup> We need to follow our youth and we need to find a different way forward. The world, Nature, is sending us this rare, dark, desperate opportunity to stop our path of destruction and to reflect, to find a new way of uniting, nurturing everyone. And so that's my wish, what we need to do. And then perhaps we would have honored this rare opportunity, risen to the occasion and to life. It is all so simple, really. It all will happen naturally. But the first step is to let go of what

we cherish, of our false accomplishments, our shiny bright things, and just relax and play. And it will happen. It is so simple. I guess that is my desperate message. We all can do it and need to do it.

## Notes

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# Chapter 9: Keryl McCord

**Keryl McCord**, President and CEO of Equity Quotient

**Date of Interview:** February 17, 2017

**Interviewers:** Sarah Lyon-Hill and Neda Moayerian

**Sarah Lyon-Hill:** It seems like you've been part of and a generator of a lot of different organizations during your career. Could you highlight some key areas or themes that have brought you to these organizations? What really spoke to you about each of them? such as Alternate ROOTS or Equity Quotient, for example?

**Keryl McCord:** It's interesting, I retired from ROOTS in December 2017. It's been a little bit over a year now. Looking back, I knew when I first went to Alternate ROOTS that it was going to be my last job. I also recognized that because of ROOTS' mission and vision and values, that it most deeply aligned with my own personal vision, my values, and the quest that I've been on, in this journey in the arts, in the nonprofit arts, for the past 35 years.

When the opportunity came to work with ROOTS, I jumped at it. I had just moved to Atlanta a few years ago. I was still trying to find my way, trying to find my legs. But I first came across Alternate ROOTS when I was at the National Endowment for the Arts. I went to an annual meeting, I think in 1992, then another one in 1993. I knew then that this was a group of people that I wanted to be with. I remember saying, over the years, that if there was ever an opportunity to work with ROOTS, I would take it. I had no idea then that I would end up living in the South. I had no idea that I would end up living in Atlanta. It just happened that I was having lunch or dinner with Kathie de Nobriga, who was then executive director of Alternate ROOTS, when I first became aware of the possibility of working for the organization. She said, "Oh you know what, might you be interested in working with ROOTS?" I went, "Are you kidding me!?" So, it was the perfect place for me, and served as a kind of capstone of my career, to be able really to put everything that I had learned, everything that I knew, to use to help that organization, and that group of artists. I will say that ROOTS informed and changed me more than maybe I informed and changed ROOTS. It's one of the most culturally rich and grounded organizations that I've ever come across.

I think it's because it's so driven by artists, was founded by artists, and is led by artists. Art is center. It informs the way that that organization moves and does everything. I learned a lot. But I also didn't know, I could not have known, that when I started this journey, that I would end up at ROOTS, and that it was the perfect place for me and them at that time. Does that make sense?

**Lyon-Hill:** Yes definitely. In some ways, when you talk about the values that they embrace that kind of aligned with yours, are you talking about inclusion, equity and diversity?

**McCord:** You know, it's one of the few organizations that I've worked with that has so clearly spelled out what their values are. They have five principles of entering community. One is about shared power. Another is about transformation. Another is transparency in your processes. I remember my first annual meeting on staff. You know, ROOTS has roughly 75 to 100 board members. All the voting members are board members. I am a voting member of ROOTS, so I'm also a board member. Here we are, at the annual meeting, not just with the board members, but with people who are coming to the ROOTS meeting for the first time ever. The business meetings are open to everyone. We're presenting the budget for the next year to everyone, and everybody can comment on it. That was astounding to me, because in most organizations, everything happens behind closed doors. You don't know how decisions get made. You don't know who is at the table, making the decisions. Here we are, with one of the most important documents that the organization had. What is the budget going to be? Everybody gets to weigh in and I was like, "Okay, wait a minute. This is different." So, there is transparency in their processes. They didn't just have these values and principles on paper, they actively tried to live them. A commitment to participatory democracy is another one. I'm talking about *Robert's Rules of Order* and they're talking about participatory democracy. "Wait a minute, what?" That's why I say, I've learned as much from ROOTS as any impact that I may have had on the organization, since that culture is so deeply, deeply ingrained.

**Lyon-Hill:** And what led you to Equity Quotient?

**McCord:** When I started out, really working in theater in the 1980s in the Bay Area, I had some experiences that were eye-opening for me. I tell this

story frequently. I was a managing director for Oakland Ensemble Theater, a 500-seat equity theater in downtown Oakland. The Ford Foundation, at that time, had a program officer; Ruth Mayleas was her name. She was touring the country, meeting with theater makers, theater organizations, seeing their work, because Ford was going to fund theater. She came to our theater. She saw all the work. She took our producing director Benny Ambush and me out to dinner. We were sitting in this lovely restaurant, I think it was at the Oakland Estuary, the kind of meal that you know a poor artist could never afford. I was very excited to have this dinner with this woman from the Ford Foundation. She gushed about our work, that it was great in terms of production value. I am like, "Oh my goodness. She likes what we're doing." Then she says, "Well, however, I'm not going to ask you to submit an application to the Ford Foundation." We said, "Excuse us, why?" She said, "Because I'm not convinced that there's a need for Black, Latino or Asian theater companies. I think that the mainstream theaters can do the work and do it well."

**Lyon-Hill:** Whoa.

**McCord:** Your response was my response, was Benny's response. I was stunned, just absolutely, totally stunned. I said, "What do you mean that you don't see the value? Do you understand that we're doing work and working with playwrights who aren't going to get a chance, this is going to be the platform for them?" We had designers and technicians, they're primarily Black, but many of them were white. We had a really, very mixed group of people. And I said, "But you're telling me that this work has no value? At this point, there's no sense in having a civil conversation because you're not going to fund us. We're going to tell you what we think." We just told her, "You know, this is not right." It was overt racism. She had similar conversations with other theater leaders.

So, flash forward to recently when I was in the Bay Area. The theater that I ran, Open Ensemble Theater is gone. Asian-American Theater is gone. Lorraine Hansberry Theater is gone. It was a Black theater. These were theaters that she said she wasn't going to fund, that the mainstream theaters can do their work and do it well. They might do one or two plays a year, but that was not their mission. Around that same time, in that same period, there was also a shift at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). I think it was

the head of the Theater Program at that time, or the new chairman of the NEA, I don't remember. It was like 1984, maybe 1985.

They were making a shift and it had to be the theater program director. He was only talking about theater and he said that they were announcing to the field that they were going to cut the roster in half. They had been funding roughly 300 theaters and they were going down to 150 theaters. They decided that they could have more impact by giving more money to fewer organizations. They made the shift. All the culturally specific theaters, all the rural theaters, were taken out and the big resident theaters were basically kept on the roster.

Around the same time, we were having huge conversations in the theater community, in the field in general, about multiculturalism. And I'm like, "I don't know what multiculturalism is. I don't understand what this thing is. But okay, we'll talk about multi-culturalism." What we were really trying to avoid was talking about race and racism. What we were really trying to avoid was talking about dominant culture. What we were not willing to talk about was that we were going to make an investment in one part of the field, at the expense of everyone else. Those theaters that were cut from the theater program roster were advised to go to Expansion Arts [another program then offered by the NEA] and Expansion Arts had half the budget of the Theater Program. They not only had theater, they also had dance. They had performance space. It was a catch-all for the discipline programs, the places that the discipline programs like dance said, they were not going to fund. They had half the budget of the Theater Program, and they were telling people that that's where you should go, to the Expansion Arts program.

I'm looking at policies. I'm looking at policies that are happening right in front of me. I began to understand, before I even got to the NEA, how policy drives money. Then when I got to the NEA, I really understood how to shape policy, to make change. That was what became kind of a through line. My journey has been one where I hold that story from the 1980s and the shift that happened. I know how we got to where we are, and that this current thing that we're now talking about—diversity, equity, inclusion—again it's another version of multiculturalism. We're not talking about white supremacy. We're not talking about race and racism. It's just another way of avoiding that conversation. I pose that if we look at the lack of diversity, the lack of equity, the inequalities, these are outcomes of policies These are the

outcomes of practices and rules, etc. So, when I retired, I knew that this was the work that I really wanted to do, to try to help the field move more closely in the direction of doing something. Does that make sense?

**Lyon-Hill:** Completely.

**Neda Moayerian:** Inclusion in the arts is one of the objectives of Alternate ROOTS. For other organizations wishing to be more inclusive, how do you achieve that aim, both within your organization and among the communities with which you work? How do you know that you are being inclusive?

**McCord:** You look at the results. As I said that lack of inclusion is the result of policies or practices. Alternate ROOTS looks very different today than it did 10, 15 years ago. It was predominantly the membership. They were predominantly older, white women from the south and from Appalachia. They looked around the table and said, “We’re not living our mission. We need to do something different.” They went and got support from the Ford Foundation to bring in, to create the hip-hop artists scholarship program, to bring Black and Brown artists to the annual meeting. What ROOTS did, that a lot of organizations don’t do, was even though that Ford program was only temporary—I think it operated for two or three years—they kept it going because the intention was, “We needed to change the organization.” Some organizations would have stopped once the money ran out. ROOTS said, “No. This is living our mission and in order for us to continue to live our mission, we have to continue to find a way to open the doors.” Today, ROOTS (if you examine the organization), is predominantly people of color. Average age is probably 40, maybe 38, fairly young. You see it in the leadership. It’s in the Executive Committee. It’s in the staff. The organization has shifted, but in addition to which, along with that transformation (because they have had the principles and the vision and the values that hold them together) those older original members (predominantly, 98% white) are still at the table.

They didn’t walk away. They stayed. And it’s this engagement in an in-principle struggle that we, that our country, doesn’t know how to do. For ROOTS, it wasn’t easy. They had some extremely tough conversations, but their principles hold them together. The culture holds them together. In doing this work, I’m saying to organizations, “You have to approach this from a place of deep intention and make a commitment to it.” If you just want to check a box, then nothing’s going to change. Your leadership must buy

into it. It has to be from the top down. You just don't bring it. Coming into a workshop, you think you're going to undo racism in a day. That's not going to happen.

**Lyon-Hill:** Particularly in light of the fact that you have racism and then compounding that, you have a lot of these socio-economic challenges.

**McCord:** Absolutely.

**Lyon-Hill:** Today, we're looking at drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, etc. How do you work with these, in addition to the challenges of racism? How do you work with those challenges?

**McCord:** In my work, I do it from a place of really understanding our history. Because, if we understand that race is not real and that racism is, that racism was developed not as a social construct, but as a political or economic construct for social control that divided Black people and white people, then we can begin to have a conversation about class. OK, then we can have a conversation about the role of women, who are also nothing but a bit more property, with a little more freedom and privilege. Then we can begin to talk about patriarchy. I think it might work if we go all the way back to colonialism and understand the doctrine of discovery and what it did in setting up the ability for race to be created. I take a historical approach to it, and then I use arts-based practices to help people understand that systems live in us. The example that I use about, how do you break the system, is the family that took in Anne Frank and her family during World War II. They were saying no to the system. The systems aren't things that you can reach out and touch. I can't put my hands on it, even if I read law. It's not on a piece of paper. The systems live in us. We enact the systems. We can say no. ROOTS broke the system, broke its history. We must stop what we've been doing and that means that we're going to have to change the way that we see ourselves and who's at the table. We must co-create a new table. That's the approach that I take.

One of the things that is my abiding principle and approach to this work is that there's no shame, no blame and no guilt in trying to do this work because none of us were alive when these systems were created. But once you know you can make a choice, you can either choose to continue to play in the system or you can choose to break it. But know, now, that

you're making the choice. We're all infected, affected, shaped by the madness because there's no such thing as race. There are just human rights, that's it.

**Moayerian:** Speaking of madness. You wrote a piece in response to a member of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), whose author suggested that he couldn't take action to diversify his board and that in any case, African Americans and Latinos lack the keyboard skills needed to advance in the music education profession. Evidently, even leaders of art associations adopt discriminatory ideas. In communities where this sort of attitude is the case, how can individuals of diverse race and ethnicity, first, become confidently self-aware of their artistic abilities and second, how can they act on those capacities?

**McCord:** The first thing we have to learn is to speak up to each other. We must be able to speak to each other. I tried to stop Mr. Butera from leaving that meeting. I signaled that this is the hard work. When he made the statement about Blacks and Latino, I honestly thought he was talking about typing. It never occurred to me that he could possibly be talking about playing the piano. I tried to get him to stop because he stormed out of the room after pointing his finger in the woman's face and going off on her. This is in a public building in the Commerce Department in Washington, D.C. His behavior was public. Therefore, everything he said was public. He also even alluded to the fact that the Blacks and Latinos had difficulty understanding music theory. So, we must speak up. We have to be able to do so. This was 2015, 2016. I'm not talking 1915. It was 2015 and he headed a large organization. It's his problem. There are people like him, who have his same ignorance, the same arrogance. You must confront them. I would say to artists, "Know who you are and know your truth. Know your ability and your worth. Don't allow people such as this man to denigrate you in any way or to assail your humanity. Just don't do it." We tried to give him examples of Blacks or Latinos who have excelled. Ultimately, I had to sit back and say, "I can give him a thousand examples and it still would not matter." It would not change his mind, because at the end of the day he wanted to believe what he needed to believe, for some reason. There's nothing that I can do about that.

**Lyon-Hill:** Have you seen effective ways of at least individually or collectively challenging these ideas? What approaches have other organizations or did you, while at Alternate ROOTS take, to wake people up to those systemic issues, to those false narratives?

**McCord:** Alternate ROOTS has (at its annual meeting over the past maybe four to five years) now, instituted “uprooting oppressions training.” It’s an all-conference session. At first, we brought in facilitators. Last year, we did our own facilitating. We designed our own curriculum. We make this training, and knowledge and information available to whoever is at the conference. That’s one way to do it. We write about it. We locate our regional meetings where these are some of the issues and challenges that we’ll talk about. But many of our artists are doing this work in their communities, where it needs to happen. They’re doing it in Kentucky, and in New Orleans, and in Texas. They are doing the work. I’m saying, “doing the work.” I’m thinking of Mondo Bizzaro and Cry You One in New Orleans. They’re losing a football field of land every half hour. They developed a theater piece to help affected communities come to grips with the fact that they’re losing their land, and they’re losing their heritage and they’re losing their culture. This is a brilliant, brilliant piece that was staged on top of a levee.

Mondo Bizzaro partnered with local environmental justice organizations, both in designing the work, as well as bringing people out to see it, and then creating conversations around the issues in the play. This is not putting on a play. This is not, “Let’s go sell some tickets.” This is about deep, deep, deeply rooted conversations about culture, about our community, the issues that are important. That’s one example.

**Lyon-Hill:** When we’re thinking about this collective action and this role of the arts, what kind of capabilities have you seen that active participants in such projects achieve at the end? What are the capabilities? What are the things that people learn, that come out of these processes?

**McCord:** I think first of Linda Parris-Bailey of Carpetbag Theater. Her piece, “Speed Killed My Cousin,” was about the level of suicide that happens among vets coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq. They organized this piece, working with veterans in Florida, helping them uncover their own voice. Through that process, some of the vets engaged started to do open mics of their own. They’re starting to write. It was the first time I learned about “moral injury.” I can’t remember her name. I think she’s a sociologist and she started writing about the moral injury of war—that there are things that soldiers must do in the course of war, that violate their moral center and that reality later manifests as P.T.S.D. If we begin to think of it is a moral injury that has been done, that helps the veterans understand how to deal with it.

Through this theater experience, with “Speed Killed My Cousin,” they formed relationships with each other. One guy came to ROOTS week and performed. He’s someone who had deeply, deeply pulled back. But this experience of being with these artists, in that space, had a huge impact on him. Linda and the director Andrea Assaf found themselves sitting with a three-star general who was talking with them about trying to find a way to continue to do this work.

**Lyon-Hill:** Wow, that’s incredible.

**Moayerian:** Your examples are so interesting. Could you share an example of a cultural project that in your experience led the actors or participants to rethink their most basic assumptions or create new imaginaries, regarding an issue at the individual or community level.

**McCord:** I was talking earlier today about a project that I did with the Alliance Theater, around the National Civil War Theater project. We had 10 community conversations in Atlanta. Each of these 10 conversations happened at the Cyclorama in Atlanta, which commemorates the battle of Atlanta. You sit in this chair, and you go around, and you see the various scenes. It tells the story of the battle of Atlanta. It’s this huge, huge painting, brilliantly, brilliantly done. It’s been there forever.

I guess when it first opened in the 1920s or 1930s or something, the city was segregated, so Black people had never been there. It was one of the things that I learned during the conversation with native Black Atlantans and white Atlantans. The Black people were saying, “This is the first time I have ever been here because it was segregated. We never came, never brought the kids. This is the first time we are here.” We are having a conversation about the ramifications and the resonance of the Civil War, in 2015. That was amazing.

I want to segue away for one second. I’m thinking about a conversation that we had with the refugee community from Sudan. In the conversation with the Sudanese community [at the Cyclorama], we really had to spend time talking with some of the refugees, to get them even to think about anticipating coming to have this conversation. They seemed to feel like, “Who is this woman? Why is she here? What does she want us to do? What do you really want from us?” What I said was, “I think it’s important in this

period, when America is looking at its own Civil War and as civil wars are happening around the planet, to ask “what can we learn from each other? What can you learn from what we experienced in this country? And what can we learn from what you experienced in your own countries and as refugees?” And as artists working with donor funding, we want to have some artistic creation come out of these conversations.

**Lyon-Hill:** Exactly. When you’re working with other organizations in many ways, how would you suggest that they struggle with this tension between “Yes, they have to check these boxes for policy, for their donors, etc.,” but still really start to have that thought and that communication with their community and that self-reflection?

**McCord:** I think I would urge them to go back to the beginning and ask themselves, “Do you really want to do the work? Because if you don’t want to do it, then don’t. Too many feelings get hurt. You step on too many toes.” But I also will say to the people, “If you really are interested in doing this work, understand, we may fail, but fail forward.” Adrienne Maree Brown is one of the most brilliant, brilliant thinkers. She said something a few years ago at a meeting that brought together Alternate ROOTS and the First Peoples Fund of South Dakota, PA’I foundation in Hawaii and NALAC [National Association of Latino Arts and Culture] concerning the Intercultural Leadership Institute. In building the meeting program together, Adrienne Maree Brown was somebody that we brought in as a thinker, to help get another perspective at the table. Adrienne said something that just startled me and stuck with me. She said, “Social justice work is like science fiction, because we’re trying to create a world that doesn’t yet exist.” I went, “Yes, that’s it!”

We don’t have a language for this. Forget the trust, we don’t even know how to talk about this stuff because it’s never been done. We don’t know how to have these candid conversations. We don’t know what the “is” is. What is racism? I know you don’t know what racism is, if you’re going to talk about Black people being racist and reverse racism. You don’t know what racism is. I said, “Thank you Adrienne. That has stuck with me so, so deeply.” In my work, I’m saying, “Let’s become science fictionists, because we want to co-create a world.” And because what’s been given to us is built on a lie, is built on sand, and we have to co-create a new world. So, let’s approach this from a place of “give each other some space” because we’ve never done this before.

**Moayerian:** In your informed judgment as an artist, as someone who always says yes, how does art making help individuals and the community to broaden their imagination and choices? How can they come out of the box they have created for themselves and create a new one?

**McCord:** I think artists must create. I still sketch. I still draw and I still try to paint. It's not great, but I still try to do it because that exercises that part of my brain, right? I was writing poetry and stories as a young kid. I think that most people have some artistic, creative aspiration to express themselves. They just don't have the tools. And we've created this language and this mystery around the artist, as though the artist is somehow so much, so different than everybody else. They're special. They're genius. That doesn't help the everyday person to understand that the way that they decorate their home is a form of creative expression, that the way that they dress is a form of creative expression, that the culture of storytelling and family is a form of creative expression, that really, what the artists do is to help tell stories. I may tell them differently than you do. My form may be dance. It may be painting. It may be pottery.

Whatever it is, I want to demystify this thing about the arts and artists. I think, in a society that's built around transactions, that's the other piece that I think gets in the way, "It's not good enough to sell." It doesn't have to be sold. I treasure the gifts that people give to me, of things that they have made. I treasure those most.

**Lyon-Hill:** How does your work, particularly in the arts, connect this kind of cultural equity issue to art? How does it marry the two?

**McCord:** I think the catalyst for me was really that conversation with the officer from the Ford Foundation, when she so very clearly said, "I don't think there's any value in Black, Latino or Asian theater or arts." I think that was a catalytic moment for me because she was wrong.

There's also something in my nature, that when I see something where I must do something, I just, I am not going not to speak up. And then when I began to understand that it wasn't just her but there were policies. I was sitting on a grant panel with a foundation that was giving money for, back then, it was multiculturalism, to help theaters diversify their audiences. I'm sitting on this panel. This is the first time that the foundation is doing these grants

and they're giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to the large theaters to diversify. At the end of the process, I said, "This is a serious problem. This is what you've done. This is who you're hurting. This is the impact it's going to have." They came back. They had another round of grants for the emerging organization theaters. The grants were a tenth the size. They were giving hundreds of thousands of dollars, now, they're giving maybe 10, 15, 20 thousand dollars. These were policies!

When you begin to connect those same policies to the way you look at the inequity in our country, you can see a pattern. For instance, understand that coming out of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the crash that happened, millions and millions and millions of individuals, perhaps 25 percent of the country was out of work, bread lines and all. How did white people get from that to a middle class in 1950s? The New Deal. Roosevelt's New Deal. It included Social Security. The Southern lobby, the Southern Democrats, would only allow Social Security to pass if it excluded migrant farm labor and domestic workers. Who were the domestic workers and laborers, farm labor? Primarily Black and Brown people, and Mexicans and others who were imported to help work the fields. It excluded them, which meant it really included only whites. This is what I mean by policy. The VA bill, The GI bill, the two things that lifted millions of whites out of poverty, coming out of the Great Depression. One was the New Deal. The other was World War II. Coming out of World War II, the GI Bill. They would not loan money to Black vets to buy homes, outside of Black communities. Of the number of Blacks who were eligible to buy homes, I think it was something like one in 10 that were approved to do so.

I'm talking systems and structure. When you know that history, when you look at how the arts were funded (and you're giving millions of dollars to largely dominant-culture companies and smaller grants, if at all, to culturally specific companies), then you can see how these structures all play out. The earth, it's all connected. I'm connecting the dots because I've also been a student of history. I want to know how things happened because, as John F. Kennedy said, "Things don't just happen. Things are made to happen." These things were made to happen.

PART II: INTERNATIONAL  
POLITICS, DEVELOPMENT AND  
SOCIAL CHANGE

# Chapter 10: Karen O'Brien

**Karen O'Brien**, Professor of Geography and Sociology at the University of Oslo

**Date of Interview:** October 26, 2021

**Interviewers:** Cathy Grimes and Lara Nagle

**Cathy Grimes:** Your latest book's title, *You Matter More Than You Think: Quantum Social Change for a Thriving World*, is uplifting and intriguing at the same time. For those who may be unfamiliar with your work, can you share what sparked your passion to address climate concerns and how you came to consider quantum social change as a means for individuals, communities, and society to do so.

**Karen O'Brien:** I have been working on climate change research for more than three decades, looking at impacts, vulnerability, adaptation, and really what it means for humans. I think once we understand what climate change means for society, we really need to look at how we respond. How do we respond and transform at the rate, the scale, the speed, and the depth that is called for by climate-change science? That led me to think about, what is the role of our worldviews and our beliefs and our patterns of thinking? And when I came across quantum social theory and realized that there was a whole emerging body of research presenting a very different way of thinking about change, I thought, what does this have to do with preserving our climate? And that really opened an avenue of inquiry for me that continues to this day.

**Lara Nagle:** In your recent article in the journal *Ambio*, you noted that hubris and human attitudes towards natural systems constitute an impediment to progress. At the same time, the authors on whom you drew also acknowledged that humans are not sufficiently represented in ecological science. I think these observations suggest that we need to acknowledge there has been a shift over time to humans as drivers of climate change rather than passive recipients of it, notably from the Industrial Revolution onwards. Is there something unique about quantum thinking as a framework

for social change that is particularly relevant for addressing this dimension of climate change? There are all sorts of social issues intertwined and entangled, but I think what I am getting at is, does the fact that it has been adapted from the physical sciences make it potentially more convincing or theoretically valid to the broader scientific community? Or does quantum social theory help us think about our position within a global ecosystem more effectively than other social change theories or frameworks?

**O'Brien:** I believe that quantum physics itself has really challenged the very nature and understanding of our relationship to the universe. To me, it is fascinating because it has been more than 100 years since the key discoveries in quantum physics, and we have not really absorbed them yet as a society, or figured out: what does this shift mean? We use the equations and algorithms and things very successfully, and we have created tools on their basis, and that fact is interesting to me because it suggests that the theory is really being used, and it has a lot to say concerning how we relate to the physical world. It is almost like the entry point for quantum physics tells us a lot about our relationship to science itself, and it brings the social sciences closer together, from my perspective. This insight has a lot to do with how we relate to our climate and the fact that we [humans] are changing it. We cannot address that reality without recognizing that we are in relation to that climate system. That we are changing our climate also has implications for how we relate to social, economic, political, and other systems. I feel it is an important entry point to raising questions and opening conversations about these very important relationships. Quantum physics, when you get down to it, is really kind of mind-blowing. What is it telling us about the nature of reality? And what is our role as human beings in shaping that reality?

**Grimes:** You have talked about quantum theory as being around for a long time and you call it an entry point. And yet, it is associated with math, science, and education. And perhaps not everyone feels very comfortable with it. You mention quantum theory, and some people may be saying “whoa, that is way over my head.” And they do not understand how they fit into this whole idea. So how do we bring it down to a level that is accessible to everyone?

**O'Brien:** I know that there are books, like *Quantum Physics for Babies*, and things that are out there. But it is just really to recognize that electrons

and photons can be both waves and particles, that uncertainty is the nature of reality, that there is the potential that there are many different interpretations of quantum physics and no agreement on what it is telling us about the nature of reality. But I think common to all of these is that humans are not the observers and are not separate from matter. The title of my book, *You Matter More Than You Think*, is that you matter not just in terms of significance, but also in terms of substance.

We know scientifically that ice melts at certain temperatures and sea levels rise and that these are going to impact us. But if you bring humans and their agency into that, our observations and measurements are collapsing a wave of potential into an actual reality. Do we have some room for maneuvering to influence the future in a positive way? And to me, quantum thinking gives us a wider and deeper space for generating an equitable thriving world. Because it does not just go into a deterministic, “Oh here is where we are and here is where we are heading, and you do not matter” sort of frame. And I think many people when they are confronted with climate change, which is quite an overwhelming problem, plus biodiversity loss, plus global inequality, and pandemics, really feel quite helpless. But the concepts of quantum physics including entanglement and complementarity provide a language that is quite useful in opening our minds and hopefully our hearts towards addressing these issues. It suggests we are inherently connected or entangled, and therefore that we are entangled with the problem of climate change and with its solutions.

**Grimes:** You have mentioned in your book and in your presentations what you have labeled three spheres of transformation. And you note how our current society seems fixated on the very first, very central one that entails practical, technical, or measurable efforts to address climate change, rather than considering our personal and collective agency related to policies and politics, and our individual and shared capacity to influence change. Can you share what those three spheres are for our listeners? And then, can you talk about the noosphere and its relevance?

**O'Brien:** The three spheres of transformation is something I have been working with for more than a decade, and really understanding that if we say we need to transform, how do we do it, and looking at transformation as a process and considering the different dimensions, the practical dimensions, the technical and behavioral aspects of it that we can observe and we can

measure and that are very much aligned with the classical world in which we live. And we're looking for results. They are important. We have indicators, we have metrics and things, and yet, as we know, we are failing to meet many of the sustainable development goals and targets of the Paris Agreement. So, it is often just not enough to be focusing only on the practical.

Surrounding that is the political sphere, which are the systems and the structures. And these refer to social and cultural norms, rules, regulation, and infrastructure. These are how we, collectively, organize society. And this is political because it is not just an individual's choice, but a collective decision about what our societies and our species prioritize and how, and it very much influences the practical outcomes that we see day to day, month to month and year to year. And often in the political sphere, we can get very much stuck in conflict and polarization and talking past each other. And that space is a negotiated one and that is where matters can become very political. We also see social movements emerging from this, where people say, "Wait a minute. We can create different outcomes in different worlds."

Often, we are stuck in the political sphere because we pay very little explicit attention to the personal sphere. And by personal, I mean the individual and shared beliefs, values, world views and paradigms through which we see the system and how we relate and recognizing that we are not all talking about the same thing when we talk about a global system, or a water system or an agricultural system. We all draw our boundaries in different places. We all place ourselves in relation differently. And that brings us back to the quantum element of when we see that we are not just related to systems, but we *are* systems, and the individual is the collective. It is a different way of relating. And to me that insight opens up wider, different types of ways of understanding how transformations come about. Paradigms are very important. These are the thought patterns that dominate the way we think about science and society.

A lot of the paradigms in Western culture are still based on a very classical, Newtonian understanding that is very atomistic, deterministic, and reductionist. I think we do not necessarily take into account consciousness, free will, and subjectivity and our lived experiences and how those influence how we engage in the political and practical spheres. In global change research, we talk a lot about the atmosphere, the biosphere, the hydrosphere, the lithosphere, but we seldom talk about the noosphere: our

consciousness and mindsets. And they are really in relation to the biosphere, in relation to evolution. That is a realm that is not included in the forecasting models and I think that bringing that in is very important to how change happens and how our thought patterns shift and how we adapt them to the idea that we are changing the climate, that we are influencing the future, not just for decades, not just for centuries, but for millennia. And I think it is a shift that is very important to start to see that we matter, right now in the moment.

**Nagle:** You partnered with an illustrator, Tone Bjordam, for your book. And you said you found that your readers resonated with the images and that helped them comprehend some of the material better. Have you seen other scholars and artists partnering to take the language of quantum and illustrate it, making it more approachable for a broader audience? We provide a full research report in our work, but we also interpret it and distill that information into an executive summary for a general audience and we use infographics and visuals to explain our findings.

**O'Brien:** There are songs about entanglement and the artist Anthony Gormley has something on clouds. There are a lot of people that are expressing these ideas of entanglement, of uncertainty, of the intra-actions of ourselves, the idea that we are not separate, but that we are connected. So, I feel like the art realm gets beyond our struggle to understand it cognitively. Tone's artwork in the book really captures that nicely, through the colors and designs that show that nature is not something separate, but that we are really connected to nature, and we *are* nature. I think that is an important shift that we need in our culture because climate change and biodiversity loss, and pollution in general, are really affecting not just the natural world out there, but us as well.

**Nagle:** What is a practical system to think through a concept like recycling, for example? It can be explored at the practical or technical levels, at the political and personal levels, but how successful are our systems in delivering what we are intending with recycling? I read recently that only 5 to 10 percent of what is collected for recycling in the U.S. is recycled. There are several reasons for that, such as with how people contaminate the recycling stream. And there is no market for many materials and little incentive to recycle a lot of items that can be reused. The issue touches all the levels you have explored. I am wondering whether there is a similar model in climate

change that we could practically examine at all those levels. Do you talk about these different levels and how the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has thought through scenarios and modeled what climate change is going to look like?

Along those same lines, during your presentation at Brown University in April 2019, you suggested that we might not be asking ourselves the right questions as we consider climate change. You argued we need to ask, whether what we perceive as social reality is not what it seems and whether we are underestimating our collective capacity for social change. So, as you consider these examples, how do we prompt such a reconsideration at the community or local level? What practical steps do you think such might entail?

**O'Brien:** It is one thing for the physical sciences to say reality is not what it seems at the subatomic level or something. But then we confront the fact that, collectively, we have some very strict assumptions about social reality in the way that we are: “This is the way the world is, and these are the possibilities. This is possible, this is impossible.” For me, quantum theory and the idea of quantum social change opens and widens that space and asks us to challenge some of our assumptions and our beliefs about the way that the world is, and to open to “what ifs,” and to challenge those givens. Everything that is occurring right now is really an outcome of earlier beliefs and interests and the way we have organized society, the way that power relations have come about and everything. We do not necessarily acknowledge that these are just one possibility among many and that there are these little turning points at which we could change things quite dramatically.

So often when we talk about climate change, we frame humans as the problem, so it is very much that in a narrative form, we are the antagonists of the planet. We do not save ourselves space to be its protagonists. We are the solutions. We are the ones that come up with the renewable energy technologies and the different ways of organizing society, helping each other. There are so many ways by which we could act to place ourselves as the solutions to complex global problems.

In many ways we are still in a very technical type of approach and people reduce themselves to, “it’s just me, it’s just my community. I just have a

small-scale project. What is it going to matter if we do something here when Country X, Country Y, or Corporation X or Y are not?" We do not necessarily see ourselves as entangled with a larger system where, when one part of the system changes, the whole system, by definition, changes. I think understanding that fact lifts up the significance of everything that we do because we are entangled, not abstractly as particles, but through language, through meaning, through stories, through shared values, and through that context. We are really wired to connect as human beings and if we ask about the nature of social reality, we can ask very different questions. At a practical level, doing so widens the possibilities for social change by encouraging us to investigate the alternatives that are not right in front of us, but are the adjacent possible. Those represent an alternate universe.

**Grimes:** I have a follow-up question. In your book, and in some of your presentations, you have talked about the fact that often the scientific explanations for this, and the stories that journalists write, are based on past understandings. They are based on what we have done, the cycles that have occurred in the past, and they do not look forward. Yet we get very caught up in, "this is what it has been to this point, so this is what is going to be again," thinking. "So, why should I even try and do anything?" How do we counter that view to push people forward to thinking, okay, this is how it has been, but we have the agency and the ability, even if it is to start small, to make some changes?

**O'Brien:** That is a great question because we live in what we perceive to be a very linear world, and we want to see the results of what we do right here and now. As we know, the past does influence the future in terms of inertia in systems. So, we will see the sea level rising for decades to come because the water pulls heat, and we will see temperatures rising. But what we do now is influencing that long-term change. If we can really start to grasp that, rather than pushing sustainability off into the future, if we bring our pursuit of sustainability goals to the right here and right now, and really think about, how do we create that sustainable and equitable world right here and now, we can start a different momentum and move in a different direction. I think it gives us more power in the moment than the very disempowering narrative that tells us that there is nothing that we can do.

In my mind, it is about having to adapt to changes, to the impacts of climate change and we will experience losses. I do think we have to acknowledge and

accept and address those in many ways. But the possibilities that we have right here, right now are also important—I open the book by contending that this decade matters because the science is telling us that we really have a window of opportunity to maintain warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius or so. We cannot just drag the past into the future, nor can we just push the future off into the future. We must deal with it right here and now.

**Nagle:** And I think that probably for everyone, that means something different for each person, how engaged they want to be, how much of their lifestyle they are going to change. Going back to, what does it mean for individuals? What kind of changes are they willing to make for the collective good? So, we could have a conversation on that alone.

**O'Brien:** And I would say that it is not just about what you do. It is also about what you do not do too. If you say that you believe that you do not matter, that has huge ramifications for the way that we are moving forward collectively. And I think that is true whether it is politically or economically or socially. And so, at a practical level, it brings us not just to this idea that I have agency, but to the quality of that agency. How am I expressing it, based on what values? And if you are looking at a quantum system, it is the values that apply to the whole system. And that brings in an ethical stance of responsibility to the whole in a practical sense, it says that what I do right here and now actually has ripple effects in and across time and space, both here and now and in the future.

**Grimes:** That brings me to one of those wonderful illustrations in your book that depicts a ripple effect that looks like raindrops. Again, the idea of the visual giving us a sense of potentially what small things might add up to be. I wanted to ask you about your organization, cChange, which you have said is very active on social media and has attracted many people. Can you tell us a little bit more about what cChange is trying to accomplish and at what scale? How do individuals factor into it?

**O'Brien:** When my colleague Linda Signa and I started cChange, it was originally a research center proposal. And we tried to do this at the universities, but we realized that to engage society with the research that we were doing and to do research not as usual, but to go in a different way, we had to set up something different. And so, we started cChange in 2014 without really knowing exactly what we were aiming to do. But we knew

that there was a different message about social transformations that had to come out, very much linked to the questions of what is the relationship between individual and collective change in systems change? And how do we transform at scale? How do we transform systems and cultures? What is my role in it?

Working with schools, with municipalities, with businesses, with society in general to shape a different narrative and give tools, we do workshops, and we present the research in a way that is actionable for people. And in turn, we have really learned a lot about how, within a municipality, there is so much going on. How do you increase the impact of this way of thinking? How do you go beyond small-scale and large-scale so that every municipality, every business, every neighborhood, every school, can come to see that they are a part of this larger transformative change process? For me, it is like a breath of fresh air to take the research out and work in society for social change.

**Nagle:** I think some of our most meaningful projects are very much community-oriented and community engaged, because there is so much lived experience and knowledge and expertise in communities that we always end up learning something from any kind of technical assistance or research projects in which we may be involved. And speaking of schools and engaging the younger generations in this conversation, during the pandemic, we have read about several online citizen science projects, such as digitizing tidal records that are hand-written, and so you just spend time plugging the numbers in. Or scanning satellite photographs of the Arctic to identify walrus for the Walrus from Space Project. Maybe these are small, trivial examples, but again, they illustrate your point that we all matter, and these different activities could perhaps engage a broader audience in these conversations, especially younger people. To what extent is citizen science a form of agency to address climate change?

**O'Brien:** I think it is an important form of agency. And from the quantum perspective, if the measurement is what collapses the wave, then we want to look at the measurer and we want to bring science out of being something for experts to something that we do in everyday life: observations and analysis and things, even when you are making dinner, or when you are counting birds in your garden, or noticing when the first snowfall comes, or things like that. That is a vital part of our collective knowledge. For me,

climate change is a systemic problem. A lot of people pick this or pick that. And you can say, “Oh, it’s not changing because of this or that.” But when you start to connect the dots, you start to see the patterns and you start to see that the patterns are continuing, and then I think in terms of transformation. How do we disrupt patterns that are not serving humans and all species? How do we recognize that we have these impacts? Citizen science is for me a way of making all of us part of this effort, this way of thinking. We are all observers in that sense of agency. We are all collapsing the wave in a certain way. It is not just in the laboratories, but in life in general that science is important.

**Grimes:** How do we take that down to the child’s level? Because children have such a sense of wonder, and they are very open to so much. You can ask them about reality, and they have a million different realities that they can pull from at any given moment. So how do we bring children into the equation?

**O’Brien:** I think your point there is, they are natural scientists. You know, “Let’s put the fork in the outlet and see what happens.” Maybe we should be asking where we stop that scientific inquiry. Where do we break down the wonder the world represents to a child and how do we socialize children into a very classical world of, this is the way it is, and reduce the possibilities for connecting with nature, connecting with others, and really thinking differently about the future? I think there are a lot of educational programs that are working on that concern. For me, education itself must transform, if we would like to transform society, because it is the heart of where we are getting our ideas and experiences and how we are socialized.

**Nagle:** So, not at all trivial.

**O’Brien:** Not at all trivial.

**Nagle:** We are already experiencing man-made climate change effects today with increased flooding, wildfires, and heat waves. For example, a recent study by First Street Foundation reported that a quarter of the roads and critical infrastructures, such as hospitals, in the United States would be impassible or inaccessible during a flood. For a variety of reasons, including both choice and necessity, we continue to build and rebuild in areas devastated by extreme weather events. So, there are regulatory mechanisms

to reduce this potential, such as increasing the cost of flood insurance. But then at the personal level, how does that affect our agency?

Unfortunately, such policies may disproportionately affect lower-income households or communities of color, or others. So, how do the various levels of government regulation account for their implications for individual and collective agency while also attempting to regulate it for the greater good? I would like to think that maybe that is the goal of government? But again, there are so many examples of systems that break down when they are applied within the context of human behavior that I wonder about that assumption. And the reality is, we do not face equitable realities within communities.

**O'Brien:** And that goes into how are we designing our policies, how are we designing our recycling systems? It is not like there is one answer, but it is the adaptive dimension of social response that matters. Are we considering equity as we begin to design every regulation to recognize that for some people it is going to be devastating? And it really comes down to, how do we look at risk and how do we look at it when we are the ones increasing the risk of flooding, of wildfires, and other natural disasters? Like the idea of burden sharing through insurance, but also just restraining ourselves from where we might naturally want to still do the same thing that we have done for years, including living in high-risk areas, and doing high-risk activities that we know will lead to climate change and that are dangerous for people and other species.

Then, I think that when we start really to adapt to the idea that we are changing the climate, that we are responsible for the future, then we must think about how we design equitable policies that reduce risk and respond to the problems and consider the possibilities for other types of solutions. And I think that is something that needs a collective conversation about what we ought to do because, as you pointed out, a lot of the impacts that we are seeing now are much greater than maybe what scientists anticipated 30 years ago. For my part, I know I thought we would still be looking at the statistics to ascertain climate impacts, but now we know empirically that the extremes are more extreme than we imagined. And so, we still do not really have appropriate risk equations.

And I know for years that the insurance companies and reinsurance

companies have been concerned about climate change and some policymakers have been concerned about it too. But when you add people in and our connection to place and our connection to our existing ways of knowing, “this is the way it always has been,” how do we shift that? I think that that is where language and conversations come in because there is no simple answer to these questions. These are also very emotional as well as economic challenges. They are very complex and very human concerns.

**Grimes:** And as you noted, insurance companies have been concerned for years, not particularly out of altruistic apprehension about their policyholders, but more because it costs a whole lot of money to keep rebuilding in places. So, it is how you also change that incentive and that outlook to be thinking more in terms of the people and not just what is happening with your bank account.

There are many examples of governments using incentives to increase renewable energy production or adoption of clean energy technology, such as Norway’s tax incentive for electric vehicles. National Public Radio has reported that nine in 10 cars now being sold in Norway are electric or hybrid. And I know in the United States that number is going up as well. Although there are some concerns about the fact that there are not yet sufficient charging stations. Some of the things that you need to have that kind of switch do not exist yet. So, how do such incentives interact with or mediate individual political agency, especially in the context of quantum social change?

**O’Brien:** I think that the example of electric cars in Norway is an interesting one, from practical, political, and personal perspectives. There was an electric car in Norway developed earlier that never went anywhere. And it was not until in the political sphere—when cars in Norway, were highly taxed and electric vehicles were subsidized—that they became business cars. And so, there was an influx of electric cars, and they became more and more popular. More, people could use the faster lanes if they were driving electric cars. So, there were a lot of incentives that encouraged people to buy electric cars, and eventually there was more traffic in the electric car lane than in the other lanes. But, from a social perspective, those subsidies came at a cost, too. I read one article, for example, that argued that you could have paid people to take public transport for the cost of those subsidies. And a lot of the electric cars are second cars. People have two cars: one for commuting

and one to go into the mountains and things. I think that might be changing because the infrastructure for recharging has increased. In any case, electric cars are not alone the solution to sustainability. They are just one of them.

So, I think, when you get to that personal sphere, where it affects people, is when they start to think, “Oh, I have an electric car,” and they consider environmental questions as a result. It starts to put you in an identity like, I, too, am green. And of course, there’s the irony of the person driving their electric car to the airport to go shopping in London—so there are manifest contradictions.

But on the other hand, I have heard a lot of stories about people starting to question things and to ask, “How are we doing this?” So, for me, the phenomenon of electric cars driven by hydroelectric power is a very interesting turn. But we also have a shortage of electricity, and its cost is very high right now, which is threatening people who use it to heat their houses. And that is also because of the export of electricity to European markets. So, there is a lot of complexity to this story. And so, you need to make sure that you have the alternatives, that you are also developing the bicycle lanes and public transport. And where is the investment in trains, which has been severely neglected during the past several decades?

So, it is the idea that in the political sphere, there are a lot of different potential solutions, but what we prioritize as the solution arises from the way we see the problem. That will drive the way that we see the solution. And if you see that cars are the solution, you might have electric cars, but you are still going to be building roads and bridges and not investing in public transport or alternative ways of organizing society, so people can live more locally.

**Nagle:** And the people who have the funds and the privilege to buy that second electric car, and maybe have a little flexibility to change their behavior, are they really changing their behavior to meet some of these goals?

**O’Brien:** We have Ph.D. students working on these questions and investigating car-sharing, so I think it is a very good study area now.

**Nagle:** Yes. But if the source of electricity is still fossil fuels, local pollution has maybe improved, but there are all sorts of considerations to be sorted

there to determine net outcomes. Climate change is in the news a lot lately. The Nobel Prize in Physics has gone to a climate scientist for the first time ever. It was recently reported that nine of the world's 20 largest economies, including the U.S. and the E.U. have agreed on a plan to restrict methane pollution, methane being a very potent gas, more so than carbon dioxide and the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference begins in about a week as the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP) on Climate Change. I think that the Conference of Parties has met every year, since the 1990s. And the Paris Agreement was one of the landmark decisions that the group has made. And so, this year, as you noted, there are expectations to develop ambitious 2030 emissions reduction targets, or maybe 2030 is even too far into the future, knowing that perhaps we have about a decade to limit global warming to 1.51 degrees Celsius. What do institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the COP on Climate Change, do well? And what can they do better to tackle climate change from a quantum perspective?

**O'Brien:** I think there are different dimensions here. With the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it is the relationship between science and policy makers. It is a negotiated text at the very end of the research assessments that helps to give policymakers a state-of-the-art understanding of where we are. And then through the United Nations Convention on Climate Change and the Conference of Parties, it is almost as if we have the marching orders from science: this is where we are, and this is what needs to be done. And then it is up to the governments to come up with these agreements. Of course, everyone has different interests, competing commitments, and different ways of seeing problems and framing solutions.

But what I think is extremely interesting with the COP meetings is that they get a lot of attention. There is a whole civil society, and artists coming up and showing up. For two weeks in a year, it generates a lot of conversation around climate change and how we deal with it. That is critical. And more and more, we are seeing that there is a consensus among policymakers that too is critical. But reaching exactly how we will change societies to meet needed goals remains a question mark. How do we do this in an equitable and ethical way? How do we move forward and align our actions so that we can address multiple problems, including the COVID pandemic and biodiversity loss?

So, we have multiple institutions dealing with important problems, but it

all must be very much aligned in the same direction. And I think with the sustainable development goals and Agenda 2030, we have the roadmaps, we have the pathways and things to get us there. And that brings us into quantum social changes, such as bringing, “you matter” into the moment and to change. If we are entangled through language and we are talking different languages, we are living in different contexts. How do we come to an agreement, not just intellectually, but at the heart, that the future really depends on what we do right now?

**Grimes:** We have talked a little bit about narratives. And I want to ask, how do stories and narratives about climate change futures help us understand the magnitude of the problem and its impact on us personally, inspiring us to act without also terrifying us? Because again, we are reviewing reports that say, essentially, we are doomed. And then we want, through quantum social change, we want people to realize, that no, we are not doomed. So how do stories, how do narratives bring people into this and make them feel connected, that entangled sense that you have often spoken about?

**O'Brien:** Yes, I think stories are very important. We live our lives through stories. We are always telling ourselves stories about what happened this morning. We share stories, but then sometimes we buy into the story of, “I can’t do anything. It doesn’t matter. This is not important, or we’re headed for an apocalypse or things.” Every story has a protagonist. It has an agent of change and the hero and the hero’s journey is often the heart of the story. And I think that we must tell a different story about the future and recognize that we are writing it. It is very easy to extrapolate the past and the future to create a dystopian narrative. And recognizing that dystopia, for many people on the planet, it is dire right now. We are seeing that. And for many communities, they have been experiencing doing things very differently for many years. And in calling for stories to empower quantum social change, those types of stories are about our connection with each other, our connection with nature, our entanglement. They are not Utopian or “all is well” tales, because they do acknowledge losses. Being able to hold a both/and perspective and the paradox of we have no time, but this is the time to act—there are a lot of shifts that we must experience through the way we talk about climate change with each other, and to move from a very disempowering narrative that does not leave us room to make that difference to an empowering narrative that acknowledges the losses and the

importance of adaptation and mitigation, but also recognizes the essential need for social transformation.

# Chapter II: Francesco Manca

**Francesco Manca**, Retired United Nations official and Consultant, Political Analyst

**Date of Interview:** April 10, 2017

**Interviewers:** Neda Moayerian and Vera Smirnova

**Neda Moayerian:** How did you come to be interested in the International Civil Service? Tell us your story please.

**Francesco Manca:** By chance, for certain things, and by location for others. I studied Political Science at a university in Italy. It is a five-year course and the equivalent of a master's degree. However, in Italy, at that time, probably the options for me were either teaching or maybe journalism. For a young post-graduate, I was seeking other alternatives. I had a scholarship to obtain an M.B.A. and so I ended up studying business. I was lucky enough to be recruited by Procter and Gamble and that was a great experience with great exposure. I had a friend and a colleague in the master's program who was working on a project with the United Nations. He was stopping by Rome, and I said, if what you're doing is fascinating, I would like to apply. His thought was that the U.N. was not an organization that could offer me a permanent job and that I would probably have to struggle in coping with the bureaucracy of the organization. He was right. However, I applied to several vacancies, and I was accepted by the New York office to join the Center on Transnational Corporations. After two years, I had had enough of the bureaucracy and was ready to go back to Italy.

However, I was offered another job with the U.N. for a seminar in China and, while there, I was caught in the middle of Tiananmen and evacuated. When I came back, the person responsible for security basically asked me if I was interested in continuing with something that was not related to development, but rather more political, and related to elections in particular. I left New York to go to Nicaragua for what was supposed to be a three-month assignment to monitor the elections there. That was at the end of 1989. I ended up spending five years in Central America in Nicaragua, El

Salvador, and Mexico. By then the Department of Peacekeeping Operations had been created. I went back to New York and soon I was dealing with negotiations concerning Western Sahara in 1990-1991. Then, I joined the Situation Center. I had assignments in the Balkans and Tajikistan. In East Timor, I became the Chief of the Situation Center, and then I had another assignment as Chief Electoral Officer in Sierra Leone for the election there in 2003. Then I got an assignment in the Middle East as a Senior Advisor, and then in UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) as Deputy Director for Political and Civil Affairs. Two years ago, I resigned. Since then, I've been enjoying a little bit more free time, travelling, and coming to Virginia Tech.

**Vera Smirnova:** We were wondering, what is the role of the independent international civil servant in the world today? What is the role of the state?

**Manca:** I think that not only today, but always, there was a need for individuals who could see with independence and neutrality the relations and conflicts among member states or groups or political entities. So, it's a role that, if it was not there, would need to be invented. I like to look at the role as analogous to the referee of a sporting match. Both parties need to accept it as authority. It is not playing the game, but it is involved in the game because it is on the field with the teams. I think, the United Nations built on the experience of the League of Nations and learned from the shortcomings of the League to try to have a more robust approach towards international conflicts. The creation of the United Nation in 1945 was aimed at preventing the resurgence of war. In that sense, I would say that peace is one of the U.N.'s crucial aims and an international civil servant is at the service of the international community to support that goal. I think that unique opportunities arose once the Cold War was over because the international community looked to the United Nations to address issues that had been stuck for decades and to move forward, with some success, with some contradictions. Overall, however, I would say that those efforts reinforced the need of the role of a facilitator for difficult issues.

**Moayerian:** You have been working in many cultural, geographic, and political contexts. In your opinion, is democracy a context-free concept? For example, can it be defined objectively by the U.N.? Or does each context have different issues and criteria?

**Manca:** I would consider it a work in progress, in the sense that certain

definitions are accepted and then they become obsolete in the moment in which something is changing. Often, we take for granted a lot of definitions and even language. Today you would expect the definition of something in English. Neither of you speak English as your mother-tongue. You realize, as well as I do, how difficult it is to translate exactly the definition of a phrase in English into your own language. It is, not only with time, but it is just enough to translate a concept into a different language, that you open a Pandora's box, where words might have other implications, might mean something completely different, or might provide the perception that you are biased in favor of something or against something of which you are not even aware.

**Smirnova:** Building upon the question of cultural differences, in different countries where you go, how do you not allow for the imperialist agenda of the International Civil Service to hold sway? How do you prevent that from happening?

**Manca:** It's quite difficult as an individual to say, "I'm going to stop the agenda," or "I'm going to block this or that action or activity." You might be just a facilitator. As we were discussing before, there are measures through which you can mitigate perceptions that you might be biased. One of your initial responsibilities is to offer transparency concerning who you are, what you are expecting to achieve, and what tools you are going to use to pursue those goals. In my presentation before, I was initially talking about my background more from an identity point of view, rather than from a professional perspective, exactly to provide you with information that was not necessarily related to my capacities, but more to provide you a perception of my neutrality. Nationality, location, religion, to you, all these items, in a context, might mean a lot. Just imagine being black or white in South Africa in 1993 or 1994, or what religion today means as an entry point in a conversation, to say "I'm Muslim, Catholic, or Orthodox." Already you think you know the person more than you do. There are certain stereotypes that we carry with us that we need to come to terms with. It gets more difficult when these stereotypes are projected towards people serving in an organization that is supposed to be above the parties or at least at the service of the parties. Above is probably the wrong word, but to be the facilitator of their exchange, if the credibility is not there, the job is not going to work.

**Smirnova:** What tools does the U.N. provide to help to ensure such transparency?

**Manca:** Well, I think the U.N. has been working a lot to provide geographical distribution and gender balance. These are certainly issues, if not attended to carefully, that might be used to undermine the credibility of the United Nations and its civil servants. I think this is being done in such a way that should enhance the neutrality of whoever works there. One method that I would criticize, and I think is not going to work is to choose one referee on each side. In other words, I think that an effort should be made to find impartial neutral people that are perceived as such to work for the organization, rather than allowing member states or parties of a conflict seeking to balance each other by selecting one individual or the other. In other words, if you have a soccer match, it works if the referee is completely neutral, maybe from a third nation, rather than having one time, a referee from one team, and one time, a referee from the other. The second kind of solution would be polarizing.

**Moayerian:** What is your opinion about monitoring elections by, for example, citizens? Does the process work to ensure democracy?

**Manca:** The U.N. has been working with the principle of representation, elections, and methodology to monitor and enhance the acceptance of certain elections. Having said so, member states have autonomy to pursue their own electoral process, or the choice of their leaders. So being an Italian republican, with my background, I felt personally sometimes uneasy with monarchies. Having said that, it's not that I would consider places where there is a king or a queen to be non-democratic countries. Member states have to have the clear perception that they have found their way of being represented by their government, but it is very much a personal choice, personal as a nation.

**Smirnova:** To follow up on that last question, how do you go about it, when you see resistance from the country toward your role as an Independent Civil Servant? Resistance, or perhaps even protest?

**Manca:** For that I go back to the U.N. Charter, which provided us with tools with which to operate. Chapter 6 of the Charter assumes the acceptance by a country of a U.N. presence. In other words, the U.N. is somehow invited to work in that country. If the country or the situation in a region in a country, or in a portion of the country, rejects the international presence, the issue goes back to the Security Council to decide if they want to go as far as

Chapter 7 and say, it doesn't matter what is going on over there in terms of the legitimacy of the government, in that part of the country, or in that country, it is time for the international community to assume responsibility and intervene, or to take care of a transitional period. That has occurred, for example, in Eastern Slavonia and East Timor.

We have examples of periods of time in which, in a country or in a portion of a country, the transition was so difficult that the government of the nation was unable or unwilling to deal with it, and the international community had political capacity to reach a consensus and assume full responsibility. However, there is a risk, in the sense that responsibility should manifest, not only in the destructive approach of getting rid of a governor or a dictator, but if that's the case and the decision is, we will take care of it, then you have the responsibility to bring in the reconstruction, ensure due process, and conduct and oversee elections until you can secure governmental legitimacy and sustainable development. Sometimes it is a process in which you give local authorities increasing responsibility, up to a point, where the autonomy and independence are complete. A good example of that occurring is East Timor.

**Smirnova:** Can you talk a little bit more about these examples where you struggled with whether just to conduct observations of politics or to conduct interventions?

**Manca:** I think that would be wrong to put the expectation of that change on the shoulders of the individuals on the ground. In other words, this is the importance of having continuous communication with the Security Council and with member states, because, particularly when you move to Chapter 7, and this is one of the reasons why it has been so difficult to endorse or to approve operations under Chapter 7, it is really the international community that has to evaluate the information on the ground. Based on independent information that they gather and then they might say, for example, "OK, we think that we are in a mature enough situation in which, for instance, a foreign military presence is not necessary anymore to maintain security in the country." The implication of such a choice is that the country could now rely on its own military capacity to defend its territory. However, the country might still need the structure of an outside force to assure service provision. I've given you examples along those lines. Usually the focus of the international community is limited to a military intervention, because the

international community is concerned about potential spillover. I think, they should also be concerned about development, and for that view I go back to former Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

After the end of the Cold War, when peacekeeping became a more common U.N. activity, the institution developed its agenda for peace and one of the phrases that summarized that idea was, “there is no peace without development and there is no development without peace.” So, you need them to go hand-in-hand and you need to create conditions for a sustainable peace, particularly in areas where often many years of war had badly affected the people, the economy and even the values of the citizenry. People might have gotten so used to kill-and-be-killed that human rights might have been affected, not only during the conflict, but as a way of envisioning the future.

It is interesting to analyze the Central American peace process in which I was personally involved and how the first agreement in El Salvador between two parties concerned respect for human rights. That was the focus because each party was accusing the other of violating the human rights of the nation’s citizens. So, they all agreed that a third party, the U.N., could enter and monitor what was going on to evaluate who were the bad ones and who were the good ones. Sure enough, ensuring that all the violations were investigated or were brought forward for public debate contributed to creating a common perception of the situation.

**Moayerian:** Talking about third parties, what is your opinion about foreign countries that intervene in other countries to bring democracy? For example, your example about Lebanon or what we might be seeing in Syria, what is your take on that?

**Manca:** I think that such initiatives should move only with the legitimacy provided by the Security Council, in the sense that you need that larger legitimacy provided by the international community that is its highest representation, not just in terms of good guys or bad guys, but in terms of long-lasting sustainable solutions. Otherwise, the game can backfire, and you can enter a stage of revenge and escalation. One of the lessons I learned in my childhood, I was probably 15 or 16, is relevant here. My father came from a village in Sardinia and we knew and hosted a lady from Sardinia who had a problem with her child while we were living in a city some distance

from her village. She came to the city where we were living frequently to obtain care for her child in a specific hospital located there.

It was unusual to have such a guest. It was like receiving a relative who was not a relative but was a friend of the family. She was very different from us and she lived in a village, where for many years they had killed each other in revenge. Revenges in that town were often very violent and fatal. So, when I got a little bit closer to her, I asked her, could you give me a little bit more background about all this violence in your village? Who are the good guys, and who are the bad guys? And I still remember the expression in her eyes, looking at me as someone who was extremely naïve. I think she offered a comment which, while not using the word stupid, indicated that there were no good guys and bad guys. There were instead, friends and enemies. The lesson for me was if we want to get out of this game of friends and enemies, we need to work on legitimacy. And we need to ensure legitimacy for the use of force. That same principle must be ensured and must underpin when you get fined when you park your car in the wrong place and when people are killing each other and the international community is seeking a solution. Legitimacy provides a party with enough authority to say, “You are responsible, and we lay the blame on you.”

**Moayerian:** That’s my question, too. Let’s say we have an authoritarian regime that doesn’t let international communities come and intervene in the country and the democracy level is very low. What factors could influence that country to pursue a more democratic course? Is there anything that citizens can do or internal forces can bring to press such a government for such change?

**Manca:** A lot of these definitions are questionable, in the sense that you need to be objective on who is evaluating what, and to what extent the lack of democracy is defined by elections, governance choices, or whatever. It is controversial to use a relative dearth of democracy as a basis for the use of international force. It is not enough, in my opinion. Let me be blunt about something for recently, I have started to admire the current Pope, Francis. I admire him for more than the fact that he chose to have the same name as me! I think he has a positive constructive presence. It just happens that he’s also a head of state. I’m not entering into questioning the democracy of the Vatican, to what extent you could consider the Vatican a democratic state. Nor, am I going to talk about gender balance and the Vatican. However, states

are evaluated for what they do, not only for standards that you can use or manipulate to judge them in different ways.

As I said, I have a great admiration for Francis as a head of state. I do not suggest that government operates democratically or that the Pope was democratically elected. These are different things. I think the international community has to be granted a lot of discretion to accept, reject, and evaluate the behavior of member states. Since it is so sensitive, I think that the entity that should discuss these things is the Security Council. And exactly, as I was mentioning before, the Charter of the United Nation addresses that issue as a way of preventing the horror that the international community faced in World War II.

**Moayerian:** Speaking of the Security Council, what are the procedures of, for example, of certain countries vetoing specific actions or investigations? Who decides?

**Manca:** Well, veto power is something limited to the five permanent members of the Security Council. Those states use the veto during their discussions or as a solution to debate in the Security Council. The prerequisite is that the issue must have been brought to the Security Council, discussed by that body, a draft resolution presented, and on the basis of that draft, one of the permanent five countries can issue a veto. A lot of diplomatic work often occurs behind the scenes to gain sufficient consensus to avoid a veto.

**Moayerian:** What do you think about the state of democracy in the world today? Its challenges? Its direction? Are we going toward a more democratic world?

**Manca:** The world is not as unified as people might believe. We are talking of concepts such as democracy. Say, for the western world, democracy means freedom of speech or participation in electoral processes. For other parts of the world, democracy is linked also to resources and social structures. So, people in those countries might say, and this was true for the Soviet Union, “Yes, you can vote freely but if you don’t have food to eat what is your vote for?” Developing countries that have faced this dilemma have sought to combine the two things: the concept of democracy, in terms of participation and the concept of democracy as sort of equal access to

services and resources. So, at this stage, we are not even reaching common understanding concerning what democracy is about. My perception is that democracy is not the solution for everything. In fact, we have often seen conflicts among democratic countries. I think a lot needs to be done to create or consolidate a measure of consensus among several nations and then try to use it as a springboard to address conflicts that might be perceived as marginal but have the potential to undermine the international order. Ultimately member states are interested in ensuring some measure of order to continue with their trade and development. So, I think that we should work on already positive existing organizations and strengthen them with a democratic component to try to have a solid base on which to build international peace. I'm not very optimistic. I think many governments have chosen to polarize the situation rather than to seek common ground. It's a little bit like our family friend explaining to me as a kid there is no such thing as good and bad. There are friends and enemies. I would like the world to look more at principles and apply them, no matter who they are talking about.

**Moayerian:** Speaking of friends and enemies, do you think the U.N. is a democratic entity or is it just powerful friends getting together?

**Manca:** I think there has been a genuine effort to have representation for the countries in the world and for the citizens of the world. Has the job been completed? The answer is no. I can certainly see progress, and I can see some time and synergies between regional organizations and the U.N. Overall, with respect to the different profiles and values and expressions worldwide, I think it is true that the world has moved towards what could be considered today a better-defined common ground.

**Smirnova:** What is the line between war and peace today for the U.N. and, why has that changed after the Cold War since you have been bringing it up as a kind of a changing point?

**Manca:** I would say, we have at least two levels, many more, but at least two levels of focus where the U.N. can and should act, and largely is acting. The first one is visible; it is like the tip of the iceberg and is related to existing conflicts. Member state security is affected directly by their capacity to ensure the safety of their own people. I am referring to terrorism that has been more and more a presence all over the world, and the issue of displaced

people, refugees, that are directly affecting member states. So, you have that kind of immediate sensibility towards the issues that are part of our daily life. These are difficult to address, but gaining attention for these issues is easy, in the sense that they affect day-to-day life and are on the agendas of political parties. In any electoral plan or government discussion, you will have these items coming up. By far more difficult is the long-term work underneath that is supposed to address the causes of these salient conflicts. I look at the issue of refugees, but I realize that the majority of the people caught in conflicts remain in their native countries. I examine the conflict and the war that is causing some to flee, but I also look at the tensions that are fed by limited resources and agreements and distribution of resources. Often, when you project the effects of those a decade or two out, they look set to bring countries to clash with one another. So, I think that the U.N. should have a capacity or at least that the international community should have the rationale for asking the U.N. to investigate these potential conflicts and see what the possible options are to mitigate, and if possible, to avoid them.

**Smirnova:** Speaking of the migrant crisis, should or do the U.N. member states take responsibility for certain actions that they conducted in the Middle East that helped to prompt this migration wave to Europe? How is this responsibility being put into action and is there such talk in the U.N. today?

**Manca:** Your comment is a bit from the European perspective, in the sense that, you know, I am coming from Lebanon. If you look at Lebanon, with a population of maybe 4 million people, it is now facing an influx of more than 2 million refugees. So, that sort of percentage of non-native population on the ground is unknown in Europe. So, we are talking about a refugee crisis in Europe because we scream louder as Europeans, not because we have more refugees than other countries have. It is difficult because a lot of migrants also have economic reasons for leaving their homes. So, we are not just talking of refugees escaping from conflict. We are also talking of a massive movement of people who are looking for better jobs, and that trend includes the United States. In fact, that motivation is historically one root of the growth of the United States. The other issue is that individuals should be respected and should claim their rights as human beings. Having said that, we should not also go into an emotional defense of the refugees as the poor

persons escaping from conflict. Sometimes those fleeing from conflict had a big responsibility in instigating it. Let's stay out of generalizations, but let's ensure individuals the rights they have, no matter the conditions they fled. And the right of asylum is one of the rights of refugees if they are escaping from a situation of conflict.

**Smirnova:** Yes, speaking of the migrant crisis, should we be taking more refugees in, since Europe has a higher capacity to accommodate them, and how to do that? What is the U.N. policy on the migration crisis?

**Manca:** The U.N. is emphasizing the rights of refugees to obtain asylum. I mentioned Lebanon, because it is one of the countries with the ratio of population to refugees that is among the highest in the present crisis. You could look also at the situation in Sudan. On Europe, in my opinion, but that is not an official opinion, is that yes, Europe not only should get more, but should get better organized to receive them in a way that could create synergy with existing societies. But that is a personal opinion and having said that, I guess that they will come, no matter what.

As an Italian, I studied Latin and one of the ancient heroes was Aeneas. Now Aeneas happened to have run away from Troy to go to what is today roughly Tunisia, to Carthage. He then moved on in Italy. What more of a refugee profile could you want to have than someone running that way? His itinerary was linked to the war in Troy and no one stopped it. I'm not expecting anyone to stop the refugees today, but I think that there is a need to oversee and regulate their movement, and to address those they left back home.

If possible, we should minimize the communication of the message that a lot of people are receiving in these conflict areas of taking a risk to get everything or nothing. In a sense, it is not an easy call, but unfortunately, the present message is, if you are capable of getting here, you will get everything. If you are not so equipped, however, you will get nothing. That's what is pushing a lot of people to choices that not only are not ideal, but are far and away from being effective and efficient for the majority of the population.

**Moayerian:** Refugees and opportunities, I was thinking about the election in the United States. What do you think about it? What is the democratic future of the United States in your view?

**Manca:** I don't know, I think that the United States has been a model for

its principles, for its Constitution, for its capacity to accept individuals of different cultural backgrounds and mold them into a positive society. The fact that the three of us are today talking in the United States about this topic shows how deeply human rights and democracy is rooted in this country. So, this is a strong guarantee, and I think the U.S. has a lot to offer on that basis. Even when choices might be questionable from outside or from inside, you have this great opportunity of discussing them in public, on the radio or in the university or anywhere you want. I think that's truly not to be underestimated.

**Smirnova:** To add just a side note, a couple of days ago we saw Noam Chomsky speaking of the world order today and what he sees from his long history of working with these critical issues. Surprisingly, he had a very positive stance. He said the world is improving, and civilization is improving. Today, behaviors are getting banned in certain countries, for example, that 10 years ago could not even be openly addressed. So, since we are speaking about it now, today and here in Blacksburg, we can be discussing these issues with an Iranian citizen, a Russian citizen and an Italian citizen. Do you think it is a sign of improvement, or are we all doomed?

**Manca:** Well, I think that's freedom of speech and opinion. I'm afraid of certain stereotypes and certain opinionated sorts of positions. I have a concern, for instance, about the anti-Islamic trend that I perceive the in the West. Yes, I think that people should keep defending that space of talking freely, but I don't limit the sort of evolution today to that right alone. So today you have freedom of speech, but events are not really influenced by the debate that is occurring. Sometimes a debate is oriented or avoided, but everything is there. I don't see serious limits to the freedom of opinion. I think that that's not maybe the main issue today. There are other things that are happening and are overruling even the debate. I'm thinking, for instance, of environmental issues that might change the way we do things, no matter how much we discuss them.

**Smirnova:** How do you live your daily life now, and what are your plans for the future?

**Manca:** To start with, I decided to go back and spend more time in Italy, in the sense I'm still one foot in, one foot out. Right now, I'm a resident of Lebanon, but I'm preparing a base for life in Italy where I want to spend

progressively more and more time. I am lucky enough to have still my mom alive, she is 86, but after 30 years around the world, it is nice to have time to spend together. You know, another thing that I think is common to people who have been working for many years, as public figures, is to go back to your roots and to the small communities that provide you with an identity. The pace is far more relaxing, and you have time for simple things, for friends, and for things that cheer you up more than continuous analysis. However, the world today provides you with easy access to information, and in that sense, it's true that even from a small village in Sardinia, I can enter the internet and have the latest information about what is going on in areas where I've been or that I'm monitoring very closely. Plus, occasionally, I come and lecture here. I teach and I enjoy it. I have good friends here at Virginia Tech and it is nice to be here again.

# Chapter 12: Hamid Bilici and Mahir Zeynalov

**Hamid Bilici and Mahir Zeynalov**, Journalists

**Date of Interview:** March 23, 2017

**Interviewers:** Mario Khreiché and Alex Stubberfield

**Alex Stubberfield:** What were some politicizing events in your past, for both of you? How did you get into journalism, what was the calling?

**Mahir Zeynalov:** Whenever I meet a budding or aspiring journalist, the first thing I ask him or her is, do you have a blog? If they say no, I become very pessimistic. I really believe that the journalist has this instinct to get things off their chest. He or she is used to scribbling down anything, just announcing things, to make sure that the people and the public are informed about them. I think aside from the fact that we're really interested as a public in making sure that we hold elected officials accountable and making sure that the public knows things that they're supposed to know, it's also in our nature, I think. We [journalists] are born with that, with an idea, that we are hardworking people who really want to say things, who really want to comment on many things. I think this is one of the main characteristics of being a good journalist, also trying to get to a wider audience is a very important pillar of being a journalist. Unfortunately for my wife and my family, I speak too much, and I think, why do I waste my words and sentences? Perhaps I can do something better? I started with *The Los Angeles Times* covering elections in post-war countries. Then I undertook my master's degree. After that, I joined a Turkish newspaper, which was an English language newspaper in Turkey, the best-selling English newspaper in Turkey. I worked there as a foreign editor at a night news desk until the government came down hard on me because of several things. I wrote several tweets, I posted stuff that offended the Turkish government, and then, because I spoke too much, they kicked me out of the country.

**Mario Khreiché:** Thank you, Mahir. I have a question for both of you that I

would like to ask. What does a government need to do to facilitate journalism and how is that not the case recently in Turkey? Maybe if you could, was there a better time for journalism in your careers?

**Hamid Bilici:** When I entered university, I did not have any idea of being a journalist. I studied international relations and political science. I was expecting to be a governor, a state official, or somebody like that. At the end of my university years, graduate and undergraduate, there was a friend of mine who was working as a journalist at the *Zaman Daily*, who was happy with that, and he asked me to come and see the work conditions to see if I might like such a job. I started to help on the weekends while I was studying at the university. We formed with some other friends a group of young students who were undertaking research to be published in the newspaper(s) at that time, in the early 1990s. When I graduated from the university, I decided to be a journalist. I started in 1993 as a reporter at the *Zaman Daily*, which now has unfortunately shut down, and I became the editor-in-chief of that newspaper. After 25 years, that's it, I worked as editor, general manager of news agency at the *Daily*, etc. This is my short story of how I became a journalist. In terms of your question, of course, media freedom is a must for a functioning democracy. Without that, I guess, it is not possible to define any government or any regime, as a democracy. In Turkey, it had always been tough and difficult to be a journalist because there was no time that we had full-fledged media freedom. There were always problems because our nation could be considered for a long-time a quasi-democracy, not a full-fledged democracy. We had 200 years of modernization, Westernization starting from Ottoman Times, and we have 60 years of multi-party experience since the 1950s. Nonetheless, in those 60 years we have had five military interventions, which means a lot of limitations, a lot of hurdles for media people, especially, for anyone in the media criticizing the government view or powerful people. There have been cases of journalists being imprisoned, sometimes assassinated, sometimes exiled, sometimes the newspaper building was blown up. Very, very tragic things have indeed happened. There has always been a struggle for democracy in Turkey. Indeed, as a journalist I witnessed a lot of those ups and downs for the journalistic or media environment.

I thought in early 2000 Turkey had the chance to join the European Union and to be a normal democracy. In 2004, there was a very important decision

to start negotiations, and the Erdoğan government was a very important reformer and very important initiator of those successful democratic changes. When we came to 2012-2013, however, the Erdoğan government changed drastically. It was no more a priority to make Turkey a member of European Union. The Copenhagen criteria, freedom of media and the independence of the judiciary, those values lost their importance. Erdoğan started to turn Turkey toward one-man rule. From a quasi-democracy, Turkey has now turned into a quasi-dictatorship. When you look at the number of academicians fired from universities, not just what's happening in media, several thousand academicians were fired recently by the government; almost 200 journalists are now in jail; and all 150 media institutions have been shut down including, TV stations, radio stations and news websites. Unfortunately, now it's very difficult to call Turkey a democracy and the environment is getting tougher and tougher for an honest and critical journalist.

**Zeynalov:** With respect to your question about how governments can facilitate the media and the freedom with which it operates, I think it is obvious that governments are not going to facilitate anything for the media. Many, many governments and authorities are obsessed with the fact that the media are out there smelling blood, and this has been true for presidents at the White House, for prime ministers at Westminster, for Saddam Hussein and for President Erdoğan.

They are really obsessed with the media. The problem here is to ensure that societies have functioning institutions that will make sure that they [journalists] do not cross the line and violate their needed freedoms. As soon as such institutions are buried, as soon as the society, the people feel that the role of the media is dispensable, I think that starts the danger. I believe it's a golden age of journalism. It's very easy to be a journalist in Norway or in Denmark where you know the biggest news story is how a cat climbed into the tree and now cannot get down without assistance. Now, and perhaps for the first time, at least in my life, journalists have this sense of why they are doing their work. I think that's true for Turkey as well as the United States. Considering recent events, I think it's important that journalists are really feeling that it's a very important job they are doing, speaking truth to power, holding elected officials accountable. I think, this is the time when the role

of media has become much more important and to repeat, it's a golden age of journalism for that reason.

**Khreic**: So just to follow up on our discussion thus far, how can we identify the formation of an autocratic state, and can you point to some specific examples in Turkey of that trend? We've already covered the crackdown on the media and academics, but are there other warning signs that might be beneficial to know?

**Zeynalov**: It's very difficult to measure, label and frame governments and what kind of areas they fail in terms of democracy. If they are authoritarian governments, there are a lot of gray zones, too. We don't really know if the United States is a full-fledged democracy, since we have an elected leader, but he is doing a lot of things that might be construed as violations of laws. For example, you can construe his characterization of the media as the enemy of the people and attempts to put pressure on judges through Twitter as an interference in the judiciary, so we don't really know. It's very difficult really to frame regimes. Scholars are really scratching their heads to understand what type of character President Trump is now. Many people say that populist politics is good for democracy because it invigorates a lot of people and makes sure that millions of people start participating in the political process. Others are saying that yes, maybe a populist politics as we have seen in Turkey and in United States, has been good in mobilizing all these people who have otherwise not spoken for many years, but since the rule of people replaces the rule of law mindset in such circumstances, it also buries checks and balances, it also hurts institutions that are really important and actually vital or essential to preserve and sustain democracy.

In Turkey I think it's very important to media freedom and how the escalation of the crackdown on the media was also synonymous with how Turkey backslid; it's a kind of a barometer of democracy. I don't imagine that any country could have huge violations of media freedoms and at the same time remain a democracy, but you may have very free media and still have a lot of problems in democracy. And we can see that, in fact, in South Korea and in India where you have very vibrant and free media, but there are a lot of problems regarding democratic consolidation. In Turkey, it's a very tricky case. In Turkey, as elsewhere, we don't have a situation with tanks going to protests and killing people. It's a new fashion of autocracy, in which leaders, including in democratic countries, are manipulating one part of the society

and discrediting the media, putting pressure on the judiciary or violating laws and transforming the country and getting their legitimacy from the people with power. I think this is a kind of a fine line that these leaders are walking. There's no one answer to this question. It's really very, very difficult to measure the degree of the move from democracy to autocracy. It's very difficult to frame countries as democratic or authoritarian countries. It's safe to say that it would be false to call Turkey a democracy because what we have is only an electoral democracy. Turkey's case, I think, is new and needs to be studied academically because there are a lot of people who are experts who are still calling Turkey a democracy because we have a leader who has won election after election, and who is perhaps the most successful Turkish politician in modern times. It's a very great challenge.

**Bilici:** I think the independence of the judiciary is important, even as we fear them. When I look at what's happening in Turkey; the crackdown on the media, firing academicians and other civil servants could occur because the government controlled the judiciary. For instance, if media is shut down, television is shut down, there's a court decision, it is not by the police, but sent by Erdoğan, the president of Turkey. The control of the judiciary by political parties, the politicization of the judiciary, is critical. When I look at how the following exemplar case was interrogated, I think it was very important. There was a decision to arrest and jail a journalist who was head of a TV channel. The accusation against that journalist concerned his decision to air a TV serial. There was a talk on that TV serial dubbed critical of authorities and a government-controlled judge decided to jail him. The case was brought to another judge, and that judge decided to release the individual. What happened then? The judge who decided to release the journalist was fired by the government-controlled judiciary. It did not stop there, as they also jailed that individual. Now both the journalist and judge who decided to release him are in jail for two years. You can imagine how critical the situation of the judiciary is.

There are also, for instance, businesspeople, whose assets are confiscated by court decisions. When you look at it from the outside, everything seems legal. There's a court decision and things are happening seemingly in a legal manner, but if you don't have an independent judiciary, there is high risk that you will lose everything. When I talk, I think about the case in America, because there is also a concern here, pessimism here about the

direction of democracy. The crucial thing is to preserve the independence of the judiciary. If the American legal system loses that, then with that step, the populist leader, by using the courts, will harm any other institutions of democracy, including media freedom of expression.

**Stubberfield:** This is a fascinating perspective that you offer. I look at both of you, how you are, in a way, exiles or in a diaspora, commenting on Turkey, and so, influencing the discourse in Turkey, and this happens worldwide. On the one hand, we see that there is increasingly for many countries this role of the journalists from outside influencing their politics, or at least the public discourse in their country from far away. At the same time, your perspective would sort of make us a bit more pessimistic because we can't outsource a judiciary of the country. There is still a relationship between journalism in a diaspora from the outside and how countries function internally, which, is very difficult to influence if you just look at how, maybe the mood or the reception of German politics, for example, is in Turkey, which is arguably very bad. How do you see the two at work?

**Zeynalov:** Well, it is not easy to try to influence events on the ground. I think there is a limit to what we can do at this point because this is not Iran, Russia, or China, where you could be exiled or in diaspora. Trying to channel some of your thoughts and some of your analysis inside the country and make sure that the people are not and do not remain uninformed there, we're talking about Turkey, which has a very popular leader manipulating a lot of his support base. So, it's very difficult, even if you can't reach out to those people, to make sure that whatever you say is being well received or at least received there. Whenever I post something on Twitter or on Facebook or I try to reach out to people, there are perhaps hundreds of people who are ready to use all these profane words and there is a group that's very prevalent among the supporters of President Erdoğan who criticize me. It's very difficult, and I'm not sure how it's even important, at this point, to make sure that you reach out to the people there. And we are just ordinary journalists. We are dealing with a very, very powerful country using every element of state power to make sure that critics at home and abroad are silenced. They shut down our newspaper and imprisoned our colleagues, for example. We're the lucky ones who could get out, and we have our social media accounts.

Nevertheless, Twitter is being complicit with the Turkish government as it

tries to withhold the content that we are sending to Turkey. If you're in Turkey, you cannot access Tweets they verify as from a journalist and then block due to tighter control by the government. That's the only window of communication that we have with our Turkish audience, and it's been taken away from us. It's really a very daunting task at this point to influence or shape events there. We don't have TV channels, which I think is a very, very important force in shaping public opinion in any country. I have this theory that, if you control television networks in any country, you control the country. It's very important that people be glued to their TV channels, prime time, and watching perhaps five or 10 folks, as those are the people who will shape public opinion. In this country, for example, we have basically Sean Hannity of Fox media deciding what will happen and what should happen. We have a president who is watching that.

**Stubberfield:** What is the pundit culture in Turkey like? I think it's a very important aspect of American politics, how pundits create their own little worlds and followers who are absorbed in that, basically become blind to whatever else is going on.

**Zeynalov:** Right. Our people really love conspiracy theories and it's very easy to explain the meaning of complicated issues with such theories. As experts, as academics, as journalists, columnists, you go on TV and try to simplify things as much as possible so that every Joe can understand them. The problem with overly partisan people, some of whom are ignorant is that they are trying to shape events, dystopian events, as if there is a conspiracy going on, without evidence to back up what they are saying. Nevertheless, this sort of claim resonates well among non-college-educated male Turks, especially.

There are a lot of people in rural areas, who constitute the backbone of President Erdoğan's support base, who whenever they see a man or woman on television making completely outrageous accusations, statements, or remarks, they buy all this stuff. They tap into the sentiments of many Turkish people, some of whom have anti-western sentiments. The people are very hungry for information that flatters their prejudices. In this sense, we do have a lot of loyalist experts who are basically parroting the line coming from the so-called palace of Erdoğan. There are a lot of people who are ready to buy this. There is no one who can challenge this, there is no way that we can appear on these talk shows and challenge them. They're just having

these monologues with the Turkish people, and I think they are playing a very crucial role in brainwashing millions of people.

**Bilici:** Our reach to society is very limited; 90 percent of the Turkish media today is controlled by the Erdoğan regime, so they repeat the same propaganda with TV broadcasting everything, and for the remaining 10 percent there is always a threat of exile. Now there is a leftist newspaper that is part of the 10 percent of media that remains free. Its editor-in-chief is in jail, together with 10 other colleagues and an important cartoonist, the most important cartoonist in Turkey. This is the 10 percent that we have with whom to work and it's very difficult to reach the mainstream media because it is also under threat. There are lots of television stations, lots of radio stations still functioning, but in terms of substance, they are not doing journalism. They're just mouthpieces of the government. If they don't follow that line, their owners are threatened with tax inspections, seizure of their assets, all the usual brutal tactics.

Those who remain are leaving the country. Many journalists have left. Some of them are now in European capitals, some of them are in America and they're establishing websites to reach Turkey society. What happens the next day after they do that? Their websites are shut down. The reach of those new sites is very limited, maybe 5 or 10 percent of society, those with virtual private networks (VPN). With, social media, for instance, I might have more than 200,000 followers on my Twitter account, which is verified, but it is now blocked in Turkey. Turkish people cannot see it if they don't use VPNs. I had a Facebook account when I was editor-in-chief of the newspaper, but when they shut the newspaper down, they also closed my Facebook account. This is the situation when you are trying to reach your society. Of course, it doesn't mean that you have no chance, but it does mean that opportunity is very limited.

In terms of populist leaders using these tactics in society, I understand now better that for the populist leader, society is not 100 percent of the people living in a country, not all citizens of a country. Society for them is their support base, so their focus is to continue to gain the support of that constituency. They used politicization tactics to divide society and to create sometimes artificial tensions to continue that polarization. This is a very important trap. If you are in this camp, the pro-government side, you're a mouthpiece of propaganda for the government; if you are on the opposite

side, you are the enemy. The ruling party's line is, those who don't agree with the government line are either an enemy, traitor, or terrorist. This way, you discredit any other voice, any independent or alternative voices in a society. It's very detrimental to functioning in a democratic fashion.

**Khreiche:** To follow up with this discussion, what were the conditions that allowed for the transformation in Turkey and how can you explain Erdoğan's appeal? He was mayor of Istanbul in the late 1990s and now he's president of Turkey. And, as you've said, he's been able to hold power for a very long time. What has been so appealing about him that would allow him to consolidate his power like this?

**Bilici:** I think there are very important mistakes by the former establishment against him that made him a hero in the eyes of many people. When he was the mayor of Istanbul, he was imprisoned for four months. When he founded the party, there had been lots of threats against him by the establishment, by the military, and by the judiciary. Then in 2007, there were several attempts by the military to overthrow his government. In 2008, there was a case by the judiciary to close down his party. These people are religious people, for instance, their wives wear headscarves, but the secular establishment judiciary banned girls with headscarves from universities. Those mistakes of the former regime, or the secular establishment, created a psychology of victimhood. This was an important support base for him in the conservative parts of society, that is a very important element. Other than that, of course this is not a leader, a party, or a government that made mistakes from day one. In contrast, they did successful things, lots of economic achievements, lots of marketing reforms. As I mentioned, they were doing a lot of reforms to make Turkey a member of the European Union and Turkey's foreign policy laws were like a shining star until 2011-2012. He got a lot of credit from people for those achievements. After a while, he changed his priorities and he turned from democratization toward a kind of one-man rule. I see a leader using the ideology of nationalism. He referred a lot of times—and he controlled the media as he did so, to highlight that Turkey is returning to the glorious days of the Ottoman Empire. Every day, this is an important topic in Turkish media and in the speeches of Erdoğan, which are broadcast live almost every day by at least 30 television channels. So, this is the propaganda.

The third thing is the use of religion. Some conservative people, as I said,

were disfranchised before, persecuted by the old secular establishment. So, they feel that if Erdoğan goes and the opposition comes, they will go back to the old days of oppression. Of course, one reason why people support Erdoğan is the system that he established to subsidize people. Between 15 and 20 million Turkish people are subsidized by multiple means. Some of them are paid directly, some of them are given donations, some of them are given coal in the winter, some of them are given gifts of pasta or rice. That system is creating a clientele; you buy support by distributing benefits to specific individuals and groups.

**Zeynalov:** Just to add to these points, I think it's important also to highlight that there's a mindset among the electorate that President Erdoğan is invincible. No matter what he does, he doesn't fall. This guy has won election after election. His popularity never goes down, no matter what happens outside: financial meltdown, economic crisis in Greece, in Europe, in the United States, they have bypassed Turkey. Now, our economy is going south. Now it is sagging, and the local currency is plunging.

The people have this belief that this guy is the savior, this guy saved us. We had 10 governments between 1990 and 2001. In those 11 years, we had two devastating economic crises. We had a terrible earthquake that shattered Istanbul in 1999. We have had a lot of political turmoil at this point. When President Erdoğan came, he was Prime Minister back then, he was seen to have lifted millions of people out of poverty and fixed the country. In seven or eight years, he made sweeping reforms in line with European standards. He limited the role of the military in politics. He reformed many state institutions, but he also eliminated the powers that were checking his actual absolute power and he turned from democracy and started to transform the country. His electorate really believes that this guy will never fall. No matter what kind of tragedy plagues Turkey, Erdoğan will save them. Look at what happened last summer. The military coup happened, then we had several military interventions. But still he survived, and his supporters really consider him a savior.

**Bilici:** The weakness of the opposition is an important chance to continue this power and success. As I said, victimhood psychology is key for his continuation in power. One more aspect is, with control of the media, all 24 hours, you are giving a perspective of conspiracy theories to the people. Now I see people's minds poisoned with that kind of approach. It's not possible

now to talk in a reasonable manner with people. For instance, now the economy is faltering, there are lots of problems with tourism, and we default on policy, with the judiciary, etc. When you raise those issues, those with the conspiracy theory-poisoned mindset have an explanation. They respond that we are getting powerful, and the international enemies of Turkey envy us. They are creating problems; there is no problem that is coming from the mistakes of government. They are not responsible. Someone outside Turkey, the westerners, sometimes Americans, sometimes Russians, or whoever, are responsible. It's not possible to make Erdoğan or his government fully accountable for anything. There's an explanation for everything in a conspiracy-minded environment.

**Khreiche:** I think that can't be overstated. We have conspiracies here, that even if you have Trump in office, there are still pundits that will say, well, now the enemy is this and that. To be an appealing leader, you need to have a strong projection of an opposition. How does Erdoğan maintain this? If you believe in a conspiracy theory, the nice thing about it is that you can be part of the narrative, too. You can be right, you can have facts, too, you can contribute to that. How does that work in the Turkish context?

**Zeynalov:** What you just said is a textbook definition of populism, that hostility and suspicion of the establishment, special interest groups, corporations and the mainstream media, and you believe that there is an intricate relationship between these groups and minorities in the country trying to take away power from the people who are the rightful owners of the country. It's very true, from Brexit, to the Netherlands, to Turkey, to the Philippines, India, South Africa and Brazil. It's important also to highlight that these populist leaders are constructing imaginary enemies all the time, presenting themselves as people who are fighting against them, and presenting the image to their people that they are fighters.

President Erdoğan has been talking about interest lobbies targeting Turkey for a long time. He has also presented the media and other forces in the country as very hostile, and the judiciary and the military as forces with which to be reckoned. I think, it's also important to underscore the fact that the populist leaders have this mob culture that does not care about the rule of law. They don't care about rules and regulations. They do not respect them because eventually they believe that rules and regulations are ultimately rigged against them, that the system is rigged against them.

Whenever these populist leaders violate those rules, they don't lose popularity because their supporters believe they were installed to favor the establishment and not them. It's very true for Turkey, too. It's essential to understand that countries like Turkey, where you have basically kneejerk supporters, they're loyal, they never go away, no matter what wrongs their leaders commit. In these types of administrations, the people who are close to the leader are not getting closer because of competence, but because they are more loyal. The media, to judges, to prosecutors, to journalists, to academics are really rivaling each other to show themselves as loyal to the leader. That's a ticket to get promoted, or to be closer to the administration. Many politicians who do not subscribe to these ideas, really want to stand by and support this populist, because they know that this is a door to success.

It's true here in the United States, too. You remember when Trump made comments about forceful sexual advances toward a woman, that was the point when [then U.S. House of Representatives Speaker] Paul Ryan said that he would no longer campaign for candidate Trump, right? On that single day, Ryan's popularity rating dropped 28 percent. It's like in one night, 45 percent of Republicans did not support the once unassailable Paul Ryan. Since then, there are a lot of policy items that he does not support, there are a lot of policy items that many Republican members of the Congress and senators do not support, but they have made sure that they are shown as supporting the White House, because there are angry voters back in their districts who will not elect them in the next election cycle. It has been very true for Turkey, too.

In countries like Turkey, where leaders are very strong, it's very hard for other leaders to emerge. We had very charismatic leaders in the past few years. One of them was presidential rival Selahattin Demirtas. Where is he now? In jail. We have another woman, Meral Aksener, she fared much better in every single poll, and the government has done whatever it takes to bury her candidacy because Erdoğan saw her as a threat. Also, within the party, there have been a lot of politicians who really wanted to challenge the establishment and emerge as alternative leaders. Most of them are buried, most of them are eliminated. Ministers who even slightly challenge the president have been eliminated. It's very difficult to rise up as a leader in countries where you have a very dominant, powerful figure as head of state.

**Stubberfield:** We've talked about the dynamics of populism, especially the

nationalist component, as well as constructing enemies, both internal and external to the country, as part of Erdoğan's popularity. He's playing the strongman role. I'm wondering how geo-political actors such as the Islamic state and the Kurds have influenced Turkey's politics in the past five years or contributed to Erdoğan's popularity?

**Bilici:** I'll try to explain. Until 2011, 2012, the Erdoğan government had a very successful foreign policy, and they were giving almost equal priority to the east and to the west. Turkey was trying to be a member of the European Union, have good relations with America, at the same time also trying to have a good relationship with the Muslim world. That was in 2008. Then there was an important decision in the United Nations when Turkey applied to be a member of the Security Council; 151 countries supported Turkey. It was such a bright success. This is what I call the golden time of Turkish foreign policy. This success, unfortunately, poisoned in some way Erdoğan and his surroundings. This success led them into the overconfidence that they could rewire empires in the Middle East, that they could design the Middle East, that they could bring peace to Israel and Palestine. There is a statement by then Foreign Minister Davutoglu, who said that Turkey was responsible for designing a new Middle East. This was just in the days that the Arab Spring was emerging.

The Arab Spring increased that confidence because in the areas from Tunisia to Syria, the Islamic-oriented political parties were winning, or it sounded as if they would get the final say if elections were held in those countries. Erdoğan and the AKP party, his party, started to think that there was a chance to establish a kind of leadership role in the Middle East. Those Islamic political parties are really closely associated with his ideology in Turkey. That was, in my view, Turkey's biggest mistake. Before that period, Turkey was very popular in the Middle East. We did soft power elements like Turkish serials, Turkish tourism, intercultural relations, university student exchanges, etc., and those things were very important in helping Turkish democracy and helping the Middle East, as well. But after the Arab Spring, Turkey started to use hard power to influence the changes and to design, or seek to redesign, the Middle East, such as intervening in Syria. Turkey thought it could get rid of the Assad Regime and establish a pro-Turkey government in Damascus, but that step was beyond Turkey's potential. Turkey did not have that power, but the leaders of the country believed they

did because of their previous successes. Success sometimes poisons, and this is a very open illustration of that fact, in my view.

**Khreiche:** Do you think Erdoğan's project to pacify Syria and to get rid of Assad has put him at odds with the current Putin Regime in Russia?

**Bilici:** It created all sorts of tensions. Turkey, in this golden time, had a policy of good neighborly relations, a zero-problems policy with neighbors. It was successful even when Turkey was modest, when Turkey was trying to transform itself democratically, build its economy and have good relations with the whole world. It was a successful concept and a successful policy, but when Turkish leaders started to feel that they were powerful, as if the Ottoman times had returned and they could rule the Middle East etc., that kind of mentality unfortunately destroyed the priority of the Turkish government in terms of a European Union orientation, which was an important drawback for democratic reforms and economic successes. Did Turkey get support in the Middle East with that change of orientation from Europe to the Middle East? No. Then, the Arab Spring failed and Turkey destroyed its relations with key countries in the region, with Israel, with Egypt, with Syria. We came from a point where Turkey was admired by those people and by the regimes of the Middle East, but now Turkey had lost its appeal. Turkey lost importance. Turkey lost the values that made it different from other Middle Eastern authoritarian countries. Now, Turkey is getting more similar every day to the other countries of the Middle East. There's just not much difference.

**Zeynalov:** I'm a state-centric, political neorealist, and I believe that no matter what type of regimes countries have, they will remain fixed in their foreign policies. That is self-interest. They will seek hegemony. And considering that the Turkish people are an imperialistic people, have a nature that's characteristically imperialistic, they will always seek an opportunity to dominate neighbors, and that has been true for centuries. The reason why it was not the case during the past 90 years, is because we had a very introverted military, a Kemalist secular military that was really taught by our founder, Atatürk: You need to establish peace in the country, and you should not cross borders into other countries. We had a military coup attempt last summer, and most of the military was excised, most of these Kemalist secular generals were put in prison and purged. Now, we see a military that is in Syria, we see a very erratic president who's threatening Europe,

threatening Syria, threatening Iraq. Look we shot down a Russian warplane, which last happened in 1952, because there was an unwritten rule of engagement during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and of all its states, and the United States and NATO members. Today, this is something that Turkey is unaware of, and Turks do not respect. Turkey is ruled by people who are very romantic about a vision of a glorified Ottoman Empire. They really believe that once they ruled a vast swath of territory in the Middle East, that they could do the same again, but they ignore the fact that there is a very powerful force called nationalism that did not exist in past centuries but is very present today. There is no way, no matter how well you may have ruled those lands for centuries, there's no way that you could do the same today.

Iraq would be fine for some time if the United States invaded their country, but they would certainly not be fine with Turkey trying to establish law and order in their country. The Turkish government doesn't understand this fact. They don't really see the fact that there's a history between those countries. Whenever they really try to impose their soft power on those countries and, as you mention, that once then foreign Minister Davutoglu said that Turkey was redesigning, refashioning the Middle East, and once he said that the no bird could fly without our permission in the Middle East, the next month, I think the next month, four, five, or six of our diplomats were kidnapped by ISIS, in Mosul. As I said, I am a neorealist, who really believes that it doesn't matter what type of power regime you have in the country, your foreign policy remains the same. But Turkey is such an extreme case, domestic politics dictates a lot of the nation's foreign policy. Look, we are, at this moment, at each other's throats concerning Europe, just because we have a referendum coming up. President Erdoğan is blasting Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, the Western countries, just to whip up national sentiments in the country. We are absolutely bombing Kurdish towns and districts, just because we have several elections pending.

**Khreiche:** Can I follow up on the referendum? What is it about? It seems more important than you would think in the context of the last couple of months that we have seen. Why does everyone care so much about it? Why these political proxies in Europe and the Netherlands? Why is it so important for him that they speak to the Turkish people in those countries? What's at stake there?

**Zeynalov:** The referendum that will be in less than a month is a very crucial moment for Erdoğan's fate. In the referendum, if successful, he will be bestowed with sweeping powers, it will bury checks and balances, it will diminish the role of parliament, it will put the judiciary under the tight control of the president. The president will be granted sweeping powers, such as declaring a state of emergency or dissolving parliament. The prime minister position will be abolished. It's creating a presidential system, which is not similar to what we have here in the United States. We have a very powerful White House, but it's constrained by a lot of institutional mechanisms, in addition to a vibrant civil society, very powerful media, free and fair elections, and this is something that's absent in Turkey. It's very important that President Erdoğan secures votes in the April referendum, because it is the moment that he has awaited for many years, and because he's facing a very uphill battle to gain its passage. Most polls show that the no and yes campaigns are neck and neck, so Erdoğan needs to secure every vote that he can get and there are, I believe, nearly 3 million votes and 1.5 million votes are in Germany and across Europe that they can secure. Most of these people are really devoted supporters of President Erdoğan, especially those in Germany, in the Netherlands, in Denmark, and they really want to make sure that everybody's vote counts.

They realize that they need to keep continuing, but I'm not sure if they can pick up the pieces after the referendum. I'm not sure if Turkey can continue working with Germany and the readmission deal, the migrant deal. And Erdoğan himself, two days ago declared that all these deals with the membership negotiations with the European Union are over. I'm not sure if he can any more sit down with Angela Merkel, who was perhaps the only European politician who had good terms and a good relationship with the Turkish President. I'm not sure if he can get together Turkish foreign policy after destroying so much of the country's relationship with the European Union.

I'm not sure if he can reassert Turkey's power, with respect to Russia, because we killed their ambassador, we shot down their plane, these are the events that happen once in a century, right? It's very important to see that Turkey is becoming a vassal state of Russia and will just do whatever Russia wants, jumping on the Russian bandwagon and does not feel a threat from Russia, as a NATO member country. As Turkey is projecting power in

northern Syria, targeting a Kurdish group called YPG, while Russia is aligning with the Syrian Kurds, while the United States is partnering with the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS. These are all shifting geopolitics and I don't know how Turkey is going to navigate all these shifting geopolitical alliances there. It's very challenging, and I think, the Turkish government is now so focused on making sure that they get a yes out of the April 16th referendum, they are just ready to obliterate whatever respect we had in the world.

**Bilici:** There's an important explanation in addition to those, about why Turkey is now in conflict confrontation with Germany, Poland or whatever European countries. Turkey has been a part of the European system for 200 years, maybe more than that, and it means being part of NATO and being part of the European Council. The European Union requires certain standards of democracy of Turkey: rule of law, media freedoms. I think Erdoğan cannot continue being part of this European democratic western structure. So, he is seeking to find a way to leave those ties and put the burden on the Merkel side, and argue they don't like us, they deny us membership, etc. Although he has no real desire to be part of the EU, because you cannot jail 200 journalists and expect to be respected in European or Western capitals.

I don't know what his grand strategy is, but when I look at the coalition that he has put together with Russia, and the fact that he is always underlining that he'd like to join, instead of the European Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which brings together China and Russia, where there is no criteria of democracy, I think he is trying to use victimhood to energize internal domestic politics. At the same time, he seems to have plans, maybe, to leave the Western bloc to get rid of questioning by democratic standards, and to go into the other bloc that would accept the one-man rule and get rid of any standards of democracy. That's my fear, I hope it doesn't happen, of course.

**Stubberfield:** Does Erdoğan still speak for the government, or have the dynamics of political representation changed in Turkey to the point that he may not even have a chance of getting his referendum?

**Bilici:** I think Erdoğan has other goals. For instance, one of his goals is to be the second biggest leader in the history of Republic, after Atatürk, and he'd like to be the second father of Turks. He underlines that very often.

There's also another limitation for him, for his thirst for power: There have been two big allegations against him about corruption related to his ministers, his family members, and there have been lots of illegal things, lots of persecution against Kurds, against journalists, against allies, against many parts of Turkish society. Normalization of Turkey would mean very bad things for Erdoğan. Turkey should never normalize, for him to survive. If Turkey turns into a normal democratic standards country, people will start to question corruption, why 5,000 judges are persecuted, why that number of journalists are jailed, why those institutions of media are shut down? I think, Erdoğan lost the chance to accept normalization of democracy in Turkey. We are beyond that threshold.

That was the case in Syria. As a columnist who was following the Syrian crisis very closely, I saw the ontological problem of Turkey's and the Western states' approach to Assad. They were asking Assad to reform, to democratize. But, because he was representing a minority and he done lots of things to his country, asking for reform and democratization, indeed, meant getting rid of himself. Now we are coming to a similar situation in Turkey, which is very bad. Indeed, according to our current constitution, Erdoğan should not interfere in internal politics of his own party, but the critical decision in this referendum is whether he will get the right to be the chairman of the party. If he wins, he will decide who will rule, who will be the prime minister, who will be the next chairman of the party.

**Zeynavol:** Well, Erdoğan came to power as a champion of the underdog, and the question is, is he still a leader of the people who voted for him? I believe the answer to this question is yes. The many people who vote for authoritarian leaders do not unconditionally support these leaders, as good men and women. I don't think there were any female dictators in history.

This is true for President Trump. A lot of nice people who voted for him, no matter what kind of personality he has. Whenever you quiz them, why did you vote for this president, they say acceptable behavior and presidential conduct has changed over time. Now the bar is so low that it doesn't matter what they say, people still vote for these leaders because they believe that these people can "fix it," they can get things done. Those people who felt left behind are looking for strong men and women, people who are perceived as tough and will bring about the change that they have desired, for many years. They couldn't raise their voice to an extent that the mainstream media will

hear, that the establishment will hear, or the dysfunctional administration or the government will hear. That's why they resort to those strong men, to make sure that their will is represented, and their voices are heard.

It's true for Turkey, too. It doesn't matter for many of his supporters, as long as they can make ends meet, because the fall of Erdoğan is synonymous for them with the economic instability and political turmoil of the 1990s that characterized Turkey as a country where the people were starving, and we didn't have any sort of foreign policy. That's not true for Erdoğan. Many, many people in Turkey see Erdoğan as someone who can stand up against the European countries, against the United States, and who reformed the country in a fashion that many people, including those women who wear head scarves and could not study at colleges until five or six years ago. There are a lot of people who have hard feelings from that period. Whenever they think of those times, whatever Erdoğan says and does is very appealing. Erdoğan was mayor of Istanbul. He knows how to get trash picked up from the streets, how to fix infrastructure problems, and that resonates among many rural voters.

Granted, Erdoğan's government did a fabulous job in fixing those infrastructure problems. They improved roads and bridges, and people really give a lot of credit to them. Whenever there's a construction job, it also means that illicit funds are going to many places, because at the end of the day you deal with 30 or 40 different companies and it's very easy to make sure that the traces of this illicit money are lost, and you can benefit enormously from that. A lot of this illicit money went back and forth between the government and the business tycoons, and a lot of corruption. When we journalists highlighted that, we were shown to jail, and that's a big problem. For many of the voters, every politician is corrupt and it's not surprising Erdoğan is corrupt, too, but it doesn't really matter because he's also giving back to the society. That's the moral corruption. That's a reality that we must face; that people are not alienated when they see that their leaders are corrupt, if they give something back to the public, something that it believes did not happen in the past.

**Khreiche:** It seems the louder we yell against the corruption of others, the more the followers of all those leaders get away with it, right? Where do you see similarities in terms of Turkey and the U.S.? Is there anything that the U.S. can learn from the Turkish experience?

**Bilici:** We as Turkish journalist are both victim and witness of how populist leaders can hijack democracy. We have a lot of experience that we could offer to a society that is at risk. Comparing Turkey to United States in terms of democracies is not reasonable, because, as I said, Turkey did not ever have a full-fledged democracy. No country has a perfect democracy, but as far as America is concerned, I see the very important addition of institutions, the tradition of media freedom, freedom of expression and a vibrant society and independent judiciary.

There should be a very strong red line not to pass towards any kind of politicization of the judiciary and preserving the independence of the judiciary is also very important. The other thing is, the democratic countries, as I look at our experience, should not put themselves into a trap of polarization, because polarization helps the populist leader. You should not act in a way that helps the polarization. If a populist leader says, please fight with your neighbor, you should come together with your neighbor. This should be your action. The biggest mistake would be, for instance, by liberal media, by mainstream media, would be to put those people who supported Trump into the basket of his small world. That will be very bad. Today there should be a separation of mistakes by Trump, and those who supported him. It's very important for the opposition party, for Democrats here, to listen to why people supported Trump. What were the goals? And the focus of media coverage should not be the people, but should be the mistakes, whoever makes them, whether a Democratic Congressman or Republican Congressman. Those points are very valuable. In terms of the media, the judiciary, and the relationships between the government and people in Turkey, I think those will be studied more from now on. That could be important, so other countries do not repeat the mistakes that we did in Turkey.

# Chapter 13: Alia Malek

**Alia Malek**, Director of the International Reporting Program and Distinguished Lecturer, Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York

**Date of Interview:** November 13, 2020

**Interviewers:** Molly Todd, Neda Moayerian, and Andy Morikawa

**Molly Todd:** I want to start us off with a discussion of one of your recent *New York Times* pieces in which you reflected on the life and passing of your father in relation to the situation in Syria. As you closed that article, you stated, “This exhausting and supposedly difficult to understand conflict seems close to being finally over. Soon money will be made in many countries as the regime turns to reconstruction, which it will use to consolidate its gains, ensuring it remains in power.” So, to start with the recent presidential election, do you still see Syria’s future as depicted in that piece?

**Alia Malek:** Thanks, Molly. Love starting off with easy questions [laughs]. I think Syria’s future remains bleak, and in many ways independent of what happens in the United States. You have a huge part of the nation’s population internally displaced. You have millions of people externally displaced as well. We have seen no change in the regime’s position on whether it has the right to disappear its people, to murder its citizens. To date, there has been no accountability. The Assad government has with impunity murdered many of its civilians, used chemical weapons, and displaced tens of thousands. So, those things don’t change for now. And all those people now outside Syria have nothing to which to return. Either their homes have been destroyed or their property has been seized. These things will not really change if Joe Biden becomes a great president or not, but there are things in Biden’s power. One of the key foreign policy accomplishments of the Obama administration was the deal with Iran. And I think by all accounts, the Biden administration will look to revive some version of that. Biden has talked a lot about holding, about trying to ward off Russian interference in United States domestic politics. It is possible that Biden will also be more willing to confront Russia internationally in other realms than Trump was, as well.

Russia, of course, is a key player in Syria. The Saudis and the Turks also continue to play a role inside Syria. The Trump administration brokered a lot of deals between Arab countries: Arab Gulf countries and Sudan with Israel. We will see. Are they [Trump officials] still trying to close a deal with Syria before the end of his term, and what would Syria get in return for that? In any case, I think the opinion piece you are talking about, in some ways was about my father, but it was really about Syria. And in my view, the primary illness in Syria remains its regime. I do not see that changing anytime soon. Again, we cannot even come to a consensus there about blame and what is happening. We have still to pretend there are two-sided “isms” that also play a role here in media reporting of U.S. politics. So, I do not see Syria’s future as getting much better because of the Biden administration. But there’s always that possibility.

**Todd:** You mentioned in your talk the restrictions of living under a totalitarian government and what individual actors can do. And that prompted me to wonder, what role do you think civil society organizations can play in Syria in the coming years? And is there even space for these organizations right now?

**Malek:** That’s a great question. The thing is, the regime is not something that only had to start considering all these questions starting in 2011. This is a government that has now been in power for 50 years, 40 years at the time that the crisis started. So, the architecture that it takes to sustain its longevity was well in place. And the key element of that was making sure that there was no effective civil society. I did allude to the appearance of reforms. I mean, it was very insidious the way it happened in Syria. When Hafez al-Assad passed from power and his son, Bashar al-Assad came to power, he also married a very beautiful British-accented, raised-in-London woman, Asma al-Assad, who became the first lady. And she created something called the Syria Trust. And basically, any pseudo-civil society initiatives must pass through her organization. So, even well before 2011, when there were initiatives, when civilians tried to begin initiatives to plant trees, for example, those efforts were very quickly squelched and then co-opted by the first lady.

So, I think this is very hard for people to understand, but the regime was very uninterested in confronting people who were civil society minded. It was much more comfortable confronting Islamist extremists than having

to confront those people from civil society, because civil society activists are other Syrians, and they represent a sort of counternarrative to that which the regime has always put in place—that without the regime there to chaperone the different groups in Syria, the country would devolve into ethnic and sectarian conflict. In many ways that has enabled Syrians to think that might be the case, or, in any case, many Syrians had internalized that view before 2011, and especially in the last 10 years. What is interesting is that with so much displacement, there are so many incredible civil society initiatives happening outside of Syria from within the pockets of diaspora wherever they arise. Whether that is in Lebanon— I sit on the board of *Basmeh & Zeitooneh*—a Syrian-founded initiative to work with refugees from that nation in Lebanon. They have created schools. They have really looked at solutions within a really messed up situation in which Lebanon can barely provide for its own people, but they have developed holistic solutions for Syrian refugees. Even in response to the Beirut explosion, they were one of the first groups on the ground because they already had teams in place to help with shelter. So, Syria's civil society is thriving, but outside of Syria. Look at Berlin, Germany, and the human rights trials that are happening there, or the war crimes trials that are occurring. Syrian lawyers and civil society activists are pressing those. Syrian civil society is also thriving in Turkey on the border with Syria, although, the Turks have tried to tamp it down. There are great pockets of Syrian civil society in Jordan too. So, long story short, civil society is thriving outside of Syria, but is seen as one of the “number one” enemies of the regime inside the country.

**Todd:** What steps can Syrians interested in promoting human and civil rights take in their own nation? You have mentioned the power of the Syrian diaspora and civil society to take specific supportive actions on behalf of refugees. Are there spaces of agency for Syrians inside Syria as well? And what roles do you think international organizations can or should play in ensuring the safe repatriation of Syrians who elect to return?

**Malek:** Let me try to take that apart. Inside Syria, the regime controls many areas. Any sort of true autonomous civil society initiative is not tolerated in regions where it has control. That said, people must make the decision and are already making the decision of whether it is worth it to deal with the regime to get humanitarian aid to folks. I mean, that would mean accepting the fact that regime players will skim what they want from whatever is being

provided before it is shared with those in need. And I judge nobody who makes those decisions within Syria. On a much more basic level, part of what has happened in Syria is that the very fabric of society has been shredded. Syrians now perceive each other as enemies, as existential threats. There is a lot of sectarian discourse that you would never have heard in Syria before all of this. There's also ethnic discourse. I do believe that there is something to be said, even within families or friendship groups, for not standing for that kind of language when it is used or employed about others because a lack of human and civil rights can blossom when groups have been dehumanized. And dehumanization starts in the vernacular in our most intimate circles, whether it's our family or our friends. So, that is a way to exercise agency. And you can see that happening in Syria. You can choose not to hate, not to see your fellow Syrians as your enemies, but that decision is by no means automatic, as current events are making clear.

In terms of international organizations, it gets much more complicated. For the United Nations and its representatives who are working in Syria, who are living at the Four Seasons hotel in Damascus, who are still posting pictures of going to dinners and places in Damascus that no one else can go, are they doing Syrians a great service? I do not know if it is for me to say. I'm sure that for the Syrians who are receiving aid of whatever sort, it is important. But in an ideal world, this needs to happen in a place of justice and accountability, right? There is only impunity if there is no accountability and the whole situation becomes quite complicated.

In terms of models, I do believe that what is happening in Berlin, if you look at the German lawyers working with the Syrian attorneys to bring those cases, is incredible. I mean, that's the kind of support that is so much needed. And in terms of delivering aid to Syria without cooperating with the regime, a lot of Syrian organizations operating in the bordering countries have been effective at doing that. But doing so is getting harder and harder. As, for example, in the border region between Syria and Turkey or from within Lebanon. And, when the U.S. announced its new set of sanctions—I'm not going to get into the good or bad of sanctions— but part of the too-zealous enforcement of that effort saw Lebanese and Turkish banks seize the assets of Syrian organizations that were doing good or that were not on the sanctions list.

So, what can international organizations do? They can really help by helping

Syrian organizations continue to do business, including assisting them to ensure the security of their funds, because, in my view, the most effective responses have come from organizations that are either Syrian or Syrian diaspora founded. I mean, they know what the community needs and there is no overhead for fancy ex-patriate salaries. I mean, we all love those gigs. To be based in Istanbul or Beirut on an ex-pat salary is a nice way to live life, and also to feel like you're saving the children or whatever else your organizations are called upon to do. But for me personally, when I give, or when I fundraise or my family fundraises, we always do so on behalf of Syrian diaspora organizations.

**Neda Moayerian:** Based on that insider's view, I wanted to ask the next question. Journalists with limited access on the ground rely heavily on online reports for video and visual content for their stories. That reliance may create a risk of accepting a partial or potentially misleading narrative. As someone with political and cultural fluency and who has lived in Syria and knows the language, how would you say your reports differ from those who do not have such access?

**Malek:** I hope I've been able to show how it differs in my work. Political and cultural fluency, I would say, is very important for covering other places. But I do not think that's the only thing that differentiates my work. I don't look at myself as a reporter on conflict or a writer on conflict. I do not visit these places in their times of crisis. I just think of myself as reporting on Syrian life, and Syrian life has taken a very sad twist of late. And I think a lot of people come to Syria to understand, why is ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] here? What is so attractive about ISIS? Or why do they hate us? And I come without those filters. So yes, I come with political and cultural fluency, but I also come without those frames and those lenses because I guess it is just not exotic to me. It is just a country and a people, and they are living their lives. And this is the not-amazing moment that they are living through now. And those are things that I teach my students. I teach them to contest the very idea of insider and outsider and really to break down what it is and what the shorthand stands for. For me "insider" is shorthand, in part, for political and cultural fluency.

**Moayerian:** Have you experienced any self or external censorship, filtering, while reporting on incidents inside Syria or concerning Syrian refugees?

**Malek:** I think it is always tempting when people have been so dehumanized, or their portrayal or the coverage has not been particularly fair or humane, there is a temptation to overcompensate. Like, oh God, they just look like a jerk in that moment. But I think if you present people in their fullness, the good, the bad and the ugly, people can handle the ugly. It is not my job to do PR [public relations]. PR doesn't really get you anywhere. Does anyone ever really believe the PR? I mean, that has just been my experience. But I have also written about my family. And there are moments when that has been difficult. Someone on a panel once shared a quotation with me that they did not know the origin of—and I have not been able to find it—the idea was that having a writer in the family is like having an assassin nearby at all times. I think that is true and I was conscious of that, but my book is nonetheless quite no-holds-barred from the first line. It is frank about my great-grandfather's womanizing, for example, which I think made many people unhappy. But I just feel like I need to show people in their fullness.

**Todd:** Thank you. That's so important. I think the narratives we get via the news often do not depict people in their fullness.

**Malek:** They're either terrorists who are victimizing or victims. In one reading I assign about Africa coverage, the writer said that Africans are portrayed as objects of compassion, not as protagonists of their own story. And I think that's quite a difference.

**Todd:** Yes, there is space between the narrative of terrorist or victim, but those are the two choices we get. And the insider/outsider dichotomy we often encounter, and employ is very similar. You were the content developer and editor of [\*Europa, an illustrated introduction to Europe for migrants and refugees\*](#). Could you share a little bit more about that project and its goals, please?

**Malek:** It arose from conversations among a bunch of journalists and photographers, because one of the things that we all encountered at different parts of that massive outflux of 2014 and 2015 was refugees or people making this journey constantly asking questions such as, which country has the better schools? Or how do we get there? What's the best route to take? And so, as journalists, at least as international journalists, we were often not reporting, not creating, the journalism for the people that we covered. And this publication was an opportunity to do more of a social

journalism kind of project, to harness our skills in the service of people who needed information. And the first thing one photographer said was, "Let's just show them what they need for the journey." For example, they will need box cutters. But as a lawyer, I responded, "Absolutely not. No." So, we stepped back and asked, "What is the information that these migrating people need?"

I was really guided in writing this by the conversations I kept having [with refugees] on these journeys. People would say, "Nothing, nothing like this has ever happened in the history of the world. You know, I'm so ashamed of the places we've come from. Look at these perfect, idealized places in Europe that we think we are going to." And at the same time, many people in Europe were being xenophobic and almost forgetting their own history of war and displacement, which is not an old history. In fact, it has only been about 70 years. The entire reason the EU [European Union] exists was that Europe's nations needed to stop having wars amongst each other. So, we thought about, how can we make this book, as much as it will serve as a guide, also a place of recognition? And I had seen a lot of demeaning guides for refugees, like telling them how to use toilets and stuff, as if they do not come from places with toilets. So, this is a guide of which people can choose the parts they want to read. It also treats the readers as people who understand that there's history and who do not need to be shown how to use toilets. And we wrote to the readers in their own languages [*Europa* was published in Arabic, Farsi, French and English]. The English and the French versions are not only for people who are making the migration, but also for Europeans to be able to be reminded of their national histories. So that was sort of the idea behind the project. And I had this idea that I wanted to show this picture of people on the rescue boats reading *Europa*. I mean, it got around. It was in the camps.

You know, we included these beautiful oral histories. I love the power of oral histories. These are ways of having conversations between people who were newly arriving and people who had arrived once upon a time and had been there for a long time. And they just spoke their stories. When I present the book, sometimes I read from some of its oral histories. There was this one woman who had been a German refugee. She was in one of the parts of East Germany and she was ethnically German in the former Soviet Union. So, they were all kicked out at one point.

When she arrived in West Germany in the 1970s, she was mocked for her hair,

her clothes, not so unlike the way people were mocked for the way that they looked who traveled to Europe in 2015. So, difference can be constructed even where we might not see that there are differences. She went on to become a tour guide at the then refugee welcoming center. For me, the book was a way to ask, when home is unattainable, what are places that may provide recognition? It may be the ability to see each other in each other. And the Magnum Photo Archive is a powerful rebuke to the kind of forgetfulness around what Europe was like before it became the Europe that we know today. *Europa* is also available in PDF and Online formats.

**Todd:** The last part of *Europa* includes a section on hope. Can you share why you did that and what role you see hope playing in the ongoing Syrian refugee resettlement crisis? And more generally, do you see a role for hope in ensuring the human rights of refugees?

**Malek:** Did I have a section on hope in the book? Because I am not particularly optimistic in general. Was there a section? What do we say in that section on hope? I cannot remember.

**Moayerian:** I think it's the one that contains the narrative of the Afghan doctor going to Greece.

**Malek:** I mean, obviously hope is important, not losing hope is critically important. It is part of human nature. Hope in the ongoing Syrian refugee resettlement crisis, yes, I am hopeful about that. I think a lot of the countries are starting to see the benefit of having Syrians there. If nothing else, in Northern Europe, the cuisine has greatly improved thanks to the Syrians there! A lot of these people came over already educated. They are paying into their pension plans. This is what I mean when I say, sometimes it is set from the top. Angela Merkel has taken a proactive step in saying, "This is part of who we are going to become." And so, I am hopeful there. I mean, there are obviously a lot of pitfalls, you know, such as, will labor have a racialized aspect to it?

Are Syrians only going to be seen as fit for certain kinds of jobs? Will they be able to realize their full potential? Also, for a lot of Syrians, there's a lot of sex and drugs right now. There is an explosion of personal liberty, translated into people doing all kinds of things that are harder to do in more socially conservative cultures. And because they are subsidized by the state, there is

a little bit more room for that kind of exploration, let's say. But that is part of life. Do I see a role for hope in ensuring human rights for refugees? I mean, yes, we must hope so that we can ensure human rights. That's the rule for hope. But I don't want to end on too "Pollyannaish" a note, because I know we are in a sober situation, right?

The best question, or the hardest question I was asked when I was on a book tour in 2017—I phoned into some nice high school in Mexico, and I think Mexican students are a little more exposed to some of the things that are happening in the world than some of their U.S. counterparts. And this one student said to me at the end,

Let's say we were in Syria right now. Everything has happened that has happened. And you have a child who's our age. What do you tell them to do? Do you tell them to shut up, keep their head down, not rock the boat, and that way we can remain together, and you can stay in the country? Do you send them away because you don't want them to have to live with that kind of rot, of having to shut your mouth and not be able to speak and not being able to be free? Do you send them into a kind of future in exile knowing that you will never be living in the same place again? Or do you tell them what is morally right? And tell them to stand up for what they believe in, knowing you are probably condemning them to being detained or disappeared or killed?

That 16-year-old understood that those were the choices. And so, the selfish parent of course keeps the child close at home. And the more pragmatic one, the one who is willing to maybe tear a piece of them themselves and let their child go into exile to see them once a year at best, maybe makes that second choice. But very few people are going to make that third choice. And so, immorality and impunity stand. The only hope I have is that somehow all those people who gave up their lives and gave up their stability, somehow it pays off and there is ultimately some kind of accountability. Right? I'm sitting here in beautiful sunny Baltimore, but I think those are the choices we [in Europe and the United States] are asking people to make. And so, you need to be really hopeful to believe that we are moving past that situation. I mean, I have hope for people who can be in societies that do not allow themselves to go down that road, which is why the past four years in this country and this entire election period have been devastating. Once you destroy institutions,

once those cats are out of the bag, it's not a good place to be. So yes, I'm going to hope that this change in administration means a course reversal on those things.

**Moayerian:** Thanks so much, Alia, for your responses and for your honesty. In *The Road to Germany*, \$2,400, a narrative comic, you powerfully reported the nuanced experience of several Syrians fleeing their war-torn homeland to a hopeful, if uncertain, future in the west. Given your work on that effort, what do you see as the role of art in sharing narratives of violence, brutality, and displacement without diminishing the experiences of those involved, while at the same time raising awareness and empathy in your audience?

**Malek:** Good question. I teach my journalism students that if they want to learn about a place, they have also to consume the cultural production of that place: the art, the films, the theater, and the literature. That is obviously super important, and it is a place, in many ways, of collective memory. It's quite informative for the student of a place of which they are not a part. I personally am not interested in fetishizing violence and brutality. I kind of let the person I am writing about guide that. If that's truly what defines them and that's all they are talking about and they're in a place of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], then, okay. But I am not going to put that on the person I am writing about if that is not true to their experience. And I also think that a lot of times we think that refugees should sensationalize suffering and brutality, that somehow that will get people to pay more attention.

That's another thing we talk about in my classes: What is the difference between reporting from a place of sympathy versus empathy? I think when you try really to emphasize someone's victimization, then you are trying to play on that sympathy and I do not think that gets you long-lived, viable, and sustainable empathy toward those other peoples. It is sometimes the little details, as when I shared that detail in *The Road to Germany*, concerning how Yousef tried to learn how to swim on YouTube. For me, and I think for a lot of people, that lands with a lot more relevance to their lives and poignancy and relatability than telling you how a chemical attack stops your lungs. There's a place for all of it, I guess, but I try not to define people according to the story I want to tell. Let them define themselves and I will share that story.

**Moayerian:** Yes, exactly. I think that is why we use art to describe your work

because your books and your pieces are all so nuanced and beautiful that we totally understand it is not for a reason or for a goal that a specific word is there. It's there because of its natural existence. Have you been following another refugee trail recently? How do the conditions, laws, and policies that refugees encounter today differ from those that were in place four or five years ago?

**Malek:** I am still following the refugees with whom I traveled previously. That's part of my long-term reporting project to inform my next book. I was on Samos [a Greek Island] last summer on vacation. But I went to see what was going on in the refugee camps there, the formal one and the one that's called The Jungle, which is where more of the people live outside on the slopes of the hill. How are things different today? Things are different in many ways. A lot of those people are Afghans. Syrians got a privileged, expedited, welcome. I think people recognized that the Syrians were slightly more educated or had more money. They were seen as more desirable. But for all those Afghans, the United States had a direct role in destabilizing their country. I can, on the one hand, understand why the Greeks are asking, why is this our problem? And obviously the change in the laws and policies in the U.S. has exacerbated that. I think four or five years ago there was more of a desire in Europe to welcome them. And I think the mood has changed a little. And unfortunately, for those people who were in the camp that just burned down [the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, in late 2020], things are quite bad.

I should point out that there is another refugee trail right here in the U.S. of migration across our southern border. I think there's this dichotomy in people's mind that the people in the Eastern Mediterranean are escaping legitimate wars and that somehow the people coming across the southern border are not. But with a little bit of exploration, you can see that Honduras, El Salvador—these are places that have been destabilized by a ton of violence and these are also places that the U.S. has had a role in creating those difficult conditions. And so, conditions, laws and policies have changed. There's less empathy and less of a welcoming attitude. And unfortunately, what does not change is our unwillingness to understand our role as Americans in these places, these tragedies.

**Todd:** We hope that eventually people will understand, or Americans will understand, their roles. I guess I would think that's part of the reason that

we're in education and interested in writing and pedagogy. So, thank you so much. We want to move towards your memoir, *That Home That Was Our Country*, in which you depicted life in Syria in a nuanced way. In that work, you worried aloud that, "By going about our lives, we had become bit players in the regime's effort to maintain that everything was normal." And you continued by stating, "No doubt many residents voluntarily participated, hoping that by performing normality, they could will away whatever was coming to Syria." We were wondering, as you reflect on that passage, if you believed there were any alternatives to the reality to which you've pointed for Syrians who had decided to stay in the country.

**Malek:** The alternative was to acknowledge it and to be arrested. I think of a woman who wore a red wedding dress in the middle of her trial. The woman whom I called Carnations in my book and who tried to acknowledge the nation's reality by handing out carnations to people in downtown Damascus with tags that said, "Stop the killing" was arrested for that "offense." So, the alternative was yes, to acknowledge the situation publicly and then to pay the price for doing so. Another alternative was to sort of confront family, as I did.

And then, there are other members who also knew what the regime was, had always seen it clearly, but after 2011, had gotten the memorandum that the dissent was not going to be tolerated. And then there are people who I really believe have convinced themselves that everything was Islamist. I mean, "Fake News?" The regime started employing that trope in Syria a solid nine years ago. It is scary how playbook it can be. That's why what folks did this summer with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, refusing to go about their lives as if everything were normal after yet another killing of an unarmed black man, was so important. So, I think the alternative can be very powerful, if it's not a risk to your life and limb. The Black Lives protestors stopped the country from acting as if everything was just normal, for which we owe them a debt of gratitude.

**Moayerian:** When writing and reporting about the lived experiences of Syrian refugees, Arab Americans, and those who decided to stay in Syria, who have you seen as your target audience?

**Malek:** Truly anybody. I try to make my work accessible to both the novice and expert. I mean, there are passages in my book that no Syrian needs me to

explain where one square was in relation to another. But everybody wanted to read the narrative. And for the contextual stuff that was there, especially the history, a lot of Syrians do not know that information because inside Syria, history has been taught in such a propagandistic way. So now, I see anyone as my target audience. And I have been very grateful to find that the book has been embraced by Syrians as much as it has been by folks all over the world.

**Moayerian:** What are your goals as you reported the conditions and concerns? And have you seen any impacts?

**Malek:** What were my goals in writing a book? Telling you a true narrative and stopping a war. So, I definitely did not succeed in the latter. Just being seen. Recognition. It is such a low bar now, but I guess, yes, recognition.

# Chapter 14: Patricia Parera

**Patricia Parera**, Associate Director of the Virginia Tech Institute for Language and Culture

**Date of Interview:** March 20, 2016

**Interviewers:** Andy Morikawa, Anna Erwin, Garland Mason, and Vera Smirnova

**Andy Morikawa:** Please tell us what brought you to Virginia Tech.

**Patricia Parera:** Personal reasons. My husband obtained a position here with Virginia Tech, so the family followed. That's why I came here. I have a 12-year-old daughter, so we moved from Bethesda, Maryland. That was our latest post, and she will be going to school here. I started working and continued consulting with World Bank, from time to time, because I enjoyed the work a lot. Since I was here, I thought it was important to continue my education and so I applied to and have been accepted to the Planning, Governance and Globalization Ph.D. program.

**Anna Erwin:** We wanted to ask you about your background. Can you give us more details about your professional, academic, and development background?

**Parera:** I am not your typical development person, scholar, or researcher. I am originally from Argentina. My first degree is in translation and interpretation and teaching of English as a second language. At that time, until I was 27 or 28 years old, I was a professional ballet dancer. That was my passion then, and I will always have that passion in my life. I came to the U.S. in 1985, because I was accepted at Georgetown University for a post-graduate degree in translation interpreting. I obtained a position with the State Department through Georgetown to develop a Translation Division Intelligence Program. Then, I wanted to change my area of study and expertise and to start thinking, to have my own thoughts, and not just to translate or say what someone else had to say. So, I enrolled in the master's [degree program] in foreign service at Georgetown University, with a concentration in the economic development of Latin America. From there,

even before I finished my degree, I began working. I was employed first in the private sector with Price Waterhouse. There, I did management consulting that involved privatization of state-run enterprises in Latin America. After that, I moved to Italy and that's where my real development work began in 1993. I worked for the two major U.N. agencies located in Rome: The International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Food and Agriculture Organization, both at the policy and operations levels. I next moved to Nicaragua where I served as the Senior Operations Officer for the Rural and Sustainable Development division of the World Bank. We then moved back to Rome and then finally, we came back to the U.S., to Washington, D.C. There, I continued working with the World Bank, both in policy, but especially operations work in Latin America, and specifically in Central America for its Social Protection Specialists. My work dealt mostly with indigenous peoples, involuntary resettlement, and gender issues. Then, I moved to Blacksburg with my family six months ago.

**Garland Mason:** We're curious about what you bring from your background in arts and translation and interpretation into your current practice and development.

**Parera:** From my background as a ballet dancer, I bring discipline, complete discipline, passion for creativity and innovation, not just to look at things from one perspective, but to try and find different standpoints. I love to integrate different backgrounds, ideas, and perceptions to address and solve problems. I am very passionate about social justice because I come from a Jesuit background. I think all those values translate into my development work.

**Erwin:** What is your philosophy of development and how, specifically, gender and development work hand-in-hand?

**Parera:** Generally, I don't have a preconceived idea of development per se, but I do believe in the right of people to participate, to open the field by recognizing their value to society, even if they're not part of the dominant society. I believe development must be comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and highly participatory. To be effective, it also demands high political commitment, not only from government, but from the citizenry, from all stakeholders.

Development also must be practical, and you must have clear goals of where you want to go. To be able to do that, you don't do it via a top-down approach, you do it with the participation of the affected population and principal stakeholders. If you can align those groups around the same objectives, mission, and goals, your probability of success is likely to be higher.

**Mason:** Can you talk about the way that you include participation in your approach, how you view the practice of participation? What does that look like? What are the reasons for including it? How do you manage the possibility for tyranny or manipulation in the practice of participation?

**Parera:** Before I started working in development, I was completely ignorant of all these concepts. I was in a different world, right? I started working in development and I started my first real experience, where I discovered my second passion, after ballet. When I moved to Italy and started working for the International Fund for Agricultural development, I was assigned to prepare all the background papers and research for the first Women's Conference in Beijing. That was in 1995, to give you an idea of when this occurred. I became very curious and involved not only with gender issues, but also, more generally, matters of social exclusion or inclusion. From there I began to work with large international organizations on efforts to improve the participation of vulnerable groups in their activities.

The World Bank and several other primary U.N. agencies, such as IFAD [International Fund for Agricultural Development] and FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization], do not work directly with communities; they work with governments. It's logical because they provide loans, grants, or technical assistance. Their main counterparts are governments. Nonetheless, there is a real need to reach the people. The target population is always communities and the people who make up those communities. Basically, I learned how participation works initially by reading a book published in 2003, by the World Bank, called *The Participation Sourcebook*. It was amazing how much I learned from that text. I personally like guidelines such as those the *Sourcebook* offered, because people have already done the work and there is a way to do it and there is a method that has proven effective and then you can improve, innovate or whatever you wish, but they allow you to start from somewhere.

I was assigned to a project that I did not have any knowledge of in Argentina, which was a shared effort among the World Bank, FAO, and the Global Environment Facility. The initiative sought to establish national parks and protected areas in Argentina. I was the project's social scientist, and my role was to make sure that we were not affecting local populations in a negative way. This was not easy, as plans called for some citizen relocation and resettlement. I learned by doing, basically, from researching, and talking to people who had been involved previously in participatory approaches. To me, the most important way of having a project be truly participatory is involving the people who are the target of your project. You go initially with consultations, and they have to be truly interactive consultations, where you do not just ask questions, but try to get the knowledge that they bring to the projects, then work with the affected populations to find the best way to design the project, the best way to implement it, and to get them involved in all its the stages. Those include: identification, design, implementation, supervision and final stages, too. We all want to belong; when those you work with perceive genuinely that they have been considered, that they are respected and that they are part of their own development, then there are going to be more possibilities for success; the impact is going to be greater.

**Mason:** There have been a lot of accusations about participation being tyrannical, of a potential for manipulation when participation is high, and that the outcomes people claim participation might result in are overly optimistic or grandiose. I was wondering how you incorporate or how you counter the possibility of manipulation in your approach, or claims that participation might be a pretense, especially given that there are goals that the World Bank holds for these people, for these outcomes and that meanwhile, these individuals might have their own goals that they've already developed, when they're coming into these projects. That is, when you're including the participation of the people, but the goals for an initiative might already be determined, how do you make sure that the engagement is not manipulative in such a way that you're leading the people to a particular set of goals, for example?

**Parera:** I have to say that in my almost 20 years of experience, I personally have not been involved in any project where we've manipulated the participation or consultation process. I'm sure that there are cases, but I am unaware of any at the World Bank.

**Mason:** The idea of manipulation isn't necessarily overt. It's just the idea that the power differential, for example, between a development practitioner and an indigenous person who hasn't had access to formal education, can itself be a manipulated relationship.

**Parera:** I think, if you're in this business of development, you're not going with the objective of trying to be an arrogant, know-everything development practitioner. To give you an example, the way I work, and we work at the World Bank, with indigenous peoples in Central America, specifically Honduras, Bolivia and Nicaragua. First, you have a language barrier. Among the Miskitos, the Miangnas, Quechuas of Bolivia, there are very few within the community that speak Spanish. That's your first barrier. You have to have trust. They have to have trust in us, the developers, and we have to have trust in them, the community, because we don't do any projects without their participation from the very beginning. We have clear guidelines. If you are a good social scientist, you don't develop your own questionnaires, service, or focus groups to try to get the answers that you want. If you are a responsible professional, you do it without trying to get pre-made answers.

All the projects, for instance, on the Caribbean coast and Nicaragua, where we used focus groups or had meetings, first to present the projects, to hear from them, what we should consider, what their needs were, we had to rely on a translator, who was generally, not in all the cases, but most, of the indigenous people themselves. And that is a requirement for the World Bank, and before that rule took effect, you could just have conversations with the leaders of the community. But we know that leaders don't always represent the interests of their communities. So, the Bank now requires that it's not only the leaders that are represented in dialogues, but the members of the community itself.

We must trust someone, right? We had people from the community, and generally in my experience they were the teachers, and generally were women, or advocates for specific ideas. These days the consultation process, with all the social media and digital devices that you have, they film absolutely everything, they record, the people from the community, from their own local governments, they record. They want to have that testimony, for in the future. Everything the World Bank has done on the coast of Nicaragua has been produced in Spanish and in the native languages of the indigenous peoples. Conservation projects or technical assistance were

also often broadcast by radio. Radio is the main source of information and communication for these groups. They produce posters that they put in their *caldias*, where the mayor is, because that's where they go, or you have identified where the people have their meetings, that's how you do it. I think, in everything you do, there is a very important element of trust and if you don't have trust— I frankly don't believe that there has been manipulation in the work that I have been involved in or know about that the Bank has undertaken.

There are also very specific requirements that you must show. All the projects have indicators. When you design your project, you work on measures that you are going to monitor. When you go with your supervision missions, you go to the government, because the government is the formal representative of the populations receiving assistance, but they have to present you with all the statistics concerning their efforts, right? What's the result of this activity and did you comply with the indicators? If they didn't comply, they don't get the development funds. It's all conditional on getting results.

To give you an example: in all the World Bank projects—this is because we have learned, and they have learned—there are required indicators that are not negotiable. When you work with indigenous people, you work with a development project and where there are indigenous peoples, you must have a percentage of population from those groups that have to be beneficiaries of the of the project, and it is 20 percent of the population initially. And within the indigenous peoples we have another indicator, you have to have women. Women must be beneficiaries. What you do, you have the indicator, and you negotiate everything, obviously. The team that designs the project is multidisciplinary. It includes gender experts, those with social experience, agricultural economists, etc., depending on the project. When you go back, if it's a well-designed project and you have a good team, you have constant communication, and you have a very fluid set of feedback mechanisms. You have people who represent the Bank in the country, the operations officers, and you have constant communication because you need to know if something is not working. The sooner you have that flag that something is not working, the better, because if you don't have that, then comes the end of the project and you didn't comply. When you do not comply, you fall short of a requirement for the Bank, but in the end, it's a loss for the country and

the people. The Bank is very strict. You have to trust the data you gather and the measures you use. U.N. agencies, including the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, provide a lot of technical assistance and that experience has helped them to develop the measures to know what you're measuring. Your measurements are just flags, symptoms of something.

**Vera Smirnova:** Going back to the global justice question related to policy choices, you mentioned involuntary settlement plans that you took part in. We all know that the global south is experiencing a rise of speculative acquisitions of agricultural land, or as we say, landgrabs. What kind of actions, based on your years of experience in the World Bank, in Latin America in particular, are being undertaken to provide security to the local communities against forced evictions in particular?

**Parera:** Again, with the World Bank, as part of the social safeguards, we have specific policies that deal with involuntary resettlement; we have them because we learned from the past and we know from experience that there were a lot of displacements and evictions for which people were not compensated. They did not consider their livelihoods. The government wanted to build a dam or build a road. This was many years ago, and probably there was not enough consideration of environmental and social impacts. It was not only the World Bank. The major international organizations have since gone through a very serious process of developing guidelines, what to do or what not to do. For involuntary resettlement, the policy is very specific. Again, the International Finance Corporation has an excellent source book on it and the World Bank as well. The first thing, when you do your assessment, and you identify that there are people going to be affected by a project, you are required to establish whether those individuals or groups are affected because there is acquisition of land or any other asset. It can be cultural or environmental. You have to identify what those losses will be, and the people have to be compensated for them economically, that is, with money. Not only that, if they must be moved, there has to be consent, they have to agree. Once you move that population, it must be to a place that is like the environment and the place from which they came in terms of social conditions and economic standards, etc. The new locations need to preserve the main sources of livelihoods for those communities, and also their social fabrics. You cannot move communities from purely Miagna territory to Miskito territory, for example. It would not work at all. All those

things must be considered and the policy says that they have to be at the same level as when the resettlement took place or better off, and in general, my experience and what I have seen is that they have been better off.

**Smirnova:** So, the current communities have what kind of security of land tenure, in particular, if they are smallholder farmers if they use their agricultural land for production?

**Parera:** In which country? Every country is completely different in terms of land tenure systems. In Nicaragua, for example, the indigenous territories of the Caribbean coast do not have title to the land they have farmed. I mean there was no land registry in Nicaragua, until 2006. One of the reasons, and maybe I shouldn't say it, one of the reasons there is no interest in having land registry is, it allows for corruption. It's so much easier to take up land that is not yours if you don't have a registry. There was a whole process of negotiation about it, and I was involved in the facilitation of dialogue between the different political parties, and this was under the Belanos Administration, it was from 2002 to 2006. This was sponsored by the World Bank, and we used to have meetings every week where we would have representatives of the Liberals, Sandinistas, Conservatives, all the political parties, and the indigenous people's territories to consider the proposed law. The law was developed, but it was pending. Finally, they approved the law, there is a land registry now in Nicaragua. We managed to do it for the indigenous territory. It was very risky and there was conflict, people were threatened, but with the support of the Bank, the political commitment of the government and the involvement of the indigenous territories, they managed to issue 17 titles. There are now 17 territories that have legal title to their land and that's an amazing achievement for them. As I said before, it's not the only necessary thing for development. Now they need resources to manage their land, they need the technical know-how, they need financial services, and they need everything involved in making the land productive.

Then you have the other cases like that of central Nicaragua, not the coast, where some groups have identified themselves as indigenous, but they are not recognized as such by the government. They have customary attachment to the land, titles issued by the Spanish king at that time. Again, it depends on which country and which groups are being considered.

**Erwin:** I'm curious about the Myanas. Could you speak in a little bit in more

detail about the international court process that the Myanas went through to obtain that land tenure, specifically, how the justice system works at the international level?

**Parera:** I'm not in a position to talk about the process because I was not involved. This is generally what happened: The Myanas had a claim to their land, but it was not accepted or respected by the central government. There are autonomous regions in Nicaragua in addition to the central government. They brought the case to the international court with the help of several NGOs and some international organizations, too. They brought the case to the International Court, and they won. They were highly organized, and they were threatened. It was a long process.

**Erwin:** I'm curious to know about the implications for dignity of the people that are being resettled, and how you reconcile those two things that are occurring simultaneously: the promotion of dignity and the perceived need to resettle these people?

**Parera:** It's very difficult, but one must ask oneself, "what's the best?" Nothing is perfect, right? What is the best from a public goods perspective? Who is benefiting? You ask if a project is necessary because it is going to benefit, it is going to have a positive impact on the environment, populations, or improving economic standards, etc. But there are always tradeoffs and making those choices can be terrible. There are winners and losers. You try to avoid imposing losses. The question of dignity is exactly what we were talking before. I mean, they, whoever it is, indigenous and non-indigenous, must be respected. They have their own norms and cultures, that is when you try to compensate them; not only financially, realizing that it is not voluntary, it is the result of policy. Those affected must be moved to a place where their livelihoods can be restored and can be the same or better off than before. If you are a small farmer of casaba all your life that is what you know how to do, you cannot move those people to a place where they do not know anything about casabas. That is, they cannot be relocated to a place they cannot be farmers; that would be completely out of the question. These are very long processes, and it is a process of negotiation, but yes, there are tradeoffs, there are winners, and losers. Hopefully the result is in the name of the greater good, and it is better than not doing anything.

**Smirnova:** Do you think that the economic crisis made this land question

even harder? Do you think the risks for the vocal communities became even higher during this period?

**Parera:** The 2008 crisis? And are you're talking about increasing food prices?

**Smirnova:** Yes.

**Parera:** There are some studies that show that the farmers benefited. It depended on whether you were an exporter or an importer as a country. That's not my work. I was not involved in that. I can tell you that the 2008 food prices for some specific countries and groups within those countries were beneficial because they were net exporters. If the prices go up and you are a net exporter of food, you are doing better. If you are net importer and the food prices go up, it's completely devastating from a food security perspective. I would recommend that you read Albert Valdez's work on Latin America on this issue, although he has written on China and other countries, too. He is a former American researcher and senior agricultural economist. He has now retired, but he has done a lot of research concerning this issue, and you can learn from there. That's how far my knowledge goes.

**Erwin:** You've noted that the World Bank has changed its strategy, as well as philosophy. From what I understand, you can correct me if I'm wrong, it's moved from more of a market-based economic development model to one also focused on human development goals, toward the development index as created by Amartya Sen, and possibly environmental concerns, when doing development projects. Why has the World Bank changed its philosophy, and how? If you could give some examples, from before and after, that would be helpful for those who are interested in development, specifically.

**Parera:** It is not that they have changed. I think their approach has evolved in response to all the social movements, financial crisis, and the globalization of everything, from poverty to governments. You need to adapt, because hopefully you learn from your mistakes. The World Bank has a new approach now, which is aimed at ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity. In that term, shared prosperity, is where they include the concept of sustainability, that you leave this world and this planet better off for the next generations. It's not only economic welfare. But it is true the World Bank is in a structural adjustment time. In the 1980s, it was mostly economic development. We know that just improving your G.D.P. doesn't

mean that you're going to be better off, right? It's not only economics, but also economic and social development. By encouraging that economic and social development, we have learned the importance of agency and empowering groups, especially those groups that didn't have a voice before: women, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, among others. I think the whole world has changed and organizations, like individuals, need to adapt, move forward and be flexible.

I have to say what I personally experienced. When I finished my master's degree at Georgetown, it was 1990. I wanted to go directly to work at the World Bank and I wanted to enter as a young professional. They have a program at the Bank that you enter as a young professional, you spend two years, and it's an amazing program, because you're doing the work with the Bank, but you have a mentor. Then you stay at the Bank, if you don't mess it up. I had a professor of economic development who was an economist at the World Bank, and I earned straight A's in that class. So, I talked to him, and said, "Professor Miami, I want to join the World Bank in the Junior Professional program." My professor liked me, but his answer was, "Forget about it; you will never make it. The World Bank does not hire people who are not economists, and who do not have a Ph.D. in economics." At that time, there were almost no sociologists at the World Bank, very few sociologists. Everything was based on economics. The view was the economy is the engine of growth. Then they started to realize, this is not working the way we would like it to work. I have to say, in my personal view, one of the best presidents the World Bank has had was President James Wolfensohn. When Wolfensohn was President of the Bank, as an aside, he's also a musician, so there's your connection with the arts! the institution adopted a different sensibility. He brought broad reform to the Bank, and they started hiring sociologists.

If you go to the Bank, the social analytic groups today are very strong, and they have lots of weight; your project will not go anywhere if you do not have good social and gender assessments. Before, those things were discretionary, if the team didn't think they needed them, they could move forward with a project. Now, the Bank requires them; and if staff do not undertake them, they get into trouble later and they have serious problems. Did I answer your question?

**Erwin:** That was helpful to see the transition. Regarding measurement, if the

World Bank is adapting in this way, do you think they'll change how they measure development from a G.D.P. to an H.D.I.?

**Parera:** Oh absolutely, it has changed that way. The Bank has changed considerably in the way it measures development and, in my opinion, for the better. Now, they must consider the social impact and not only the G.D.P. or economic impact, but they now include environmental indicators, social indicators, and human developmental indicators. It is now a more comprehensive, or, in the jargon, a more holistic approach to development. It is not based on only one factor or area.

**Mason:** You were just talking about what the World Bank envisions development as being and what the World Bank holds as goals of development. I'm curious to know what drives people to do this work, what motivates you to be a development practitioner versus some other more lucrative career, for example. Then, how do you define development as a practitioner for your own practice? What does the term development mean to you? What do you envision as your goal for development? What would a fully developed world look like to you?

**Parera:** Please do not get me wrong, the people who work in development, they make money. It's not a charitable organization. Let's be honest: these are well-paid jobs. The people in them work a lot, they are generally very good professionals. I see why people who work in development get involved in it. As I tried to say before, I have a high sense of social justice. I know of giving back and sharing, what I have and the opportunities that I had that other people provided. I still get emotional when I go to work with indigenous women and indigenous girls, when I see the abuses, not only government abuses, but in their own communities and their homes by males, whether at the hand of husbands, brothers, or others. But I also am very optimistic because I see the resilience that they have and how much their situations have improved.

I am in development because I wanted to be able to be an agent of change and to bring positive impact to people who don't have a voice, who don't have opportunities. By doing that and respecting their dignity and culture, that's not far from what the development goals are for the United Nations, its millennium development goals, or for the World Bank. We're all under part of the same umbrella there. There are people who are not good in any

organization, you have dedicated ones, and you have those that are there because of their own professional interest in moving up. I do not waste my time on that. I want to do good, and I want to be part of projects with that result, if I can contribute a little bit to a community and they emerge better off as a result, I'm happy. It's very rewarding to do that, even though you're faced with poverty, they don't have drinking water, they can't even go to a health clinic. It's tough, tough, tough, and they're still happy and they share whatever they have. Working with those people and trying to improve their lives is, to me, amazing.

**Mason:** What recommendations do you have for those seeking job opportunities with The World Bank or the U.N., and how might someone prepare him or herself to be an applicant?

**Parera:** OK, as I said, I am completely an outlier, because with my background, I could have done anything. I was a professional ballet dancer and that was my background originally. Then, I knew I wanted to study and to do something different. I went to school and got my master's degree, etc.

Specifically, for the World Bank, they still look for people with economic backgrounds, quantitative knowledge helps a lot. Qualitative, too, but if you have your own quantitative studies, that helps a lot in being considered competitive for posts. The U.N. agencies in general, or U.N.D.P., etc., want people that they can see are committed to the cause, and not just because they want a job. It's tough, it's an interesting, amazing, opportunity to be able to work in countries in developing areas, but it is also very hard.

At the World Bank, without a master's degree you don't have a chance. Go somewhere else, because you need a minimum of a master's degree, ideally a Ph.D., but the bare minimum is a master's degree. In all these organizations, they like to see that you have had some experience either in volunteer work, or NGOs, and for the U.S., people with Peace Corps experience helps a lot. With those coming out, they can see they have the soul to do development work.

Again, I think, the Bank has moved into more soft sciences. They have had to do so. Nonetheless, in my experience, you prove your case not only with qualitative research, but also by marshaling facts and quantitative analysis.

# Chapter 15: Theresa Williamson

**Theresa Williamson**, Executive Director of Catalytic Communities

**Date of Interview:** January 24, 2019

**Interviewers:** Lehi Dowell, Vanessa Guerra, and Garland Mason

**Vanessa Guerra:** We wanted to start talking about the mission of CatCom. We know that your organization's mission is to develop models for effective integration between informal and formal settlements in cities around the globe and we wanted to ask you, based on your experience in Rio de Janeiro, how do you choose your project areas? And can you walk us through the CatCom process and its approach? In what ways do you seek to sustain relationships with community members?

**Theresa Williamson:** Great question. And it's a good way to begin because I can talk a little bit about how the organization started in the first place. You know Catalytic Communities began when I went back to Rio in 2000 as part of my doctoral research. I was originally from Rio. And I went to visit favelas and tried to develop my topic for my research, but what I found was that these communities were very different from what the mainstream media portrays and what people generally think, and the way academic disciplines typically handle them: as problems, as challenges, as places in need of outside solutions. And often the media depicts them as marginal and heavily stigmatizes them.

What I saw was very different. I saw inspiring communities where residents were solving every problem you can imagine, usually at the very micro scale, so you might not have heard of these projects. But in my first few months visiting favelas, I saw everything from eco-brick manufacturing to daycare centers for children, but also day support centers for elderly people, communities doing adult literacy, doing sewage solutions, basic sanitation, housing, you name it: after-school programs, soccer, capoeira [an Afro-Brazilian form of martial arts]. Literally, this was just in my first few months visiting favelas.

And so, I had the idea at the time to start an organization that would support

those initiatives. The idea really began from there and it kept expanding over time because it was driven by the communities themselves: what their needs were, what their organizers' needs were. Those fluctuate depending on the political moment, depending on the economy, and so on. So, over these, now it's been 19 years running Catalytic Communities, we've engaged in several different projects, but always with a specific focus on how to support local community-based organizing efforts. And we do this based on whatever conditions are happening as we undertake them. So, when you ask the question about how our project areas are chosen and what our process and approach are, I would say there are a couple of components. One is that we work, again, with community-based solutions, community-based organizers. So, these aren't outside groups coming in with an idea of what to do. Sometimes, for example, we might be contacted by an outsider who would like to do something. The way we handle that is, we put it out to the network and say, is anybody interested in engaging with this? Then, if some group in a favela is interested, we will connect them to that, but we don't facilitate the outside in, unless there's a demand from the communities for us to do that. Instead, our focus is, how do we support the homegrown community-based efforts that are already happening?

Again, we're focused on community-based solutions that come from the inside. The second criterion is we focus on the organizers. Ultimately, obviously, we want to benefit the residents, we want to benefit the average person in a favela, but we're not in the best position, as an outside organization, to do that. The people in the best position are the residents who are acting on behalf of their communities. And so, our focus as an organization is supporting local organizers so they can do more. Our broad definition of community organizer or leader or the people we work with is basically anybody in a favela that's working on behalf of the collective, on behalf of the community.

That could be a woman who has a daycare center out of her house informally or takes kids on field trips on the weekend. It could be a community collective of local young social media producers. It could be a residents' association that's established by the residents' vote. It could be a community NGO, and so on. Those are the people and organizations we support. And over the years, we've grown this network into thousands of these local organizers from whom we're constantly hearing.

And that gets to your question about trust. In what ways do we seek to sustain relationships with community members? So, I said, I went straight to trust because it's trust, right? It's, how do we maintain trust, how do we build and maintain trust? Trust is our number one asset. It's the one non-negotiable. It's the one thing that we prize above anything else. We will not do anything that compromises the trust of, specifically, the community organizers with whom we work, nor, more broadly, of anyone with whom we engage. So, over enough years, that trust gets built. It's not something that can come quickly, especially in a culture like Brazil, with such dramatic inequality, where there is a long tradition, dating hundreds of years, of policies on paper that aren't translated into reality.

Where communities have academics coming in and doing research and then leaving and making careers, and not coming back with their findings. Or communities that have NGOs that start a project on which the community comes to depend, then the funding streams dry up, the NGO leaves, and the community is left without. From the NGO perspective, from us, let's say, in the U.S., we give a donation to a big nonprofit, and we say, "Look, they did this great action for a year. I was supporting something good." From the community perspective that same investment may not feel so good because it may have created a dependency, and may have created a hope, a desire that can't be maintained, and so on. There are so many facets that, because we prize trust as our number one asset from the beginning, we started becoming hyper-aware of how communities experience these relationships. Things that we see one way from outside, they may see differently from the inside.

I mentioned something earlier, communities that say, well, the outside person is coming here to do the social work, only if they get paid for it. We're doing it every day, day in and day out, as volunteers because this is our community. So, even that relationship can be kind of tenuous and difficult because there's a sense of, they're only here for that. So, these are communities again, and historically it's a culture that's incredibly unequal.

When I started Catalytic Communities, the first year, I literally was just going to community meetings and listening, and a phrase I heard, and I've heard during the years frequently since is, we're a bunch of scalded cats. It's a sense of, so-and-so comes and promises this, so-and-so comes and does that, so-and-so and they leave, and they leave us here without improvements. And

so that hyper-awareness and concern is what led me and the organization consequently to value trust and that is really what is at the heart of sustaining our relationships with community members. But also, just doing things that are useful to them, right? And like I said, we're responding to their needs. And we haven't talked about our programs yet, but hopefully we will.

**Lehi Dowell:** That kind of leads me to my question. So, over the years, obviously, you do network within the community, but you also network internationally. For example, *Rio On Watch*. So, in your view, during CatCom's existence, what do you value as the most successful project or strategy? What are the biggest challenges you've had to face in developing it, and what is the measure of that success?

**Williamson:** So, starting in 2000 and for our first 10 years, our focus was on network building, building relationships, and facilitating peer-to-peer-exchanges. So Catalytic Communities didn't appear much. Our programs were rooted in supporting communities directly through, like I said, exchanges, networking.

We had a community center for five years that I would have, if you asked me this question a decade ago, I would have said, hands down, it was our community center. For five years, it served as a hub for local organizers from all over Rio, where they met each other face-to-face and engaged with each other and learned from each other, could use the internet before it was accessible on scale, and have events and it was their space. They could do trainings, and it was peer-to-peer, so they would do the trainings for each other. And that was really where our network grew, and where the relationships were established.

But since then, we've become most known for, and I would say currently, if you look back at our history, that the most successful project was *Rio On Watch*. *Rio On Watch* is our news site. We started in 2010 and it was originally short for Rio Olympics Neighborhood Watch.

What happened was, in that first decade of work with favelas, we were very close to quite a few communities, we came to know their struggles and their work towards improvement, but then, in 2009, the Olympics was announced for Rio. And we knew and we started seeing in government declarations that many policies were going to be directed towards favelas, including some

investment policies, but also eviction policies, and other types of things. And so, we also saw the international spotlight turning to Rio, the global media interested in Rio, and we thought there was a space there to create a news site, where this community's news could get out. So, we knew that the mayor at the time was more concerned with what people abroad thought than what people in favelas thought, and so we thought if we can get these community voices out in English, then we can help influence the way favelas are treated by the government in this period through the Olympics.

And so that's how *Rio On Watch* was born, and it's now a nearly nine-year-old news portal with 2,600 or 2,700 articles in both languages [English and Portuguese] that have documented everything from specific policies, communities, community organizations, individuals, in some cases, and their trajectories in Rio, at a hyper-local level. So, although it's predominantly read by Brazilians and people in Rio, we had individuals in 208 countries read *Rio On Watch* in 2018. In any given month, we have people from a couple hundred countries checking out the site. So, it's become a unique sort of hyper-local to global news source. As far as we can tell, there aren't others like it in the world.

And it's used by community organizers in Rio who, you know, both want to promote and document things that are happening in and to their communities, because they see it as an important voice, and also they know that we will not report in ways that are harmful to them and that we will retract or change things if they request, because it really is for them. So, they have a high level of trust in the website. International community organizers from other countries and cities have come to view the site as a model. For example, I know the L.A. Olympics 2028 organizers are using *Rio On Watch* as a model. In addition, Rio officials read the site. We know that international development groups read the site. We've had emails, you know, contacts over the years from the Asian Development Bank in Mongolia and the IDB [Inter-American Development Bank] even invited us to a conference based on some of the writings, and things like that. It's used by academics around the world and in courses in many universities, too.

So, the idea of *Rio On Watch* is to inform people who then influence others. We have maybe 25,000 readers a month, so it's not about reaching everybody. It's about reaching community organizers, who then reach their communities. Academics, whose exposure influences their teaching and

their research. Journalists, sorry I didn't mention journalists. They're huge readers of *Rio On Watch*. The journalism community that reports on Rio and Brazil uses the site often, because it is a source of ideas, stories, contacts and context for them. So anyway, so that's, sort of going off about *Rio On Watch*, explaining what it is for those who haven't come into contact with it and by reading, whether it's profiles of residents or broader analyses. We have academics and community members who write for it. So, by reading it and so on, it influences them, and consequently, we became known in the pre-Olympic period for influencing the global narrative on favelas, and that's how I measure the success of the site. It's the idea that it has actively influenced the way the global media report on informal settlements and favelas in Rio specifically, with much more nuance and detail, less stigma and consequently it has influenced government policy in Rio. There are cases of evictions being halted or stopped or slowed down or improved negotiations because of reporting in *Rio On Watch* in the pre-Olympic period.

Also, through the site, we try to look past current issues and look at new things, so I might come across ideas, like I have already today about code switching. We might write a reference piece about code-switching for *Rio On Watch* and introduce the concept to local organizers who might think, oh this is useful for thinking about my work. So, it's a site that also helps create debates and discussions and push concerns forward related to Rio, but also concerning city planning and governance in general.

**Guerra:** That brings us to one of the questions that we have about hosting major events in cities. Both Lehi and I have studied the effects of tourism linked to major events in cities and we know that, when done correctly, they can increase G.D.P., improve destinations' image for tourists, provide opportunities to improve infrastructure and promote a lot of opportunities in general.

However, we also know that there's a lot of evidence and the experiences that we learned from projects, such as *Rio On Watch*, that these major events do not always benefit the entire population and that very often the most vulnerable groups are the ones that obtain the least benefits or are even actively harmed. So, based on the experience of *Rio On Watch* and all the events that have happened in Brazil after Rio hosted the Olympics, what do you think are the lessons that we can learn? How do we ensure that at-risk communities such as favelas are protected from displacement or other ill

effects by future events? And do you have any suggestions for revitalizing and reclaiming those abandoned spaces or all the spaces that were built with the idea of hosting these major events, but that are not now actually serving the population?

**Williamson:** Thank you for asking about the Olympics, because that was what caused us to start *Rio On Watch*, and as a consequence, we observed them and their impacts very closely. You know Rio spent some \$15 to 20 billion, or rather, Brazil spent that sum on the Olympics in Rio, a city that even today is chronically underfunding the infrastructure, education, healthcare, and sanitation needs of its favela communities. And the Olympic investments did not improve any of those areas. When the International Olympic Committee approved Rio for the Olympics, they approved both the plan for the stadiums and so on, but they also approved a legacy plan, and that blueprint included improving all the favelas. It was all in the initial legacy plan: investing in sewage treatment and improving sanitation systems and so on. In the end, government officials changed the legacy plan conveniently to the things they did, which were largely transportation improvements, although it's very, very questionable whether they were real improvements, because commutes have increased and because they eliminated many of the other forms of transportation that people used to depend on, which in many cases were more effective. So anyway, in the end, we had developers who benefited tremendously from the games, and communities that didn't. So, my first point of comment to anybody, any city interested in hosting, or residents of cities inquiring about hosting such events, is to say that it's not about whether the city is going to make a profit. It's about who will receive resources, what those will be, and if they are narrowly or broadly distributed. Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world, Rio is a city known internationally for its inequality. If you bring an event into that city and all that money is made, who is it going to benefit? And in the case of Rio, very clearly the benefit went to the elites. In fact, our Olympic governor is now in jail for the equivalent of a couple of life sentences because of corruption related to the Games and other things. So, our justice system is working in some ways in Brazil.

One thing I've learned from watching the Olympics in Rio, and I talk to people about this, is, if your city government is really insisting on hosting the games, you need to take a second look at your city government, because

the Olympic Games do not benefit cities. You can just look at any case and really study it. Talk to the people on the ground. Talk to the residents, and it's very rare that cities profit from their involvement in the Olympics. There are cases of specific things, one piece of infrastructure that got better, the London [train] tube got better, but ask residents of the areas where the Olympics happened, and you will find the evidence concerning their impact is at best mixed and usually negative. Anyway, I don't know if I answered your question properly.

**Guerra:** Yes, your response makes a lot of sense.

**Dowell:** A lot of my research revolves around attempts to formalize the informal. We have seen both successful and unsuccessful attempts to do so. One major concern that I've read about related to formalizing favela communities is gentrification. Many of the favelas in Rio are in potentially lucrative and desirable areas, for example, the most expensive real estate in Rio next to Leblon. In that case, some private citizens are trying to buy a share of the favela resident's properties, and in addition, boutique hotels are moving into the area to cater to tourists. I was in Rio on New Year's Eve, and I saw camping in Rio's favelas advertised on Airbnb. So, how do you respond to that? And what successes and failures have you seen with ongoing initiatives to formalize the informal in these neighborhoods? And what recommendations would you have to improve the process and make it more transparent and equitable for favela residents?

**Williamson:** I'm surprised about the camping! Wow. I mean, favelas are on Airbnb. I just hadn't heard about camping.

**Dowell:** Yeah, \$28 per night.

**Williamson:** Amazing. OK, Interesting. So, yes, the fact that favelas are on Airbnb, the fact the favelas are gentrifying, is testament to the fact that they are not slums. These are communities, in some cases historic ones. For example, Vidigal celebrated its 80th birthday a couple of years ago. This is the favela that you're mentioning, that's become best known for the gentrification process in Rio, where the boutique hotel is located. And so, when you bring up gentrification, it brings up a whole slew of questions about, you know, what do residents want? Do they want to sell? Do they benefit? And so on.

My personal view is that gentrification, by definition, is displacement and development gone awry. So, if a territory is developed for residents, we call it development. If it's developed and residents don't benefit and they're displaced, we call it gentrification. For me, you know, I see this process as very problematic because the residents aren't generally the ones benefiting. There are cases, as in the lead up to the Olympics, when this process was happening, when communities were being gentrified, we led a series of debates with residents of this community around gentrification, because people didn't know it existed and so many people were selling out thinking they were getting a lot of money.

There's this whole area of this community where the boutique hotel is based that residents were selling for say \$100,000 reais, \$25,000 in today's dollars, thinking this is more money than they had ever seen. This is great! Except you can't buy anything anywhere near there, including in favelas, for that amount. But people didn't know how much their house was worth. They didn't know how much their land was worth. They didn't know how much their commute was worth. They didn't know how much their community was worth, and so on and so forth. And so, people weren't used to thinking that way, and when you've been told historically over and over that you're from a favela and favelas are bad, and you have an opportunity to sell and get out, you think that's a good thing, if you haven't learned to value your community.

And so, we worked with the residents' association there and several other community organizations to lead a series of conversations, which started with just what is gentrification? Is it happening here? What is it? Let's give it a name. Let's talk about it. And the case of the U.S. was informative in that process because we were able to point out cities and places in the world where this process had been unfolding for decades and say this is how it tends to happen. It tends to start like this, and then other groups come in, the developers see it, and eventually, even long-term residents who could afford to stay may not see themselves in that place anymore, and essentially, at that point, you've lost. And so, to be able to bring experiences from other places, talk about how in the U.S. now there are movements to stop it, or there's a lot of other protests in some cities around it. So, people there could understand this before it took on that kind of proportion, that dimension. And from there, the community brought in, engaged in a debate with local businesses, undertook a debate with authorities, and just basically tried to

make it clear to people, so people could at the very least make informed decisions. But they didn't get to the point of thinking of solutions. How do we balance these?

How do we formalize the informal? What do we do? So that brings me to another project that we've worked on, which is the Community Land Trust project. And that started out of those discussions. So, when we were in Vidigal talking to residents about what they could do about this, we started talking about, well maybe they could press for rent controls. Or other ideas, right? Or, could local businesses benefit? Could the community appropriate the process and say no, we're going to control this process? We're going to create Airbnbs. We're going to create our own hostels.

We're going to create our own businesses that cater to outsiders, similar to what in L.A., in one community is called gente-fication, the idea that we from the neighborhood are going to benefit from the development. Although I visited that community, that's Boyle Heights, and I was told that some residents benefit from that, but others don't. It's only the wealthier within the low-income community who benefit from that process. So, the lowest-income residents, they don't seem to be able to benefit anywhere from gentrification, right? If we want to try to use that framework to think of it. Anyway, fast forward to today. We have this project around favela community land trusts. And I really think this is part of the solution to what you're identifying. So, traditionally in informal settlements, there's a struggle for land rights, right? People want title to their land and that is seen as the way to empower residents, and that is seen as the most important solution. But in places like Rio, where land values are very high, if you give that individual title, you're basically transferring that land from the affordable housing market to the speculative market. So, overnight you're taking it from being low-income housing to speculative housing. And when you do that at scale, like let's say you give a lot of these titles out, basically you're just going to get massive displacement.

And so, we started thinking about this more and working with residents and came eventually to this idea of the favela Community Land Trust, to later discover Puerto Rico has already done this. And there's an amazing case in a community called the Caño Martín Peña in San Juan, where eight communities came together nearly two decades ago with people from

government and realized that they didn't want individual title because it would force displacement.

Their goal was to stay there. They didn't want title to sell, they wanted title to stay. And I think that's very common in established informal settlements, that strong sense of belonging we saw in the video before, that people have? Their concern isn't, how do I get out of here? Sometimes it's just how do I stay here and make it better? And so, when that's the basic concern of residents, you need a different form of improving the community than individual titles, because those will result in displacement.

Anyway, community land trusts allowed the favelas to own the land collectively, and then individually own the properties. They can buy and sell those properties, but because the land value isn't embedded in the value of the house, it's kept affordable. And because the land isn't for sale, developers don't want it. And because the land is public, and of course is collective, the community can improve it. They can fight for public services collectively, which gives them a lot more bargaining power and they become large landowners instead of tiny landowners. It gives them more power. Anyway, that's something we're seeing as a way that communities can formalize, can have all the legal status, in a way that doesn't compromise their rights.

**Dowell:** Wonderful.

**Guerra:** That's a fascinating approach to a very complex problem. And that is just one way of showing that we have a lot to learn from the favelas. However, there is a lot of stigma in the current population about favelas and about informality. There is the historical component.

History indicates that in 1823, African slaves made up 29 percent of the total population in Brazil. Also, that Brazil was the last country in the Western hemisphere to abolish slavery. The favelas kind of represented a solution for all these minorities, for all the slaves that didn't have all the resources to have housing solutions, you know. It kind of represented a solution for all the indigenous migrants that were travelling from the countryside to the city. So, there is a big kind of racial component within the favelas. And this has brought a lot of discrimination, and this has also brought the idea that people within the favelas are identified with certain characteristics.

There is also a big stigma associated with informality: The idea of thinking that the informal sector brings chaos to the city and that it is something that we should shut down.

So, we know that context. How do we break that stigma? How do we break the racist stigma, the stigma about the negative implications of informality, so we can focus on the lessons these communities can offer? And, on the other hand, how can we learn and pass on all the solutions that these communities are creating and inform the formal sector as well? It's complex.

**Williamson:** Well, you know stigma really is at the heart of why these communities are still in this predicament, but it's not just that. Stigma is maintained because it's beneficial to certain people. You mentioned slavery in Brazil. Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in the Western Hemisphere. It was also the biggest slave-holding country in history. Rio was the biggest slave port in world history. Brazil's slavery lasted 60 percent longer than the practice did in the U.S. It started earlier and ended later, and again, it's a whole other scale than we even think about in this country. Fifty-four percent of Brazilians are of African descent today. They are a majority.

And so, think about how could those folks, back then, how could you maintain the status you had and that you had built over generations if you were of white Brazilian descent, right? And you had created that status for yourself in the society and suddenly you have to abolish the system and try to maintain it when they're actually a majority. I mean, literally, if you think that way, that is how we got to where we are today. That is why education in Brazil is so poor. That is why favelas exist. That is why they're kept precarious. That's why it took so long for improvements to happen. And it was only in the last 20 years that you had major social improvements in Brazil, which are now being rolled back, we're seeing regression in that with the new government.

And so, we've got to fight back against the elite who try to return to those old systems, because we've had progress in the last couple of decades. So, I want to give that background because I think it's important just to understand what we're dealing with here. Favelas are more than 120 years old and they've been kept precarious and again, not by accident. A few years ago, I was on a panel, and there was someone from the city government

that turned and said to the audience, “Well, favelas, it was convenient to have them there because they provide cheap labor, but it’s not convenient anymore, especially during the economic boom in the 1990s and 2000s, when gentrification was happening.” So, there was this idea that well, if you keep them precarious and you keep them feeling stigmatized, so they also have a self-imposed stigma, because society is stigmatizing them, if you keep them in that sort of constant state, then you get cheap labor.

You don’t have to serve them because they’re illegal. You can argue that they’re illegal, even though they do have squatter’s rights. You can say they’re illegal; we’re not serving them. They don’t pay taxes, so I’m not serving them. But they’re still serving you. Cheaply. And you can keep that status quo going. And that was really what the systems were about that have been in place historically. So, how do we break that?

I think that is happening finally. It’s been building up over, obviously, years and years, but I think in the last 10 years we’ve seen a huge speed up in breaking that stigma. How is that happening? One is through careful observation, or careful monitoring and response to media. So, media is one piece. I’m just going to give you some practical ideas, but then I’m going to go a little bit behind that.

So, one is just media, how does the media address these communities? How can they control their own narrative? How can they take over that narrative? And social media is making that increasingly possible. So favelas, favela organizers, are incredibly astute using social media, especially young media collectives that have formed, and getting the word out about what they think, to the point where now there are young people from favelas on national media in Brazil, because they’ve created a presence for themselves, so those voices are increasingly getting out there. The international narrative needs to change because that influences domestic policies. As long as favelas are seen as this horrible problem, it makes it easy for the government to repress them, neglect them, marginalize them, if they’re seen as the problem. The second we shift and contend that the problem is that the government has been underfunding them, has been putting police in them rather than schools? Could the problem be the government? Then things shift. So, it’s these narratives that need to change.

But also, just internally, how do you shift the stigma? None of this can happen

if residents feel stigmatized and internalize that stigma. It always must start with residents who value their communities and who don't self-impose the stigma. I'll just give an example of how that can be very powerful. A few years ago, I was interviewing a woman in a favela who was fighting eviction. She had built her house. I visited her house; it was beautiful. It was also finished inside and outside, which is rare in a favela because of the iterative nature of improvements.

She told me the story of how she and her husband and their two adult daughters had invested everything in that house, and it was all tiled, painted, and beautiful, and they were fighting eviction. I ask her, "Oh what kind of work do you do?" She said, "I clean houses in Baja the Juca," which is this wealthy area next door. And then she turned and said, "Well, of course if I could live there, I would."

And I was shocked because she just told me for 15 minutes how much she loved her house and how she was fighting for it. And I said, "Oh, really?" And to me, Baja de Juca is the last place I would ever live because it's this very sanitized, gated-communities kind of place. And she said, "Yes, I can't stand the way people there, you know, talk to me. I can't stand the way people think about me living here in the favela." So, then I said, "Well, if people didn't see you that way, would you leave?"

And it was just the shock of how impactful the external lens is on an individual's psyche, to the point where she would be willing to forego the house she built and she loves, and her community and everything to leave. And that is the weapon that the government uses in forced evictions, because if people see themselves that way in their community, the government can come along and find those, exactly those people, which is what they did, and say we're going to move you to public housing. You're going to live in a formal, recognized place. You're going to have an address and some people will say yes, and they will go and then the community is weakened, it's easier then to have a domino effect and evict all the residents and this tactic has been used. So, the stigma is at the root of a lot of policy and how policy can be implemented.

**Dowell:** That's a great answer and it leads us right into the next question about stigmatization. The new president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, has made

violent pejorative statements regarding indigenous populations, LGBTQ-plus populations and individuals of African heritage.

Not wasting any time on January 2nd of this year he stripped the FUNAI agency, which oversees Indigenous affairs, of several of its most important responsibilities, including the ability to identify, delimit, and demarcate indigenous land boundaries and has given that power to the nation's department of agriculture. He also removed LGBTQ-plus oversight from the Department of Human Rights. In doing so, he created concern for these already at-risk minority groups. Considering the ethnic makeup of favelas, this a concern that it might be even easier to discriminate against an already stigmatized group, and how does CatCom plan to address these concerns and where do we go from here?

**Williamson:** Well, thank you for bringing this up, because to take an already complex situation, which I've described, and make it even more complex, that's what's happening. And if I've learned anything with these elections, it's when we think things can't get worse, they can. So don't ever think things can't get worse because they can. We currently, as you said, we have this new president who's very much taking shifts, moving us towards fascism in Brazil. And who was elected, you know, it's very complex, how he got elected, through what interests, what groups, what techniques, and so on. And we could talk all day about that. If folks are interested, we can talk about it after. But to focus on your question, we are concerned about the favelas.

We're concerned about three broad communities: favelas, indigenous and quilombola [Afro-Brazilian] communities. Those are the three most vulnerable, I would say, broadly speaking, groups in Brazil, and interestingly, they all have in common land conflict. And being low income, on land that is valuable to wealthy people, and that's what they all have in common. We as an organization are focused on favelas in Rio, but because of the current situation, we are forming alliances now with favela groups in other cities with indigenous and quilombola organizations, to figure out how we can work together to address some of what we expect is coming. So, there are different ways in which this new political scenario influences these groups.

You mentioned discrimination in your question. And yes, I think, discrimination will be easier, because the policies are changing; for example, they're removing LGBT protections from policy-making. They're removing,

they're shifting land rights, like you mentioned, the designation, so there will be discrimination there as well. There's also violence. We expect violence. So, one of the groups that, within our networks, that we're most concerned with are the community journalists, community media producers. This new administration, on top of everything you mention, they're also limiting the role of the press.

And the President issued an executive order in his first week in government closely to monitor and supervise NGOs. So, the government does not want civil society. He has referred to activists as terrorists. And they're trying to change the law concerning drugs, so that drug traffickers are considered terrorists, so if some kid is selling drugs on the corner, he can be tried as a terrorist. So, these are the kinds of things that we're looking at. We're concerned. We're watching to see what's going to happen.

And of course, there's going to be an increase in vigilantism, people that think, now, oh, I have, I feel empowered to do this. We're familiar with that here in the U.S. You know, I feel empowered by the people in power to behave a certain way, even if the law doesn't say it's OK, People feel empowered by the shift that's happening, so we're concerned with all of that. So, how are we addressing it?

I mentioned one way, which is to connect with groups in all these different areas, but also internationally, because of our role, historically, working in networks and across networks within the city, across networks globally, we're looking at strategies for how we can do this in a very productive way at the moment. So, we're also connecting with international groups in three areas: human rights, environment, and democracy, that are concerned with Brazil. We're trying to create a global network of solidarity, while we also create domestic networks on the ground, and we are figuring out how we can make information flow among these seamlessly, so that we can try to get international pressure on the situation as events unfold on the ground. That's basically how we're doing it.

**Garland Mason:** I have very much appreciated you talking about how you establish trust in the communities that you work in, and going back to when you were starting, and I was curious about your own entry into this work and how you became involved in it. I think you mentioned that you were a master's degree student when you started analyzing favelas, and that there's

a legacy of a kind of academic extraction in those communities already, and so I was wondering, as somebody who spent a lot of time in the U.S., and was educated in the U.S., I think, I'm assuming you were not originally from a favela, how you were able to come in as a young person, kind of as an outsider and begin to engage with people and get their trust at the very beginning.

**Williamson:** Well yes, I was doing a master's degree and Ph.D. in the U.S., but I was not an academic by nature. I was more of an activist. I started doing environmental and social justice work when I was about 12 in [Washington] D.C. I was involved in lots of different movements and then I went into academia to do the Ph.D., as more of a tool to go back into activist work. So, my plan was always to serve and support communities somewhere, somehow, but then I ended up working with favelas, and that was the right fit for me, I guess, looking back. And in terms of how to build their initial trust.

**Mason:** And how to gain entree, how just to get in and get people to talk to you.

**Williamson:** There are a couple of things. It's interesting because Brazil is, I think, on the World Values Survey, it's the last in the world on trust. So, it's a country where people don't trust easily, but at the same time there are researchers that, I remember learning this way back in grad school, some countries are easier, and some are harder for people to talk to researchers. And Brazil was on the easier list. Like India was considered quite difficult. So, it's interesting. People don't trust, but it doesn't mean they don't talk to you. So, there is an opening, in other words, and that was my experience. There's an opening, but then trust depends on time and dedication. Part of trust is just sticking around. It's showing up and not leaving and being someone, they can depend on.

And I had the luxury of Catalytic Communities being a nonprofit that I created out of my Ph.D., so I had the opportunity to spend a year basically listening. I did ethnographic work, just visiting, going to meetings, documenting, writing, talking, mostly listening, not saying what I thought needed to be done, what I thought about this or that, listening, and then starting to engage in ways that seemed helpful, suggesting this, or asking, what do you think of that?

Our very first project was out of my head, and it was our least successful. It was the Community Solutions database. It was an online database. We won an award for it. The concept was great, but it wasn't the thing they needed, but it wasn't bad, either and it did serve a purpose, but it wasn't particularly efficient, because it wasn't what people most needed. It was an online database where communities, early on in the internet era, when it was cost prohibitive to do so, could create a web presence, because you had to create a website, there was a database where people could document their local solutions and share them, and we would translate them through volunteers, and it seemed like a great idea, and it was. But the reality is, it wasn't the most useful, urgent, important thing that they needed.

That's when we started our community center, and the community said well that's great, but we need somewhere we can meet in person and it's too difficult to go across town, it's too complex, or there's drug trafficking or this or that limitation, and we need a space where we can work and we need to have access to the internet in the first place so we can see the database. And so, we started a community center for them with access to the internet and spaces where they could meet and so on and that's really where the work started taking over.

So, having that responsiveness, I guess, and then just, we've stayed very low budget, and I mean very low budget, like \$100,000-\$120,000 a year for our whole history. And we're now in a phase where we want to expand that, simply because now we want to do more infrastructure with residents. Sustainable Favela Network wants to build communities, wants to do solar and this and that. We're trying to raise money for all this other stuff, but for years we've maintained ourselves, very low budget, based on this idea of, how do we preserve trust. The second you become big budget, you look like you're a big player and you've got a hierarchy and you're looking down and you look like a umbrella organization, all these things we talk about, then people become part of you and are consumed, or they think or feel that way, and the last thing we want to do is have people feel that way. We are peers, we're learning together, we're all together in this, and so that's part of it, as well.

Just think from another perspective for a second. When you see the brochure for any large organization that supports low-income people, look at the images they use. Are they empowering to those communities, or are

they disempowering? Are they selling a message or are they stigmatizing the community to raise money? And often they are. And I understand because that's what's going to get donations. That's going to tug on people's heartstrings, but from the perspective of the community, that just makes them feel worse. That makes them feel like they need someone else. That disempowers the community and so, we're hyper-conscious of all that kind of stuff, and I think that self-awareness has always been part of our work, and it must be that way to do what we do. We wouldn't be able to do the work we do if it were any other way.

So, we sort of ended up that way naturally, as well, because we're trying to get something done.

# Chapter 16: The Beltrones

**Art and Lee Beltrone**, Co-founders of the Vietnam Graffiti Project

**Date of Interview:** April 23, 2018

**Interviewers:** Andy Morikawa, Alexander Stubberfield, and Will Muessig

**Andy Morikawa:** Art, how did you come to be aboard that troopship, General Nelson M. Walker, and what were your thoughts when you explored the berthing compartments and first saw the graffiti on the underside of those canvas bunk inserts?

**Art Beltrone:** In 1997, I lived on a farm in Keswick, Virginia. One of our neighbors was Jack Fisk, who was a Hollywood production designer, and Jack knew of my background in military artifacts, and he had the job of doing production for the movie, “The Thin Red Line.” He asked me if I could help him on the project with basic things, like uniforms, the equipment, and the weapons to make sure everything was accurate. When I was done with my work, he had to find a berthing unit on a troop transport so he could videotape it and create the set, and the set was going to be created in Australia. He found the General Nelson Walker, a troopship, in the James River Reserve Fleet, better known as the Ghost Fleet to most Virginians. He asked me if I would accompany him, help him carry gear, and see the ship. I readily accepted because it sounded intriguing. We went one morning at 4 a.m., left Charlottesville and headed down to the James River. We arrived about 7:30, just in time for the first cruise out to the ships. It was operated by the Maritime Administration and at that time there were about 130 merchant ships anchored in the James River, row after row, 10-12 ships in each row, awaiting disposal of some kind, and we had to be escorted out to them. There was one troop ship, the General Nelson Walker, being held in a state of ready reserve, so everything from its last voyage was kept on it. The hatches or doors were locked, and once a week an employee there visited the ship to make sure it wasn't leaking and about to sink. The exterior was all rusty when we boarded, although the attendant who was with us had the key. He unlocked the padlock on an outside door, and we were wearing hard hats

with head lamps, because part of the ship still had light in it while other parts, especially down in the troop compartments, were dark.

He escorted us to the very first troop compartment and Jack noticed all the bunks. Each of these compartments could hold about 200 men. The ship could carry 5,000 and it was two football fields in length, so we're talking something very big and in this very first troop compartment, Jack was shining a light along the row of bunks and we both saw there was writing on the underside of the canvas. The ship was a World War II ship. My immediate reaction was, this is from World War II, but on closer inspection, it turned out 1967 and 1966 were the dates, so it was Vietnam. And I thought, my goodness, these were messages from people who had been on that ship that long ago and it was almost as if it was speaking to us. There was nobody else on the ship, other than the three of us, but these messages just had a compelling nature about them. They didn't want to be forgotten and that's what struck me.

**Morikawa:** Those voices that didn't want to be forgotten.

**Alexander Stubberfield:** I'd like to pick up that same line of thinking. I'm very interested in materiality and whether you think objects can really speak to us. In what sense do artifacts, like the canvases, display their own personal histories and how do they speak in terms of their discovery to you, or how did they speak about the time in which they were written? One of the more interesting things about this time in Vietnam is that we were still using a lot of draftees, so how did the draftees speak to you through the artifacts that they left?

**Art Beltrone:** We happen to be looking at a couple of canvases right here on the table. They're roughly six feet long and about 22 inches wide. That's what they slept on. On top of this was a thin bunk. So, the man below this canvas was usually doing the inscription on the canvas above him. It's a piece of canvas with either metal, brass or just composite metal grommets all around it's perimeter through which rope would be threaded and that was affixed to a rectangular steel frame, bunk frame, and usually there were four bunks high, and four blocks bunks high side by side, so you had eight individuals in close proximity. But, the point of the canvas is, it's just a canvas without the writing on it. It's just an artifact. I'm in the military artifact field. If you have a sword, a model 1860 cavalry saber, it's a sword. But if the cavalry saber has

an inscription on it, it becomes much more than that. It becomes the story of the owner, the story of the history comes forward and through the National Archives and other research agencies, that brings the individual story to life. There were canvases that had nothing written on them, but with the ones that had the writing, you could tell there was a person there and the message they left told a story, whether it be as personal as a loved one at home whom they were missing or something else. The voyages took 18 to 21 days to get to Vietnam, a lot of time to think about things.

That's the thing that began the story. Now, here's where Lee came in, because when they signed the canvas or put a name there, they usually also left an address.

**Lee Beltrone:** The internet played a big part in being able to find these individual men, and many of them we found either still lived in the same hometown that they listed on the canvas or had family members who were still in the area. So, we were able to find the men and interview them and get their personal stories from the inscription they left with their name and hometown on those canvases.

**Art Beltrone:** Through research, we found that there had been very little done on going to war. There were lots of things about being in war. These were young kids. These were 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds. Vietnam was a working-class war. Chris Appy, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, wrote a book on that. These were kids fresh out of high school, not necessarily college bound, who were drafted, as you indicated. That was how these troops were obtained for the military and taken out of low-paying jobs. They didn't know what their future was. It was interesting talking to them many years after their war experience. Now, there were some college kids. There were several college kids that we found who were a little bit older. They had been maybe one year in college, but they partied too hard and when the college said we don't need you anymore here, they had that one year of college experience, and the Army was looking for helicopter pilots. The fact that they had a little bit of college experience enabled them to do the training. They didn't come out as commissioned officers. They graduated as warrant officers, and I think they were just as wild in the military as they were in college because we went to several of their reunions and interviewed numerous members of their groups and they had a very interesting lifestyle.

**Will Muessig:** You have experienced many of these stories. You've come across a lot of them either through the canvases themselves or the interviews you have done with the individuals who wrote on the canvases. Of all these stories that you've heard, are there any that stick with you, some that you were able to explore more than others, or something that had significance to it?

**Art Beltrone:** A good number of them have been that way. There was a canvas that said, "Zeb Armstrong, Clover, South Carolina." And then he wrote, "Billie Armstrong, my dear wife," and then he put on that canvas, "Vietnam bound and ETS 69." Now ETS meant estimated time of separation and we found that on many of the canvases. What that meant was the man got on the ship, got on his bunk, reached up with a felt tip pen to the canvas above him and marked his estimated time of separation. No sooner had they gotten on the ship, than they were noting when they were going to get out of the Army. They couldn't wait. And then Zeb Armstrong then said in large letters, "Will I return," with three question marks. So, he had just gotten on the ship, notes his wife, notes he's going to Vietnam, and in the back of his mind he doesn't know if he's going to return.

Fortunately, Clover, South Carolina, and his name were there, and Lee was able to track him down and that led to a wonderful experience. We got his story about his voyage over. We were going to Charleston for a little mini vacation and Clover is a jag away from Charleston, so we decided to meet up with Zeb and Billy and bring the canvas so she could see it.

**Lee Beltrone:** It turns out that Zeb's children, his grandchildren, and his wife were all there at this visit that we made. We were able to show Billy the canvas where Zeb had remembered her so fondly on his way to war. And he had never gotten recognition for having served in the war, as many of the servicemen had not, and as we've been told by many of the men, "We never thought anybody cared." That is the greatest gift that we've been given, to be able to thank these men in person.

**Art Beltrone:** You know that's what this project is about, thanking them for their service because, as Lee said and we found out numerous times, they weren't thanked. They were overlooked.

**Stubberfield:** I think what's unique about this is that these were found on a

troop transport ship, and that the voyage took so long. Do you think we could have had the same discovery or same story had we been flying our troops there the whole time during the war? In what way did the transportation really play a role in defining the, perhaps going-to-war-ness about it? In what way does that influence the story?

**Art Beltrone:** I think because it took that long to go by ship, that did influence the stories that were generated while the soldiers were aboard. Historically, the reason the ships were used, and they were only used for about a two-year period, was that the government had to get complete units over at one time as opposed to 150 men on a plane of a unit that was comprised maybe of 1,200 men. If something happened to a plane, the Army would lose a good portion of their troop capacity. So, during that two-year period, the ships were utilized to get complete units to Vietnam because you could carry 5,000 troops, a typical cavalry squadron. In that August 1967 period, there were two cavalry units that sailed: the Second Squadron of the First Cavalry and the First Squadron of the First Cavalry. Each had 1,200 men, and so that enabled the government to deposit a complete squadron on their arrival. They were on that ship for up to 24 days, just how long was determined by the weather. If a typhoon was coming in or in the way, then the ship would be diverted, and that would cause another day or two delay, so that's what enabled them to have the time to write: sheer boredom on the ship, as opposed to an airplane. You don't have much to do.

They tried to get the men back into a training regimen aboard the ship, but that did not work. So, the men looked for things to do, and graffiti, or making marks on the canvases was just something that came naturally to many of them. Bear in mind, too, that we are looking at these canvases, and they used a felt tip pen. Some of the graffiti was in regular normal ink pens, but during that period in the military, felt tip pens had just come out and they were using them. I was in the military from 1963 to 1969 and we had to mark the inside of our clothing with our service number, just in case an item got displaced and you could always track it down, and we used a felt tip pen to do that. So almost everybody had a felt tip pen and it was a natural way of creating the graffiti. And some of the graffiti artists, graffiti writers, were really artists. Lee, what was your reaction when you saw that?

**Lee Beltrone:** My thought is that they got on as boys and they had a couple of weeks to still stay the boys they were. As they neared Vietnam, their

reactions became quite different. They realized they were heading into something very serious. But at the beginning of the voyage, they were still young and engaged in antics and had a lot of high jinks aboard the ship.

**Art Beltrone:** Oh yeah. For example, with 5,000 on these voyages, or about 3,300, everybody had a job on the ship. The ship was crewed by merchant mariners, so they were the ones that did all the work on the ship. They needed help, though, from some of the troops. The NCOs [noncommissioned officers] and the officers knew that if they could keep the troops busy, the privates and the P.F.C.s [private first class], would stay out of trouble that they could otherwise possibly get into. So, you would be either assigned guard duty or night watch or working with the people where the food was being prepared. So, those soldiers had access to material things like wood food crates, and the Americans aboard said, “Why don’t we build kites?” So, they stripped the wood and built kites, and then it was, “Why don’t we bet, and have a lottery to see how long that kite will stay up?” And so, they did that, and it kept things going. They also just tied a long line on the food crate, threw it overboard and the ship was doing about 25 knots [about 29 miles per hour], so it’s moving along at a fair clip, and this crate is bouncing up and down on the ocean and they were taking bets on how long it would remain intact as well. That’s an example of how these men passed the time aboard ship.

**Muessig:** It seems American servicemen have a pattern in history of leaving graffiti wherever they have served, from Kilroy in the Second World War and again with this graffiti in front of us. Do you notice, or have you noticed, any themes within this graffiti or specific symbols that were

more prevalent than others? Something that was shared a lot more than anything else?

**Lee Beltrone:** The calendars were very prevalent, showing how long they had been on board ship and how many more days they were going to be in the Army or Marines.

**Art Beltrone:** And I’d say, too, family, whether it be mom and dad, or a girlfriend or a wife and lots of names, just names and units. I think it’s a sense of mortality and wanting to be remembered and wanting to remember home. Home was a very important point.

**Lee Beltrone:** And humor and Kilroy.

**Art Beltrone:** We found Kilroy on many canvases.

**Muessig:** I was curious about that.

**Stubberfield:** Lee, this is more of a question for you. I am hoping you can bring your photographer's eye to this. When you entered the ship, how did that experience present itself to you and how did the architecture of the ship frame it?

**Lee Beltrone:** These ships were anchored in the James River. They all had rusted exteriors and you had to cross about three ships to get to the Walker. The doors on the outside were rusted and so on. However, when the door was opened, the inside of the door exposed perfectly fresh-looking paint. As we walked in, there were papers on the desks that people had just left behind, dirty dishes in the galley sink waiting to be washed, items the bunk units. It was very eerie. It was just as though people were expected back that evening and the sense of the emptiness of the ship, and yet looking like it was ready to be used again was very strange.

**Art Beltrone:** Lee spent lots of time on that top deck, photographing rust.

**Lee Beltrone:** I like rust. It's very photogenic.

**Muessig:** What was the process or how did you approach removing the canvases from the ship? Was it challenging or did they just come right out?

**Art Beltrone:** To give you the background, when it was in the river, the ship belonged to the United States Maritime Administration. It was government property, United States government property, administered by the Maritime Administration. So, after that very first visit when I came home to tell Lee what we had encountered, I said, "I think you'll agree this material should be saved." Some of it, if not all of it should be saved, so we both agreed that we would try to see if that could happen. I called the Maritime Administration in Virginia at the James River and the director there happened to be a Vietnam veteran himself, and I proposed to him that Lee and I would volunteer to go out, pull canvases with the most historic relevance, and get them to museums, because they weren't ours, but we just wanted to see them saved. He said, when do you want to start, because he wanted them to be saved, too. He recognized that they were men who maybe even served with him.

So, about a month later we went out, arranged it and went through the ship ourselves. We had a guide and we pulled maybe a dozen canvases, then we were taken back to the headquarters there, right at the Fleet. They had prepared a property transfer form, so we would sign out 12 canvases, and then it was our responsibility to get them somewhere. But because of my background and Lee's help in the military artifacts field, we knew the curators. So, it was a matter of letting them know what we had found and what was available, and they thought, wow, this is very unusual. We'd like some examples. So that's how that worked.

We would go out four times, maybe five times a year, and revisit the ship and pull canvases and get them to the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, state museums, historical societies. We knew the ship was going to be scrapped and we recognized that everybody was interested. This material, historically, was very important to the museums, not just because of it being a canvas, but because of what was written on it and by whom. So, when we were told the ship would be scrapped, we then formed the Vietnam Graffiti Project with the intent of going out and going to the scrap yard and negotiating with its owner to see if we could pull enough for a travelling exhibit.

It just so happened that for the Virginia Festival of the Book in Charlottesville, I would be moderating the military history books that authors were coming in to present and there was an official from the Navy Memorial Museum across from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. She had just done a book on personalities in the Vietnam War, and I just happened to mention to her about the canvases that we had been collecting from the scrapyard, and she said, "Why don't you put together an exhibit and bring it up to the Navy Memorial. We'd like it."

With that in mind, I talked to Lee and said, what do you want to do?

**Lee Beltrone:** And that was the beginning of an expanded exhibit. It was a very small one to start with. What we wound up doing was telling the story of the voyage through the canvases, starting with how it began and trying also to tell the stories of sea sickness, their boredom during the voyage, throughout and then, as they approached Vietnam, how they felt. The tone became more serious. We also found out more visits were made to the chaplain aboard the ship as the end of the voyage approached.

**Art Beltrone:** Yeah, the exhibit was out and in California we met a chaplain from the ship, the Walker, at a museum opening at Santa Barbara—there were usually several chaplains assigned to these ships representing the various faiths, who could counsel those of their beliefs. The exhibit was at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum, and he happened to be there. He's a California resident and he happened to have in his pocket his calendar book from 1967. We introduced ourselves to him and we chatted for a while and he said, "Let me show you this," and he pulled out his calendar book and he said, here is when the ship left. And it was that August of 1967 date that we were focused on, which we knew was when those cavalry squadrons were sailing. He said, look here it takes off, it leaves Oakland, goes under the Bay Bridge, and then the Golden Gate Bridge, and then, I have nobody to see. Nobody wants to see me. But then, look what happens after we hit Okinawa for refueling and resupply. Three more days and they are there, and suddenly every line in his calendar is filled with individuals who want to talk to him.

I asked, what rank were they?

He said, you know, it was a cross-section, but believe it or not, there were more officers who wanted to talk because they felt the responsibility of leading these men.

**Stubberfield:** I'm just struck by the power of that narrative. Can you put your finger on a cultural attitude toward the war itself through an observation, that appeared across these canvasses?

**Lee Beltrone:** I don't think the men really thought about where they were going initially. They had no idea. Many were from the Midwest, had never seen an ocean, big bodies of water or whatever. But as they got closer to the International Date Line and it got hot, reality started setting in, according to the stories they have told us, and they became more somber, and facing the fact that they were heading into a war.

**Art Beltrone:** Bear in mind, too, that when we're talking about complete units going over, these are men that have trained together for about a year and a close bond had formed among them.

They were watching each other's back during training and they were committed to doing the same in country. Contrast that to a replacement soldier who was not assigned to a unit even on the ship, but when he got

there, he was assigned to a unit, whether it be a Marine or an Army soldier. They don't have that bond, but on these voyages, they were complete units going over, so there was that connection. I think they were committed. Politically, I don't know how they felt about the war. I mean there are canvasses that say that they don't want to be there.

**Lee Beltrone:** There was one with the peace symbol on it, a very large peace symbol.

**Art Beltrone:** So, they were expressing themselves that way, and so it's a little different than maybe the ones that served as replacements. This is more unique in that sense because they trained together for that year.

**Lee Beltrone:** I think it was a big cross-section of thoughts, beliefs, from where the men came.

**Stubberfield:** Did you find any canvasses with comments that were gung-ho about going to war?

**Art Beltrone:** A few. That's all.

**Muessig:** Were there any canvasses that, maybe due to the artistic qualities of the individuals who completed them, that you would consider personal favorites, something that you might hang on your wall in your home?

**Art Beltrone:** There's one that I particularly like. Charlie Brown is just arriving in Vietnam and there are several panels done over the full six-foot length of the canvas in a horizontal position. So, he's there and suddenly he's taking on the facial characteristics of an Asian and then he winds up in a cook pot in the last piece of the panel. I mean that was quite artistic.

How about you, Lee?

**Lee Beltrone:** I like the one that depicts a man climbing out, with one leg out of the window of a hotel room and underneath the inscription, "Cancel that chicken salad sandwich." We're never sure whether he was on his way to avoid the war. He was on his way somewhere to do something, but we're not quite sure what.

**Art Beltrone:** But the footnote to that story is that one of the highest officials

in the Army Museum system particularly liked that canvas. Charlie Curan is his name, and I asked him, “Charlie why did you want that one in particular?”

He said, “I want this one for the new National Museum of the Army.” So, for whatever reason he wanted it. I am still not sure why. We brought him aboard when the ship was first found. One of the things that we just felt was that it was very important not just for us to be there, but we engaged those in the museum field, so the Army came aboard, the Army curators and a Navy curator came aboard, too. The Smithsonian asked us to represent them and pull some canvases for them, too, and we did.

They kind of gave us an idea of what they were looking for and I think they kept three. The Library of Congress wanted canvasses for the Veterans History Project, which is an ongoing project that they have and we went up to Washington and we carried about 20 canvasses, and in a very large room we laid them all out on the floor so you could walk down the rows and the curator could walk along with us and we would comment about what the meaning might be for this one or that one. And when we got through walking up and down the rows, she said, “How many canvasses did we say we wanted?”

And I said, you said two or three. She said, “Can we have them all?” We said, sure. They are yours.

**Muessig:** Lee, you mentioned earlier how you found some of the things that they had left behind, the troops that is, just odds and ends still on the ship. Was there anything among the things that they left behind that can tell us about the troops that were on board?

**Lee Beltrone:** Yes, many items can. They can tell us that they were interested in paperbacks. They say the bunks had many paperback books in them, comic books, current magazines from that time, many rosary beads, used bars of soap, one sneaker, religious books. What else would you say, Art?

**Art Beltrone:** Well, this says a lot about what was going on in the ship during the voyage. We found playing cards in the bunks, but we found more aces than any other card.

**Lee Beltrone:** We found a variety of items.

**Art Beltrone:** When you think about it, we first visited the ship in 1997

but it had been anchored in the river since 1970, so that's almost 30 years. Everything had been on it for that many years. And thank goodness it hadn't been stripped like all the other ships. The Walker was being kept in a state of ready reserve in case a Hurricane Katrina happened, they could put it into service and 5,000 people could live on it. There was a de-humidification system in place on the engine and some of the electrical systems in other areas had also been maintained, so it could be put back into operation within 30 days.

So, fortunately, they never removed anything from the ship. That's why the items could just stay there, because getting to that ship, as Lee said, you had to cross several other ships and they were completely stripped. It was just the ship itself, nothing on the inside of it.

**Stubberfield:** What do you hope a future generation will gain from this exhibit?

**Lee Beltrone:** For me, I hope everybody realizes you never know what path you're going to take in life. This is a path we never thought we would wind up on, but it has been one of the best gifts we've ever been given.

**Art Beltrone:** That said, there's history all around us and it's just a matter of keeping our eyes open and thinking about what we're looking at, and if it is something that has, you think has some relevance, well, pursue it. It may be significant to future generations. I think that one part of the lesson of this exhibit is that history should be pursued, and if appropriate, saved. And the other part is to correct an injustice because of what's on these canvasses, that these men never received the thanks of this nation that they should have received. So, it's a way of thanking them, and we've seen appreciation for that fact in places where the exhibit has been. A lot of these Vietnam veterans haven't been able to talk about their experience in that war with family members.

**Lee Beltrone:** Especially the wives and the children of the men. Many veterans did not share their stories. It's taken the grandchildren to bring it out. My favorite story arose when we were in a restaurant for the Los Angeles opening and we were having dinner, and Art gave the waitress his credit card and she came back with the check receipt and said, "I know who you are. I'm taking my grandfather to your exhibit next week." That was

so meaningful because we've seen grandchildren several times when we've been at openings bring their grandfathers back and that's the first time their grandfathers had spoken of their experience in the conflict.

**Art Beltrone:** The graffiti on the canvasses isn't like an in-country experience. This is all about going to war, being young, being 18 or 19, the way some of the inscriptions were and what some of the slogans were. So, it takes them back to a little safer time and it's like a key that opens a lock and then they're able talk to family members about their what happened to them in country.

# Afterword

## *Storytelling and Interviews*

CATHY GRIMES

### Storytelling and Interviews

As Michael McGuigan, managing director of Bond Street Theatre, discussed ways in which theatre can transcend the need for words in his interview in this volume, he shared a haunting scene in a show produced by his company and Exile Theatre in Afghanistan. His description places readers in the audience, watching the scene as it unfolds. The reader also can “hear” the song the actor sings as the scene progresses. The story has a complete and compelling arc, all shared within a few sentences during an interview about using theater as a means of communication, connection, and engagement.

In their interview, Art and Lee Beltrone take us on a tour of a decommissioned naval ship and share the stories of the men who once were transported to war on it, and what they left behind, scrawled on the canvases on the undersides of their bunks.

Activist and artist Lily Yeh used a share of her interview to describe an abandoned lot in Philadelphia she wished to turn into a community space and the dilemma of discerning how she might do so with few resources and no crew. She recounts recruiting children to assist and create a mosaic, and through her narrative, readers can imagine how they became a team working together to build an amazing space for their community.

This volume contains myriad stories like these. Some are quick visual vignettes. Others are remembered exchanges of dialogue and action, with vivid characterizations. Many include the storyteller’s thoughts and feelings. All were shared in response to questions posed by members of the Community Change Collaborative (CCC) as they interviewed their guests.

Humans are natural storytellers, and we love to share those stories with each other. As actor and educator Alan Alda has observed, “We can’t resist stories. We crave them” (2017, 178). Alda, who founded the Center for Communicating

Science at the State University of New York, Stonybrook, teaches scientists and other professionals to share their work via stories. His approach grew out of his experiences interviewing scientists for a television series. He said his guests proved engaging storytellers as they discussed their work before filming began, but once the cameras started recording, they would assume a more pedantic and stilted tone. Alda learned to ask questions that elicited anecdotes and vivid memories from his guests. As Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author David Maraniss has noted, “Humans will always have a need to explain themselves through story” (2010, x). Stories are vital to those listening to or reading interviews, as they provide context and connection. Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Jacqui Banaszynski has argued, for example, that “Often, a personal story is what people relate to most” (2020, Para. 23).

Alda, Maraniss, and Banaszynski have all recognized that interviews are conversations. The interviewer usually has a goal/purpose in mind and uses questions to elicit responses that will address that aim. It could be a desire to hear about the interviewee’s life, experiences, and work. It could be to gather information about an event or topic, or to gain perspective and insights concerning specific events or concerns. Whatever the goal, good interviewers prompt the person with whom they are interacting to share more than simple, perfunctory, or abstract answers. Thoughtful questioners seek to tap into their guests’ desire to share stories that reveal their knowledge or experience. Doing so also establishes a relationship between them that enriches the listener’s or reader’s experience. As Alda has suggested, “[P]eople are more in tune with one another if they trade information through story” (2017, 168).

One of the keys to eliciting stories from guests is careful preparation. That advance work provides the interviewers with a sense of what the guest has done, what will interest listeners and readers, and what specific concerns they hope to address. Once they have developed their questions, the CCC interviewers that appear in this volume, following recommended practice, share them with their guests. This “primes the pump,” according to journalist and writing teacher Jack Hart, helping guests think about what stories and information they can offer that addresses the questions they know they will encounter. (2010, 160). Sharing the questions also begins to build a relationship between the interviewer(s) and their guest(s) that can make stories more effective as vehicles for emphasizing a point or providing an

example. This benefits readers and listeners, too, as Alda has also emphasized: “People’s minds will sync up in the presence of story” (2017, 178) During their conversations with guests, CCC interviewers occasionally share stories of their own, but they are careful to keep the spotlight on their interviewee(s). They focus their attention, and that of the reader or listener, on their guest(s).

Asking guests about challenges they have faced or key moments in their lives can set up a complete story arc by taking the listener and reader back to the beginning of an effort as the interviewee describes it (Hart, 2010, 162). Journalism coach and author Roy Peter Clark has written that such stories can hark to universal themes: “Small stories can stand in for bigger ones” (Clark 1976, 153).

Banaszynski has similarly suggested that such stories shared in interviews may help listeners and readers relate more deeply to the guest(s) and pay closer attention to their thoughts and revelations.

I think human connection, listening to and sharing stories, is its own human life therapy. It is how we relate and connect, how people get closer and understand one another, how we develop empathy. The way people achieve empathy is by connecting with and hearing someone else’s story, by getting to know that other person (2020, Para 25).

Rebecca Solnit also has similarly argued that stories help individuals listen more closely and think more deeply about what they are hearing, “In the strongest stories, we see ourselves, connected to each other, woven into the pattern” (2013, loc. 2607). The power of story suffuses the interviews in this book, which offer readers multiple opportunities to experience just such connections and to think more deeply about the topics discussed. The attentive reader will learn more not only about the specific matters under consideration, but also about themselves.

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# About the Interviewees

**Hamid Bilici** is a former Turkish newspaper executive and former editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Zaman*. He was general director of *Cihan News Agency* and editor of *Aksiyon Weekly Magazine*, writing mainly on the topics of Turkish foreign policy and world politics. Bilici frequently shares his views on various local and international television programs. He is a member of the Turkish Journalist's Association, Journalists and Writers Foundation, and World Association of Newspapers.

**Art and Lee Beltrone** are co-founders of the Vietnam Graffiti Project, formed after Art Beltrone discovered graffiti drawings from the Vietnam era aboard a troop ship, the General Nelson M. Walker, that had carried soldiers and Marines bound for Vietnam in the 1960s. Art Beltrone is a military artifact historian and former journalist, who also served in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve from 1963-1969. Lee Beltrone is a professional photographer. The Beltrones coauthored the books, *A Wartime Log* and *Vietnam Graffiti: Messages from a Forgotten Troopship*.

**William “Bill” Cleveland** is an activist, teacher, lecturer, and musician, and directs the Center for the Study of Art and Community. His career includes leadership of the Walker Art Center's education and community programs department in Minneapolis, Minnesota, California's Arts in Corrections Program, and the California State Summer School for the Arts. He has written several books, including *Art in Other Places: Artists that work in America's Communities and Social-Change Institutions*; *Making Exact Change*; *Art and Upheaval: Artists on the World's Front Lines* and *Between Grace and Fear: The role of the arts in a time of change*.

**Dudley Cocke** is the now retired artistic director of Roadside Theatre, part of the rural multimedia center Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Cocke directed main stage productions and produced radio and television specials exploring theater's role in society. Roadside Theatre is also known for its artistic collaborations with African American, Native American, and Latino theater artists. Cocke received the 2002 Heinz award for Arts and Humanities for creating artistic opportunities with people whose stories have not been reflected in mainstream cultural institutions.

**Lisa Jo Epstein** is the founder and director of the nonprofit Just Act. a theater director, educator and teaching artist, she has developed an engaged theatrical vision that sustains her leadership role in arts for community change. After teaching at Tulane University, she co-founded and served as artistic director of Gas & Electric Arts with her husband, David Brown, to stage productions by living women playwrights, and focused on theatre-based community engagement projects. She served as artistic director for Gas & Electric Arts. artistic director and co-founder of Gas and Electric Arts. In 2015, she founded Just Act as a catalyst for change and activism to build a just and thriving world, combining artistic and community engagement, and working at the intersection of theatre, social justice, anti-oppression facilitation and creative community engagement.

**John Ferguson** is executive director and founder of the national award-winning American Voices, established in 1992 to fulfill the need for authentic cultural engagement programs with the newly independent nations of central and Eastern Europe. Since then, the nonprofit organization's focus has expanded to include nations emerging from conflict or isolation in the Middle East, North Africa and Central, South and Southeast Asia. Ferguson also is director of the Youth Excellence on Stage (YES) Academy summer youth programs in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Sudan, Pakistan and Indonesia. In addition to his work with American Voices and the YES Academy, he is an accomplished concert pianist who has performed in venues around the world.

**Liz Lerman** is a choreographer, performer, writer, educator, and speaker. A key aspect of her artistry is opening her process to various publics, from ship builders to physicists, construction workers to ballerinas, resulting in research and outcomes that are participatory, relevant, urgent, and usable by others. Lerman has received numerous honors, including a 2002 MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant fellowship, a 2011 United States artist Ford fellowship in dance and the 2014 Dance U.S.A. Honor Award. Her work has been commissioned by Harvard Law School, the Lincoln Center, American Dance Festival and the Kennedy Center, among many other institutions.

**Michael McGuigan** is managing director of New York-based Bond Street Theatre. The company's mission is to promote peace and mutual understanding through the arts, using the art form to communicate across cultural borders through artistic exchange and creative partnerships.

McGuigan has been an ensemble member of the company since 1979, performing as actor, director, designer, percussionist and technique instructor. He is the author and director of BST's production *The Mechanical*, and a collaborator on *Volpone* with Thukhuma Khayeethe in Myanmar and *Beyond the Mirror* with Exile Theatre in Afghanistan. He has developed arts-in-education and conflict-resolution programs for Bond Street Theatre, UNICEF, the United States Institute of Peace, and as Cultural Envoy for the U.S. Embassy in Burma.

**Alia Malek** is the director of international reporting at the Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York. A journalist and former civil rights lawyer, she is the author of several books, including *The Home That was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria*, published in 2017. Her stories have been published in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and other publications. Born in Baltimore to Syrian immigrant parents, she began her legal career as a trial attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. After working in the legal field in the U.S., Lebanon, and the West Bank, Malek, who has degrees from Johns Hopkins and Georgetown universities, earned her master's degree in journalism from Columbia University. In April 2011, she moved to Damascus, Syria and wrote anonymously for several outlets from inside the country as it began to disintegrate into civil war. After returning to the United States in 2013, she was a senior writer for *Al Jazeera* for two years. She has received numerous awards for her work.

**Francesco Manca** is an independent political analyst and former deputy director for the Political and Civil Affairs Office of the United Nations (UN) Interim Force in Lebanon. During his 25 years at the United Nations (UN) he held many roles at headquarters and in the field addressing economic development, electoral assistance, human rights, peacemaking, and peace keeping. He held political and managerial posts in several UN peacekeeping missions in Central America, the Balkans, Tajikistan, East Timor, Sierra Leone, and in the Middle East.

**Nate May** is a composer, performer, and educator whose interest in human ecosystems has impelled explorations of a wide variety of sounds and interactions. Raised in Huntington, West Virginia, much of his work stems from a "fascination, love, and respect for the people" of Appalachia. Currently a doctoral candidate in composition at Yale University, he holds degrees

from Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music (M.M., Composition) and the University of Michigan (B.F.A., Jazz and Contemplative Studies). He serves as a teaching artist with the American Composers Orchestra and on faculty at Montclair State University and at the Walden School, where he was awarded the 2018 Arno and Ruth Drucker Faculty Chair. He and Andrew Robert Munn combined contemporary opera and their passion for environmental and economic justice in Appalachia in a live performance at Virginia Tech of their jointly developed *Dust in the Bottomland*.

**Andrew Robert Munn** is a cultural organizer and singer who has dedicated himself to the climate justice movement. Until 2014, he lived in the Appalachian Mountains, working as a leading organizer in a constellation of community groups resisting mountaintop removal coal mining. As a singer, he has performed on opera and concert stages across Europe, and North America. He is an associated artist of the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel and teaches youth master classes internationally as a Juilliard Global Teaching Artist. He serves on the board of the Highlander Center for Research and Education, acting as a link between fellow cultural organizers within American and European movements for social and environmental justice. He and Nate May combined contemporary opera and their passion for environmental and economic justice in Appalachia in a live performance at Virginia Tech of their jointly developed *Dust in the Bottomland*.

**Karen O'Brien** is a Professor of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo and an internationally recognized expert on climate change and society. She is the co-founder and partner of Change, an Oslo-based company and beacon for individuals and organizations seeking a new perspective, inspiration, knowledge, and tools concerning climate change and sustainability. She was a co-recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize while serving on the International Panel on Climate Change and was named by Web of Science as one of the world's most influential researchers of the past decade. She received a Research Excellence Award from the American Association of Geographers Human Dimensions specialty group in 2019. She was co-recipient of the BBVA Foundation's Frontiers of Knowledge Award for climate change in 2021.

**Keryl McCord** is the President and C.E.O. of the Equity Quotient or E.Q., a national training and organizational development firm. E.Q. is dedicated to supporting nonprofits that are interested in becoming more just and

equitable community partners as outcomes of their work. Ms. McCord founded E.Q. after more than thirty years of working in the arts with such organizations as Alternate ROOTS, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the African Grove Institute for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Ms. McCord recently retired as Director of Operations for Alternate ROOTS.

**Patricia Parera** has more than 15 years of experience in environmental and social sustainable development with the World Bank, the United Nations and the government of the United States. Her work at the World Bank as an economic and social development consultant included several projects including one with the government of Romania to prepare a communications strategy to implement a strategic framework to reduce school drop-out rates. She has also provided technical support for World Bank gender, environmental, and social safeguard policies. At the time of this interview, she was serving at the Language and Culture Institute at Virginia Tech as Associate Director for Partnerships.

**Joanna Sherman** is the founder and artistic director of New York-based Bond Street Theatre. Created in 1976, the company's mission is to promote peace and mutual understanding through the arts. As a director, choreographer, musician and actor, Sherman has initiated and participated in company projects in East Asia, South America, Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. Under her directorship, Bond Street Theatre received a MacArthur Foundation Award in 1990. She has been an advocate and speaker on the role of the arts in peacebuilding across the globe, including at the United Nations, National Council on Women, Association of Performing Arts Presenters, and at numerous universities, conferences and forums. She has a BFA in Fine Arts from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, and an MA in Theatre & International Studies from New York University.

**Theresa Williamson** is a city planner and founder and executive director of Catalytic Communities (CatCom) a nongovernmental organization working since 2000 in support of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. She also serves as editor-in-chief of *Rio On Watch*, CatCom's internationally recognized favela news service. She has published opinion columns in *The New York Times* as well as several book chapters and has been cited in publications and on television. She has received the 2018 American Society of Rio Prize for her contributions

to that city, the 2012 National Association of Housing Rehabilitation and Redevelopment Officials award for contributions to the international housing debate, and the 2005 Gill Chin Lim Award for Best Ph.D. dissertation in international planning.

**Lily Yeh** served as the co-founder, executive director and lead artist of the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania-based Village of Arts and Humanities for 18 years, a nonprofit organization with the mission of building community through art, learning, land transformation, and economic development. Under her leadership, the Village's summer park building project developed into an organization with 20 full-and part-time employees, hundreds of volunteers, and a \$1.3 million budget. She founded Barefoot Artists in 2002 and now works internationally on projects in Rwanda, Kenya, Ghana, Ecuador, and China. A volunteer-based organization, Barefoot Artists aims to empower local residents and organize communities to take action for a more compassionate, just, and sustainable future.

**Mahir Zeynalov** is a Turkish journalist and analyst based in Washington D.C. He has worked with *The Los Angeles Times* and *Today's Zaman*. He worked at the latter until the Turkish government shut down the newspaper in 2016. He has written for *Al Arabiya* and the *Huffington Post* and is a frequent commentator on developments related to Turkey for major world television channels including CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, and NBC. He is best known for reporting on Recep Erdoğan's post-coup-attempt purge in Turkey.

# About the Interviewers

**Lehi Dowell**, a fourth-year Ph.D. student in Planning, Governance, and Globalization at Virginia Tech, is the Economic Development Director at CCD Business Development Corporation in Southwestern Oregon, where he leads the award-winning Economic Recovery Initiative and Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the three-county region. Over the past few years, he has worked to incorporate cross-campus and interdisciplinary activities at Virginia Tech by taking leadership positions in organizations such as the Graduate Student Assembly, the Community Change Collaborative, and the Diversity Scholar program. Having worked 10 years in hospitality operations management and several years in nonprofit administration, he has been exposed to issues concerning economic growth, sustainable development, and community engagement on local and international levels. He earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish from the University of La Verne and a master's degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management from Florida International University.

**Anna Erwin** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She is an interdisciplinary, environmental social scientist whose work sits at the nexus of human geography, public policy, and sociology. She uses qualitative and mixed methods to investigate the how and who of environmental justice in rural and peri-urban communities. Her research analyzes how institutions address environmental injustices through participation, laws, and governance processes and who makes decisions when addressing environmental issues and injustices. She applies this approach to study how rural communities wrestle with social and environmental injustices associated with multiple domains including agriculture, extractive industries, climate change, migration, and water. Erwin has published her research in numerous interdisciplinary journals with scholars from the biophysical and social sciences. She completed her postdoctoral work in Natural Resource Social Science at Purdue University and holds a Ph.D. in Planning, Governance, and Globalization from Virginia Tech.

**Naphtali Leyland Fields-Forbes** is a playwright and rural arts consultant from Kodiak Island, Alaska. Her first memories of stories are from the ocean;

as a child, she and her family would swap tales while working in their commercial fishing operation every summer. These days, she's retelling those childhood stories to her son as she teaches him to fish the way her grandparents did. In the off-season, she has worked as a university professor, theatre director, and community organizer. She is a founding member of Icara Productions. Whether on the water or in the classroom she believes stories change people and communities for the better. Her passion is telling transformative stories by and for rural people in remote places around the world. She holds a master of fine arts degree in Directing and Public Dialogue from Virginia Tech.

**Lydia Gilmer** now serves as the Director of Small Business Solutions for Pulaski County, Virginia. She works with entrepreneurs and small business owners to conceptualize and actualize business ideas, explore new business ventures, and solve any challenges that arise along the way. She manages the Pulaski County Innovation Center – a business incubator facility in Fairlawn with 40 tenants. She also serves on the Board of Directors for the Pulaski County Chamber of Commerce and Pulaski on Main. In her free time, she teaches yoga throughout the New River Valley. She was an active member and officer of the Community Change Collaborative while in graduate school. Gilmer holds a master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning (MURP) and a bachelor's degree in Public and Urban Affairs, both from Virginia Tech.

**Vanessa Guerra** is an Assistant Professor in Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia's School of Architecture, where she teaches urban planning and urban design. Her work focuses on urban interventions to promote social inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development in cities and regions of the Global South. Her teaching intersects with her research in urban informality, spatial justice, resilient cities, co-production, and cognitive urbanism. Before joining UVA, Guerra served as a research associate and interim program director of Virginia Tech's Rhizome Living-Learning Community (LLC) and as a consultant at the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank in Washington, D.C. She has presented in conferences and exhibitions across the United States, Europe, and South America, including the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale, a TEDx event in Quito, Cityworks (Xpo) in Roanoke, and Oxford Talks at the Transport Studies Unit at Oxford University.

**Brendan Halloran** is the Head of Strategy and Learning at the International

Budget Partnership. In this role, he facilitates strategy and learning processes at IBP – both the internal production of learning insights and drawing on evidence and ideas from broader research and practice in the governance space. Prior to joining IBP in 2016, he led the learning work of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, where he played a role in shaping and interpreting evidence about what works, as well as supporting collective learning spaces. Before that, he spent five years living, researching, and working in Guatemala. Halloran holds a Ph.D. from Virginia Tech, and has published work in a variety of journals, think pieces, and blogs, including his own – [Politics, Governance, and Development](#).

**Sarah Halvorson-Fried** is a Ph.D. student in the health behavior program at the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health. She researches neighborhood effects and impacts of the built environment on health behavior and health outcomes, with a focus on food and tobacco retail environments and their impacts on youth. She is also interested in unintended consequences of place-based health policy, such as gentrification, exposure to police violence, and employment. She holds a bachelor's degree from Macalester College, a master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning from Virginia Tech. She worked for more than five years as a health program evaluator at a place-based organization in New York City before starting her doctoral studies. Her goal is to conduct community-based quantitative research to improve population health and mitigate potential harms of public health action.

**Eric Hodges** is an assistant professor of Political Science at Longwood University. He is also the coordinator of that university's Homeland Security minor. At the age of 18, he enlisted in the U.S Marine Corps and later went on to work in the U.S. Intelligence Community. Hodges entered a doctoral program to achieve a better understanding of the veteran reintegration process, with the hopes of improving the situation for current vets and their families. His dissertation focused specifically on how civic engagement can aid vets in the transition. He has presented his work at several conferences and published in both scholarly and non-scholarly publications. In 2020, he received a \$100,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to study how the struggle for Civil Rights affected the wartime and homecoming experiences of Black Vietnam veterans. He holds a bachelor's degree in Philosophy from the University of Virginia, and a master's degree

in Philosophy and a Ph.D. in Planning, Governance and Globalization, both from Virginia Tech.

**Dana Hogg** is an international development professional, specializing in food systems strengthening, food security, nutrition sensitive agriculture, and community driven development. She is currently a Food Security Program Officer with Counterpart International, a nonprofit international development organization that prioritizes localization and partnerships. She is particularly interested in the ways indigenous knowledge, climate change adaptation, social inclusion, and gender sensitivity can create resilient food systems that prioritize regenerative agriculture and non-extractive resource management. Her previous research explored the value of cultural capital as it relates to resilient communities vis-à-vis economic downturns in Appalachia and historical resourcing disparities. Hogg served for two years with the Peace Corps in Timor-Leste working on projects related to agriculture, community development, and apiary management. Dana holds a bachelor's degree in Agricultural and Extension Education, and a master's degree in Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, both from Virginia Tech.

**Mario Khreic** is a Visiting Assistant Professor in Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. Before joining NYU, he was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Mellon Sawyer Seminar Series on Information Ecosystems at the University of Pittsburgh. His research and teaching interests include the future of work, education technologies, and histories of computing. Currently, his work focuses on the platformization of education. He holds a Ph.D. in Political and Cultural Thought at Virginia Tech, where he was affiliated with the Data in Social Context program.

**Lyusyena Kirakosyan** currently serves as a Senior Project Associate at the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance. Her research interests focus on critical disability studies, particularly in the context of the Paralympic Games and legacy. Since January 2016, she has been a research member of the Brazilian Paralympic Academy collaborating on the inquiry into paralympic sports in Brazil. She holds a Ph.D. in Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought (ASPECT) from Virginia Tech, a master's degree in Management from the Hult International Business School in Boston, Massachusetts, and a bachelor's degree in International Economics from Yerevan State University in Armenia.

**Jordan Laney** is a program coordinator for the Virginia Rural Health Association, offering adult education classes and developing cross-sector partnerships focusing on mental health, substance use disorders, and community healing. Additionally, she serves as the programs and services lead for the Institute for Liberatory Innovation. Previously, Laney served as a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech, teaching courses that addressed equity and inclusion in the United States. Laney holds a Ph.D. in Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought from Virginia Tech, a master's degree in Appalachian Studies, and a bachelor of fine arts degree in Creative Writing. Her dissertation and the resulting research on the cultural politics of bluegrass festivals was awarded the International Bluegrass Music Foundation's inaugural Neil Rosenberg Bluegrass Scholar Award.

**Becca Ligrani** has worked in food systems education and development for nearly 10 years. She has been fortunate enough to contribute to the Appalachian Foodshed Project, the North American Food Systems Network, and the Hudson Valley Food System Coalition. She currently works as a Grant Writer for the nonprofit Food & Water Watch and teaches an Introduction to Food Systems course at the Culinary Institute of America. She holds a bachelor's degree in Conservation Biology from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and a master's degree in Agricultural and Extension Education from Virginia Tech. She lives in upstate New York with her husband, daughter, and two dogs.

**Sarah Lyon-Hill** is Associate Director for Research Development at the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement. She specializes in cultivating viable solutions for community and economic challenges by integrating community and industry input, university resources and data-driven analysis. She works across disciplines to engage key stakeholders, collecting and interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data to provide multiple perspectives and garner the greatest benefits. Her areas of research include strategic planning, organizational development, socio-economic impact analyses, and community cultural development. She recently co-edited a book examining Virginia's urban-rural continuum. She holds a Ph.D. in Planning, Governance, and Globalization, where she examined the changing national dynamics and roles of arts-based community organizations in community and economic

development; a master's degree from Virginia Tech in Urban and Regional Planning; and a bachelor's degree in French and International Relations from Beloit College.

**Lorien E. MacAuley** is devoted to working towards a healthy, equitable, ecologically sustainable food system for all. She has worked on food system issues for nearly two decades, from laboring on farms, to leading agricultural and nutrition education programs, to nonprofit program coordination, to researching community nutrition and beginning farmer policy and programming. She has implemented and evaluated programs for agricultural cooperative extension, first with Virginia Cooperative Extension, then with University of Maryland Extension. MacAuley currently teaches courses in environmental stewardship and nutrition at University of Maryland Global Campus, while serving as Food System, Agriculture, and Environment consultant for the Montgomery County, Maryland, Food Council. She also currently operates a one-acre vegetable farm in the Montgomery County Agricultural Preserve, selling directly to consumers within the community. She holds a bachelor's degree from Longwood University, a master's degree in Agricultural Extension Education, and a Ph.D. in Agricultural Life Sciences and Community Viability from Virginia Tech.

**Garland Mason** is the program coordinator for AgrAbility Virginia, a federally funded program that promotes safety, wellness, and accessibility on the farm through education, rehabilitative services, and assistive technology. She also serves as an associate for the VT Center for Food Systems and Community Education. Her academic interests center on the intersection of power, knowledge, race, and nonformal education. She is particularly interested in epistemological politics surrounding land grant universities and their efforts in agricultural and community development. Her previous research explored participatory methodologies and the micro-politics of stakeholder participation. Mason previously worked in the areas of food equity and beginning farmer education in Vermont and served for two years with the Peace Corps in Nepal working on projects related to food security and community development. She holds a bachelor's degree in Animal Science from Cornell University and a master's degree in Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education from Virginia Tech.

**Neda Moayerian** currently serves as an assistant professor at the University of Tehran School of Urban Planning and a non-resident research associate at

Virginia Tech's Institute for Policy and Governance. She has been a member of the Community Change Collaborative at Virginia Tech since 2015. Her research interests include hospitality discourse in tourism and refugee studies, art-based community development, nongovernmental organizations, and international development. She has been a part of collaborative research projects in various parts of the world, including Central Appalachia in the United States, Brazil, Europe, and the Middle East. Neda holds a Ph.D. in Planning, Governance, and Globalization from Virginia Tech. She earned a master's degree in Urban Management from the University of Tehran and a bachelor's degree in Urban Planning from the Art University of Tehran, Iran.

**Cheryl Montgomery** is an assistant professor in the Department of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Addressing issues of race, place, and power, her research examines southern black women's practices of community, documenting the ways these women take up and transform physical and virtual spaces. By employing critical theories, affirming epistemologies, and qualitative research methods, she demonstrates the fluid and historical relationship between race and space, uncovering an active archive to imagine community otherwise. She holds a master's degree in City and Regional Planning from Morgan State University and a bachelor's degree from Hampton University.

**Andy Morikawa**, a third-generation Japanese American, is a former Peace Corps volunteer English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teacher and teacher trainer. Following his time in the Peace Corps, he found a career in nonprofit work, primarily in Virginia's New River Valley, a small town, rural community in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Appalachia. He has served as executive director for New River Community Action and founding executive for the Community Foundation of the New River Valley. As a volunteer, he serves and has served on the boards of directors of local, regional, and national nonprofits. He is a senior fellow at the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance where he hosts a podcast, Trustees Without Borders. He lives in Blacksburg with Susan, his wife. Their three children, three grandchildren, and great-grandson all live in the New River Valley.

**Will Muessig** was a junior at Virginia Tech at the time of the interview in which he participated (2018). He holds a bachelor's degree in International Studies from Virginia.

**Thomas Murray** is an ethnodramatist, a theatre director, and a teacher of performance. His multidisciplinary documentaries involve ethnographic research with collaborators including civil engineers, urban planners, landscape architects, policymakers, lawyers, motormen, clergy, and morticians. His original docudrama, “The Right of Way,” was produced at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and was published in *ArtsPraxis* by New York University. Murray is the chief community officer for EquiTech Futures, an applied research lab and global talent incubator focused on the intersection of technology and social challenges. He leads EquiTech’s alumni network and teaches a course he developed, the Speaking Lab, encouraging young innovators to lean into their self-narratives and clearly communicate their ideas. He has received a fellowship from the National Academy of Sciences and an outstanding alumnus award from Ball State University. He holds a master of fine arts degree in Directing and Public Dialogue from Virginia Tech.

**Lara Nagle** works as the community-based research manager at the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance, where she supports program evaluations for organizations at the local, regional, and state level, including those in workforce development, public health, and housing. She also manages community-based research and engagement projects in Central Appalachia to assist stakeholders with strategic positioning and cross-sectoral partnership development. She has worked in, and with, communities in environmental education, policy, advocacy, and cross-sectoral community development for more than ten years. Her research experience includes assessment of green infrastructure performance, recreational user preferences and values, mixed methods program evaluation, and study of the social, political, and economic dynamics impacting community change.

**Vera Smirnova** is an assistant professor in Geography and Political Science at Kansas State University. Her work lies at the intersection of political geography, urban and territorial politics and explores the relations between land and power and their various manifestations in pre-and post-Soviet Russia. She examines how rights to land ownership are negotiated and how territorial policies are performed through formal and informal technologies of power. Through this lens, she researched Russian land privatization reforms, as well as perceptions of territorial integrity in Russian geographic

thought. She is also a board member of the Eurasian Geography Specialty Group at the American Association of Geographers and an adjunct researcher at the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies at the University. She holds a Ph.D. from Virginia Tech, and she was a postdoctoral fellow at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia.

**Alexander Stubberfield** is visiting adjunct assistant professor in the Political Science Department and the International Studies Program at Virginia Tech. He has published previously on American political development and was featured in *Re: Reflections and Explorations: A Forum for Deliberative Dialogue* Vol. 2, Edited by Stephenson, Max O., and Lyusyena Kirakosyan, as well as *SPECTRA: The ASPECT Journal*. He has a chapter, “Technonaturalism: A Postphenomenological Environ-mentality” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Politics and Theory* (forthcoming February 2023) and his interests fall within environmental political theory, environmental social science, philosophy, environmental history, social theory, environmental politics, and ecological modernization. He holds a Ph.D. from the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical and Cultural Thought, an interdisciplinary doctoral program in the humanities and social sciences at Virginia Tech.

**C. Flachs-Surmanek** is an urban planner and theater artist. Surmanek specializes in performed ethnography and Theatre of the Oppressed to explore community conceptions of place and belonging. Their scholarship focuses on the centrality of aesthetics to navigating complex social issues. Surmanek is a co-investigator with the University of Florida’s Center for Arts in Medicine, working to develop a Core Outcomes Set for the arts in public health. With Civic Arts, Surmanek provides services in professional policy and engagement to integrate arts and culture into the ways we create our cities. Surmanek has worked with Ping Chong + Company to create community-based documentary theater and with Virginia Tech’s Center for Communicating Science and School of Performing Arts as an adjunct instructor. They are a master’s degree candidate in the Urban and Regional Planning and Theatre Directing and Public Dialogue programs. Prior to pursuing their master’s degree, Surmanek worked for several arts-based nonprofit and public placemaking organizations in New York City.

**Scott Tate** is associate director for the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement. In that role, Scott leads projects and programs to advance community well-being and economic prosperity. Tate’s doctoral

dissertation research focused on arts-based community change. He has written and published on this and other development topics in journals, books, and edited volumes. He regularly teaches courses at the undergraduate and graduate level on planning, policy, leadership, and community development. He holds a Ph.D. in Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought and a master's degree in Management from the Pamplin College of Business, both from Virginia Tech.

**Molly F. Todd** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought program at Virginia Tech, studying Cultural Studies and Global Politics. Her dissertation research highlights two groups of artists and expressive forms — one, a multi-media exhibition about the Maré neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, called “Maré from the Inside,” and a performance of daily-life stories from Tijuana, Mexico called The Frontera Project. Using ethnographic methods, she investigates how each of these works emerge through ongoing dialogue at, on, and across borders. She works with an interdisciplinary research group focusing on arts and community journalism in two of Rio’s favelas. She also serves as the president of the Community Change Collaborative, a graduate student organization of which she is a long-time member. She has taught courses in Foreign Policy, Theoretical Approaches to Global Order, Global Politics, Spanish I and II, and served as a Cultural Ambassador, teaching in Spain from 2012-2015.

# About the Editors

**Max O. Stephenson, Jr.** serves as a Professor of Public and International Affairs and the Director of the Institute for Policy and Governance at Virginia Tech (VTIPG). He is the author or editor of 11 books and more than 80 refereed articles and book chapters. Stephenson is also the author of more than 400 commentaries concerning American and international politics and democracy. Those can be accessed at the following URLs:

[https://ipg.vt.edu/tags.resource.html/ipg\\_vt\\_edu:Soundings](https://ipg.vt.edu/tags.resource.html/ipg_vt_edu:Soundings)

[https://ipg.vt.edu/tags.resource.html/ipg\\_vt\\_edu:Tidings](https://ipg.vt.edu/tags.resource.html/ipg_vt_edu:Tidings).

He has taught graduate and undergraduate courses related to social change and development both domestically and internationally for more than three decades.

More information concerning Professor Stephenson may be found here:

<https://ipg.vt.edu/OurPeople/Stephenson.html>

More information concerning the Community Change Collaborative, whose activities feature in this volume, may be found here: <https://ccc.ipg.vt.edu/>.

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