

2003 Charles Fowler Colloquium:  
Cultures in Counterpoint: The Arts as Intercultural Dialogue  
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## ***Moving Together: The Arts in Higher Education***

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### **Universities as Public Goods**

Universities have a rare and critical role to play as a public good. We educate the next generation of leaders. We address important societal issues with discoveries that change our world. We preserve our cultural past while laying the groundwork for the future. And we experiment with ways of building community.

This role is “rare” precisely because universities are constituted off to the side of “normal” society, unfettered by the need to deliver immediately on real-world concerns. We should, in principle, encourage an experimental attitude well suited to a thoughtful discourse, from many angles, about important issues. We should be centers of intellectual diversity and should permit a certain intellectual playfulness with ideas likely to encourage discovery.

The “critical” role works when we open our gates sufficiently to our many publics that we remain connected to the concerns of the day, the critical societal issues and the voices pushing them. We must also face outward, toward culture-changing work.

We do our best when we are poised between two worlds, the world of the monastery, with its dedication to a higher purpose, and the marketplace, with the multitude of pressing concerns of everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

As I will argue here, exchanges built around the arts can be especially effective in allowing us to remain poised between worlds—to celebrate who we are and how we get to know each other, while also taking a self-critical view of how we normally live our separate lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Cantor and Steven Schomberg, “Poised Between 2 Worlds: The University as Monastery and Marketplace,” *EDUCAUSE review*, Vol. 38, No. 2, March/April 2003.

## Separate, Contested, and Lost

And, speaking of separate lives, surrounding each university is a world – actually, many worlds – as divisive, insular, bounded, and contested as one can imagine.

Last summer, 35 years after the Kerner Commission warned “Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white —separate and unequal,”<sup>2</sup> racial violence as tragic as any the commission studied broke out in the all-black city of Benton Harbor, Michigan. With cruel irony, this happened just as the Supreme Court was affirming in the Michigan cases—as it had 50 years ago in *Brown v Board of Education*--that this nation has a compelling interest in educating students to live and work together.<sup>3</sup>

We are now just one generation away from a time when white children will be the minority in our public schools, and different races and ethnic groups still live in separate neighborhoods, attend different schools, churches, synagogues and mosques, and grow up without attending each other’s birthday parties, proms, weddings and funerals. In practice, the promise of desegregation in *Brown* is largely unrealized, a vision of a better time that has not yet been achieved.

Because we do not know each other, the stereotypes we hold have led to great injustices and inequalities in such vital areas as employment, health care, and the criminal justice system.

Mirroring these divisions at home, ethnic, religious, and inter-group conflict can be seen in virtually every corner of the globe, resulting in untold human and cultural carnage.

To make matters worse, we have reacted to very real pain and losses on our own shores with a turn inward, a “battening the hatches” if you will, that poses real problems for the kinds of free and vital exchange of people and ideas at the heart of our democracy. It is no accident that when this nation begins to worry about “outsiders,” we often clamp down on our own artists and writers, precisely because they are forces for free intercultural expression.

Boundaries that separate, as they do in our own land, contribute to the loss of cultures and indigenous traditions everywhere, as ethnomusicologists, linguists, anthropologists and archaeologists lose track of music in Liberia, native languages in the Southwest, rituals in New Zealand, or treasures in Iraq, to name a few contested arenas.

Paradoxically, even as we build walls and lose touch with indigenous traditions within them, we cannot escape the effects of an astonishing and fast-moving revolution in technology that is spreading a certain kind of global culture.

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<sup>2</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, March 1, 1968, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Grutter v Bollinger*, No. 02-214, Supreme Court, June 23, 2003.

This revolution in technology has other effects as well. It should connect us and give us access to each other, but on an individual level, as novelist Richard Powers has observed, it can isolate, exhaust, and overwhelm. The barrage of news 24 hours a day makes our world seem smaller in some regards and accelerates our sense of tragedy and dread without genuinely or deeply connecting us to the experiences or voices of those beyond the digital divide.

We must ask ourselves how we can help shape this revolution. How can technology be a means of forging connections, sharing worlds, freeing the imagination, and expressing differences while still reaching out to each other?

### **Artists and Scholars Lighting the Future**

In this world of foreboding, artists and humanists working at the boundaries between campus and community can provide a medium for participation in a dialectic in which intra-cultural expression and intercultural dialogue are intimately intertwined, just as the growth of the self is inextricably bound with one's interdependence with others.

We can see an unparalleled example of such peaceful and creative human, cultural, and spiritual dialogue if we take a fresh look, as you are at Maryland, at the Spain of al-Andalus--at its dynamics as well as its artistic artifacts. For more than seven centuries, it was a seedbed for art, science, and philosophy, in which three cultures derived from three religions shared the past and created a rich heritage of architecture, poetry, and music.

Taking direction from the legacy of art in action in al-Andalus, the arts, broadly defined as "expressive culture," can be the medium, not just the reflection, of intracultural affirmation and intercultural dialogue. They can express difference while building trust, rather than conflict or separation, and they can make possible a creative, dynamic coexistence that richly affirms each part. The arts of all forms—from visual to performing—provide a context for exchange that we must nurture.

The arts can forge sustained connections between peoples and ideas and cultures that otherwise either simply remain invisible, unexpressed, or worse yet, clash in destructive ways. Across our institutions and around the globe, scholars, artists, citizens, and students are teaming up—sometimes, but not always, aided by some form of cyber technology--to explore differences, preserve and interpret and share cultural heritages, and criticize ourselves, thereby fostering new dialogues.

Many of these projects fulfill the hope of preparing for a more peaceful world largely by their ability to embrace several generations at once, interweaving different kinds of expertise about life, including the scholar's penchant for cataloguing the range of experience and the community's search for a dominant, coherent voice. By teaming up, there is an enriched authenticity to the dialogue.

For this dialogue to flourish, we must suspend the norms through which we live and our habits for perceiving the world. We need a place apart, where we can listen to our inner voices and those of others. The arts, which stand to the side of daily life, allow the expression of self and of social tensions in this safe way. We need to combine the arts as a medium for learning about ourselves and others with the open-mindedness of students oriented to change. The freedom of an academic setting, whether on or off campus, can often provide a powerful context for safe exchange, allowing artistic expression to reveal some of the ills of our time.

### Exploring Difference

As we all try to explore difference, we are often drawn first to the safety of artistic expressions of them. On our campus, for example, we recently began a year long commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Brown v Board* decision with the exhibition at our Krannert Art Museum of Visualizing *the Blues*, a dazzling and poignant collection of photographs of life in the Mississippi Delta between Reconstruction and the end of the millennium.

As collected by the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis, the images capture the experiences that have contributed to the culture of the Deep South and the huge barriers between the lives of blacks and whites. Even when they were taking a lunch break together in the same cotton field, as photographer Dorothea Lange showed, black workers and white workers inhabited two worlds with parallel narratives.

Deborah Willis Kennedy writes “The blues is a life and death struggle. The blues permits the living to defend life/living.” To visualize the blues, one must contend with prejudice and racism, blood and spit, malice and murder.<sup>4</sup>

Ernest Withers took such a photograph: “Boarding House Bathroom From Which James Earl Ray Shot Dr. King, 422 South Main Street, Memphis, April 1968.” The photograph shows very little, and yet it shows everything: a filthy toilet, an old tub, a pockmarked wall, the open window from which a killer silenced the greatest voice for peace in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The image puts us there, unable to stop the crime or understand it but unable to forget it.

Photographer Mark Steinmetz show us the loneliness and boredom of a young white girl lying on the hood of a car in “Athens, Georgia, 1996,” and Birney Imes suggests a whole world in “Turk’s Place, Leflore County,” where a tiny string of colored lights has been turned on at sundown on a summer night, and a door stands open to a brightly lit room, drawing us down a dirt road to a parking lot in the middle of nowhere, empty of everything but possibilities.

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Willis Kennedy, “Coda: Imaging the Blues,” in *Visualizing the Blues: Images of the American South* catalog, ed. Wendy McDoris, Memphis: The Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 2000.

Such an exhibit reminds us that people who love the blues may live a world away from Memphis. One of the most telling photographs is a self-portrait by Tseng Kwong Chi, a Chinese who, at the height of the cold war, proudly took his own photograph at the gates of Graceland, appropriating the stance of the white man who became a legend and a phenomenal commercial success by appropriating black music for white teen-agers.

Although the photographs in *Visualizing the Blues* often have an undercurrent of violence or show the aftermath of violence, one can look at them and become intimately involved without direct personal risk beyond the vulnerability that comes from feeling others' pain. Like all the arts, they offer a safe haven—for the artist to express conflict, anger, and dissent and for the audience to suspend the protectionism in which we normally indulge, the boundaries we draw to isolate ourselves and look inward, not outward.

Whereas our commemoration of *Brown* includes a year of symposia, courses, community-based projects, performances, and dialogues, marking both the victories initiated by this landmark decision and its unfulfilled promises, *Visualizing the Blues*, through the breadth and honesty of its portrayal, communicates this bittersweet message in one collected moment. Sometimes pictures really do speak a thousand words, light up a thousand lives.

### **Inviting Others In**

In fact, part of the effectiveness of *Visualizing the Blues* is that, while ostensibly showing the separateness of the worlds of blacks and whites in the South, then and now, it actually draws the viewer into a dialogue across those worlds. This is not atypical of artistic expression, as it frequently both affirms difference and still manages to draw in others instead of pushing them away, offering the possibility of bonds that go across cultures.

Another example of this is the documentary “The Amasong Chorus: Singing Out,” by Jay Rosenstein, a member of our journalism faculty. The documentary, which recently debuted as part of our *Brown v Board* commemoration, charts the growth of Champaign Urbana’s premiere lesbian/feminist chorus.

It shows us the beauty, the love, the pain and the humiliation that have been suffered by the members of this outstanding chorus, while drawing us into a dialogue with them. We are invited in, across cultures, not pushed away. Moreover, this exchange operates on multiple levels, as the film also documents the exchanges within the chorus itself, in which lesbian and straight members share both their voices and their lives with each other.

Brenda Farnell, a cultural anthropologist on our campus who is also a former dancer, is among those trying to break down the boundaries that have led to the destruction of indigenous languages and culture. She is working to preserve languages of

the Plains Indians. These languages, which are in danger of extinction, combine gestures and sound, and Dr. Farnell records the multi-faceted performances of elder storytellers, from the Nakota and Crow in Montana to the Kiowa in Oklahoma, trying to reverse the process of loss and to invite others in to carry on.

### Equalizing Standing

The arts work to empower and to foster intercultural dialogue partly because everyone has some “standing” in the “conversation.” The arts offer an escape from the silencing that tends to come in “normal” society through the subtleties of power and status. The arts, through performances, through dialogues, are a uniting force, more like the counterpoint of Bach than a debate in which one side inevitably dominates.

In the arts, for example, it is not only diplomats who can discuss and negotiate peace. Without money, without limousines, without hotel reservations, children are taking it up, one to one, from different parts of the globe through a “*Peace through Poetry*” exchange on the internet, sponsored by iEARN, an international educational and resource network. At the moment, the 16 schools participating in this project are located in Chicago, Lithuania, Japan, Bulgaria, Moscow, and in Urbana, a few blocks from our campus.

*“Nothing will be as good as you want it to be/If you do nothing for it,”* writes 16-year-old Yuri Petrovichev, from Kiev, Ukraine. *“You should put your soul in it.”*<sup>5</sup>

*“Before the war commences the end is clear,”* writes Rositsa Kuneva, a student from Bulgaria. *“All taking part are losers, nobody wins. /Never wins the one who fights against his fear/Sluicing down the earth with bloody rinse.”*<sup>6</sup>

Dialogues like these strip away the armor that we think we need to protect our place in the world, and there is nothing quite like the voices of students when they are given standing through artistic expression. They remind us that things could be different.

### Sharing the Particulars

One of the reasons that *Peace through Poetry* can work its magic is that, unlike most of our languages, art forms are shared across cultures—expressed differently but derived from similar impulses that are easily grasped. Choreography and body movement, vocal expression in song, and the range of human emotions expressed on hand-made instruments can be appreciated and shared by people throughout the world. And because great art can gather together all generations, all classes, and all levels of expertise, the arts are unique in their ability to represent the particulars of local experience while communicating them universally.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.vceducation.org/peace/schools/ukraine208.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vceducation.org/peace/schools/varnabulgaria.html>

One such shared impulse that often finds its way into artistic expression is the remarkable drive for survival and the restoration of voice that heals. Here, for example, at the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, a digital archive project, *Narratives That Heal*,<sup>7</sup> researched and created by Carolina Robertson, contains universal stories of survival and healing from particular communities across the globe: an ivory carver and farmer in Ghana, a Hawaiian woman who composed more than 300 songs, many of which are standard hits in the modern hula repertoire, an Argentine social psychologist detained and tortured for eight years during his country's "Dirty War," who teaches workshops about the hidden art that emerges as a tool for survival, even in the worst human conditions.

Just as *Peace through Poetry* is an ongoing act of negotiation, the *Narratives That Heal* draw on the life-giving power of the arts to record the endless struggles for survival of so many peoples in so many places over so long.

Around the world, we are seeing libraries not only serving as centers for recording the particulars of these struggles, but also for actively exchanging information so as to create opportunity.

Karen Kitching, for example, city librarian at the Alberton Public Library in South Africa, spent a summer at our Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, partnering through the Illinois State Library with local libraries throughout the state. Afterwards, she wrote: "This program gave me the opportunity to reflect on my situation, and I realized that I am limiting myself. There are so many opportunities for me and areas where I can contribute." The program, she said, "gave me wings."

### **Preserving Our Pasts**

Indeed, the arts offer ways to draw from the past, from traditions and legacies, while offering a beacon for change. They make places for us to be at home in ourselves. And they offer us ways to venture out of that home into new territory.

Last year, for example, the New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture, and History teamed up with the Mayor's Housing and Neighborhood Development office to reclaim the area around North Claiborne Avenue, believed to be the oldest black neighborhood in the nation. It had been an oasis of green until its oak trees were cut down, in spite of opposition, to build Interstate 10. The oaks were replaced by an elevated highway and 40 concrete pillars, each 8 to 10 feet around and 16 to 20 feet high.

With help from the mayor and the museums, artists got together to paint murals on the pillars to memorialize the people, traditions, organizations, and institutions of the historic Treme and Seventh Ward neighborhoods of New Orleans. The name of the

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.mith2.umd.edu/nth/>

project, which was a successful blend of the arts and community activism, was called “Restore the Oaks.”

If you go to New Orleans, it will also not take you long to realize that Zydeco bands often include two and even three generations among their members, and the music flourishes in locations such as bowling alleys, where aficionados go to “rock and bowl.” These intergenerational “performances” loudly announce the evolution of an art form and its new place in the world.

Through the gathering together of generations and of communities, it is possible to at once solidify traditions in the arts and invigorate those traditions. This year in our Jazz Threads series, a partnership between the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts on campus and 40 or more local jazz artists and advocates, we are celebrating the grand legacy of jazz in Champaign, IL., and its possibilities in the future of our community.

“Hometown jazz heroes,” such as the legendary jazz trumpet player Cecil Bridgewater, are coming home to give performances and classes on campus and in the community to “students” of all ages. This ambitious project is built around the affirmation of local heroes and local history and the inspiration that comes from them. At the same time, Jazz Threads is providing a powerful context for exchange about the very painful history of racism, discrimination, and prejudice in our community and on our campus. Embracing the self-critical stance of this artistic exchange is opening the way to build community and go forward.

Perhaps most critically, projects such as those in New Orleans and Jazz Threads in Champaign serve to invigorate our children as future citizens by connecting them to both the pleasures and the pain of the local history of their communities. In this vein, David Scobey, at the University of Michigan has organized “The Arts of Citizenship,” an apt name for partnerships which include children’s theater productions of oral histories of elderly Detroit residents.<sup>8</sup> By moving together across generations in artistic exchange, it is also likely that other barriers so corrosive to our communities begin to come down.

### **Moving Together: The Arts and Intercultural Dialogue**

In the end, I return to getting to know each other and the unique power of the arts to demolish corrosive barriers and foster honest intercultural dialogue. This is what makes them so essential to the life of a university as a public good. When universities turn their campuses into communities of practice in the arts, barriers between the groups on campus and with our neighbors, dissolve. Consider an example from Illinois, mirrored by similar ones across higher education.

Last year was a time of intense distress and growing conflict between our Jewish and Muslim student communities in the wake of ever-escalating tensions in the Middle East and world-wide. These tensions, which had been festering for several years with considerable anger and polarization on both sides, were further inflamed by publication

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.artsofcitizenship.umich.edu/about/program.html>

in the student newspaper of anti-Palestinian “One-Truth” advertisements from a group external to the university, followed several months later by an intentionally provocative anti-Semitic letter from a person in Seattle. The situation seemed grim as Israel’s Independence Day approached, and students on each “side” planned for celebrations and protests on the Quadrangle. In the face of potential confrontation, we turned to student leaders, relying in particular on two women, one Jewish and the other Muslim, who had engaged in student-run intergroup dialogues before.

Within three weeks, these two students gathered 50 students from diverse backgrounds to create, in their words, a “cultural symposium” on Israel/Palestine for the first evening of Independence Day. They worked feverously, developing a network of personal relationships in the process, to create a richly woven tapestry of displays, performances, prayer offerings, songs, readings, and so forth, gathering these “normally” very hostile groups together for a long evening of *Common Ground in the Holy Land*.

Not only did this calm the tide of potential conflict the next day on the Quad, but even more significantly, it also set a standard for intercultural dialogue unprecedented for these student advocates and “adversaries.” The impact was extraordinary, and it continues to be felt in the diminution of hate speech on campus, the flourishing of more intercultural dialogues, and the emergence of student leaders ready to talk across traditional divides.

As the two designers of *Common Ground* now reflect on their efforts, they write with great poignancy of the ways in which the artistic expressions that evening, the readings, the music, and the poetry, served to “re-humanize and de-politicize” the peoples and ideas at the heart of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Surely, it will take many more such evenings of cultural expression and sharing to defuse these deep tensions thoroughly, but if anything can sustain this “moving together,” it is the art that sprang up that evening.

The experience of common ground is at the core of the cultural work of artists, students, and the place where differences intersect. Art allows its presenters and audiences alike to step away from norms and ideologies and passions that can be isolating and stultifying. It lets them suspend judgments of each other for a few moments, to express social tensions in a safe way. As art unfolds, participants live together for a moment in a land of intellectual and social playfulness – serious, not giddy – but playful in its message that things can be different. That experience is also what defines education at its most hopeful and its best.