

SOUNDING STATECRAFT:
U.S. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY PROGRAMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Erica Fedor

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Approved by:

Mark Katz

Andrea F. Bohlman

Michael Figueroa

Danielle Fosler-Lussier

Jocelyn Neal

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ABSTRACT

Erica Fedor: *Sounding Statecraft: U.S. Cultural Diplomacy Programs
in the Twenty-First Century*
(Under the direction of Mark Katz)

My dissertation examines the complex set of objectives, principles, and motivations that animate modern U.S. cultural diplomacy, with a focus on two performing arts initiatives: OneBeat (established 2012) and Next Level (established 2013). U.S. government-sponsored arts programs harbor an essential tension: they depend on collaboration and consensus among a diverse group of stakeholders but operate within an inescapably asymmetrical power structure. A key strategy for gaining consensus is to promote a sense of a shared agenda that depoliticizes diplomacy and embraces a universalist view of art and culture. I argue that the act of distancing cultural diplomacy from politics creates gaps between rhetoric and action, between how programs are theorized and described in promotional materials versus how they are carried out. State Department employees, program staff, and participating artists often deemphasize cultural diplomacy's political underpinnings or describe cultural diplomacy as being separate from politics entirely. For instance, artists may be invested in separating cultural diplomacy from politics in order to justify their participation, focusing instead on personal and professional objectives and opportunities. State Department employees, meanwhile, may celebrate the supposedly transcendental qualities of music rather than focus on cultural diplomacy as a way to secure U.S. influence on the world stage or act as a precursor to hard diplomacy.

Defining U.S. cultural diplomacy as a multi-directional practice rather than a strictly top-down pursuit, I draw upon insights from participating artists, U.S. State Department staff, and employees at the NGOs that administer these programs. Using an interdisciplinary framework that connects ethnomusicology, anthropology, and the study of diplomacy, I illuminate the social, technological, and musical networks through which diplomacy and international exchange take place. By highlighting the individual agency of participants and program administrators, the often-conflicting ideologies, subjectivities, and values brought to spaces of cross-cultural encounter take center stage. Building on scholarship that examines 20th-century cultural diplomacy programs, my study of 21st-century programming offers new perspectives on American exceptionalism, negotiations of power on the world stage, and how the players in today's cultural diplomacy programs conceptualize value, labor, and what it means to represent one's country as a cultural ambassador.

*To my family, for supporting me on every journey,
especially this one.*

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INTRODUCTION

What can music tell us about mutual understanding? How does music's malleability foster encounters between diverse global actors? These are questions posed by cultural diplomacy, a form of state-sponsored programming in which people of different nations engage with one another through ideas, culture, and values. Cultural diplomacy involves diverse fields, from literature to sports; my work focuses on music, sound, and the performing arts. Cultural studies scholars Ien Ang, Yudhishtir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar identify a lack of critical engagement in fields that explore cultural diplomacy and exchange, citing the need for a "rigorous, theoretically informed analysis which locates actually existing cultural diplomacy practices within their social, political and ideological contexts and examines the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which they operate."¹ My dissertation responds to this call, exploring the complex set of objectives, principles, and motivations that animate two 21st-century U.S. cultural diplomacy initiatives, OneBeat (established 2012) and Next Level (established 2013), both of which focus on the performing arts.

U.S. government-sponsored arts programs harbor an essential tension: they depend on collaboration and consensus among a diverse group of stakeholders but operate within an inescapably asymmetrical power structure. As I will show, a key strategy for gaining consensus is to promote a sense of a shared agenda that depoliticizes diplomacy and embraces a universalist view of art and culture. I argue that the act of distancing cultural

¹ Ien Ang, Yudhishtir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar, "Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?" *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 366.

diplomacy from politics creates gaps between rhetoric and action, between how programs are theorized and described in promotional materials versus how they are carried out. State Department employees, program staff/administrators, and participating artists often deemphasize cultural diplomacy's political underpinnings or describe cultural diplomacy as being separate from politics entirely. For instance, artists may be invested in separating cultural diplomacy from politics in order to justify their participation, focusing instead on personal and professional objectives and opportunities. State Department employees, meanwhile, may celebrate the supposedly transcendental qualities of music rather than focus on cultural diplomacy as a way to secure U.S. influence on the world stage.

Drawing upon an interdisciplinary framework that connects ethnomusicology, anthropology, and the study of diplomacy, I ask: What does it mean for musicians to conduct diplomacy within such complex flows of power? How do cultural diplomacy participants make sense of global imbalances and inequalities as well as their own relationships to power? Throughout the dissertation, I draw upon insights from participating artists, U.S. State Department staff, and employees at the State Department's NGO partners in order to illuminate the social, technological, and musical networks through which diplomacy and international exchange take place and highlight the individual agency of participants and program administrators. Whereas the U.S. government invests in cultural diplomacy to secure influence and advance U.S. interests (both at home and abroad), participating artists and program facilitators prioritize these programs' abilities to generate global community and inspire ways of being that challenge current geopolitical realities. Such views, which extend from those of a Next Level alumna who describes her personal politics as anti-government to a State Department employee who cites cultural diplomacy as a prelude to

more confrontational encounters, are ultimately unresolvable yet frequently coexist. The often-conflicting ideologies, subjectivities, and values brought to spaces of cross-cultural encounter take center stage throughout the dissertation.

Building on scholarship that examines 20th-century cultural diplomacy programs, my study of 21st-century programming offers new perspectives on American exceptionalism, negotiations of power on the world stage, and how the players in today's cultural diplomacy programs conceptualize value, labor, and what it means to represent one's country as an artist and cultural ambassador.²

U.S. Cultural Diplomacy: Definitions and Historical Overview

Edmund Gullion, a distinguished retired foreign service officer and former dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, coined the term *public diplomacy* in 1965:

Public diplomacy . . . deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications.³

² My dissertation is not an attempt to evaluate the efficacy of cultural diplomacy programs or examine the complex reverberations that linger long after U.S. practitioners return stateside. Such works, which include Kendra Salois's scholarship on hip hop and diplomacy in Morocco and Rebekah E. Moore's investigations in Indonesia, are critical to fuller understandings of cultural diplomacy programs from local perspectives, as well as cultural diplomacy's ramifications abroad. See Kendra Salois, "Connection and Complicity in the Global South: Hip Hop Musicians and US Cultural Diplomacy," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 4 (2015): 408–23 and Rebekah E. Moore, "Work in the Field: Public Ethnomusicology and Collaborative Professionalism," *Comparative Anthropologies*, vol. 6 (2013): 103–29.

³ Edmund Gullion quoted in Nicholas Cull, "Public Diplomacy Before Gullion: The Evolution of a Phrase," in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 19.

Today, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) sponsors a number of public diplomacy programs, each with a distinct focus, from environmental conservation and public health equity to cuisine and baseball. *Cultural diplomacy* remains a prominent aspect of public diplomacy programs both old and new. Historian and public diplomacy scholar Nicholas Cull defines contemporary cultural diplomacy as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad."⁴ Describing cultural diplomacy as "the linchpin of public diplomacy," a 2005 U.S. State Department report asserts:

[I]t is in cultural activities that a nation's idea of itself is best represented. And cultural diplomacy can enhance our national security in subtle, wide-ranging, and sustainable ways. Indeed history may record that America's cultural riches played no less a role than military action in shaping our international leadership, including the war on terror. For the values embedded in our artistic and intellectual traditions form a bulwark against the forces of darkness.⁵

Here, U.S. culture is likened to military might in terms of its importance and role in maintaining the status of the United States as a global power. Contained within U.S. art and culture, the report posits, are a set of uniquely "American" values that "form a bulwark against the forces of darkness." In other words, the U.S. State Department invests in cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power to accomplish international objectives, project American values to the world, and promote national security at home.

⁴ Nicholas Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (March 2008): 33.

⁵ Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, U.S. Department of State, "Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy," September 2005, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/54374.pdf>.

Cultural diplomacy programs have been deployed in response to a variety of U.S. national security threats and international conflicts, particularly Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s, communism during the Cold War, and terrorism in the early 21st century. In the late 1930s, alarmed by the growing influence of Nazism and fascism in South America, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt approved the formation of two government offices responsible for using U.S. art and culture for security and defense: the Division of Cultural Relations (1938) and the Cultural Relations Division of the Office of Inter-American Affairs (1940). Both had their own committees dedicated to selecting musicians, composers, dancers, and artists, and each of the awardees was to represent the “artistic best” that the United States had to offer.

Sending classical musicians abroad remained popular throughout the Cold War in an effort to counter Soviet propaganda that portrayed the United States and its citizens as uncultured. U.S. popular music also played an important role in U.S. cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. Jazz was particularly effective in challenging perceptions about racism in the United States, and acclaimed jazz artists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and Dave Brubeck each conducted successful tours through the State Department’s Cultural Presentations Program (CPP). U.S. government officials highlighted jazz’s supposed universalism and its ability to transcend difference while depending on the presence and prominence of Black jazz artists to make the tours into effective symbols of equality in the United States. And while U.S. State Department and other government officials identified popular music—including jazz, electric blues, and rock’n’roll—as a

potent symbol of freedom, democracy, and collaboration, many of the musicians funded by the State Department were subject to dehumanizing Jim Crow laws at home.⁶

In 1961, the influential Mutual Education and Cultural Exchange Act created the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), the branch of the State Department that oversees the two cultural diplomacy programs I discuss in this dissertation. From the 1970s through the 1990s, financial and institutional support for cultural diplomacy dwindled. In 1999, the United States Information Agency (USIA), which had overseen international exchanges and showcased American culture through programs like the radio program, Voice of America, was dissolved and absorbed by the State Department.

A renewed sense that the United States needed to improve its image gripped Washington, D.C., following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, intensifying as opinions of the United States and Americans plunged to all-time lows following the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Similar to their predecessors' promotion of jazz during the Cold War, State Department officials were eager to use hip hop to engage young people around the world. The State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) began sponsoring hip hop diplomacy programming with celebrated MC Toni Blackman's three-week tour of Senegal and Ghana in February 2001. In 2002, the Voice of America launched a radio show called "Hip Hop Connection," which featured music, news, and interviews from its Washington, D.C., studio. The State Department increased its support of hip hop diplomacy programs beginning in 2004 when American Music Abroad sent the

⁶ See Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up The World: Jazz Ambassadors Play The Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz And Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Havikoro Dance Crew to Azerbaijan. The renewed interest and expanded financial support for cultural diplomacy during the early 2000s led to the establishment of four new State Department programs: Center Stage (2010), DanceMotion USA (2010), OneBeat (2012), and Next Level (2013).⁷

While much of the existing scholarly literature engages with U.S. cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, musicologist Jennifer Campbell argues that the Cold War model for U.S. cultural diplomacy was in fact established in the 1930s and '40s music tours that the U.S. government sponsored throughout South America.⁸ In her book *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*, dance historian Naima Prevots explores ballet exchanges between the Soviet Union and the United States, examining the institutional inner workings of the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) Dance Panel, the group that selected the dancers and companies who would take part in the tours.⁹ Historian Penny Von Eschen's *Satchmo Blows Up The World* explores the inherent contradictions within U.S. State Department–sponsored jazz tours of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Throughout, Von Eschen discusses tours in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, regions in which “the shifting relationships of race, nation, and modernity were the most dynamic” due to decolonization efforts.¹⁰ In order to highlight the many paradoxes within the Cold War jazz diplomacy tours,

⁷ This summary of U.S. hip hop diplomacy is drawn from Mark Katz, *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 33–39.

⁸ Jennifer L. Campbell, “Shaping Solidarity: Music, Diplomacy, and Inter-American Relations, 1936–1946” (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2010).

⁹ Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up The World*, 270.

Von Eschen draws upon the perspectives of the musicians themselves, revealing a series of complex aspirations, motivating factors, challenges, and tour outcomes, intended or otherwise. In her examination of how Civil Rights, Black Power, and African anti-colonial efforts influenced jazz and jazz musicians between 1950 and 1975, ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson also discusses the State Department–sponsored tours by the Jazz Ambassadors. Monson’s account provides detailed information regarding program finances, finding that classical musicians were generally paid more by the State Department than their jazz musician counterparts.¹¹ This scholarship reveals that the tensions I observe within contemporary cultural diplomacy have precedents in earlier eras, and that the legacies of Cold War politics remain strong in today’s programs.

In *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy*, musicologist Danielle Fosler-Lussier challenges perceptions of cultural diplomacy as a wholly top-down or bottom-up endeavor, instead highlighting the complex flows of power that animated Cold War programs. As she demonstrates, U.S. State Department–sponsored programs provided opportunities for diverse state and non-state actors to pursue and advocate for their interests and agendas. Building on music critic Christopher Small’s “musicking,” Fosler-Lussier highlights music’s ability to form relationships between people, relationships that inform music’s multiplicity of meanings and impacts.¹² Musicologist Anne Searcy is also invested in how music and dance shape participants, particularly audience members who attended the ballet performances that comprised dance exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold

¹¹ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 123.

¹² Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

War. Far from being universal languages, music and dance are influenced by audience members' own interpretive practices and strategies. Searcy uses the concept of transliteration, the act of rewriting words from one linguistic script into another, rather than translation, to theorize the reception and impact of four tours from early Soviet-American ballet exchange: the Bolshoi Ballet in 1959, American Ballet Theatre in 1960, and both the Bolshoi and New York City Ballet in 1962.¹³

Musicologist Mark Katz, Next Level's Founding Director, discusses the evolution of Next Level and hip hop diplomacy in *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*. In his application of Ramón Grosfoguel's "subversive complicity," Katz reveals the many complexities, paradoxes, and zones of ambiguity in Next Level and the practice of hip hop diplomacy.¹⁴ Dance scholar Clare Croft's *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* presents accounts of U.S. dance-in-diplomacy tours in the early decades of the Cold War and the 21st century. Combining archival work with more than 70 interviews with dancers and choreographers who participated in State Department tours, Croft investigates how dancers negotiated their roles as official representatives of the United States, both performing and challenging what it means to be "American" through embodiment, choreography, and kinesthetic encounters with collaborators and audiences. Croft argues, "Cultural diplomacy catches the government in the gaps between rhetoric and practice: arguing for the benefits of openness while practicing the covert dissemination of ideas. Such cooptness is only possible if cultural programs are presented as apolitical."¹⁵ I

¹³ Anne Searcy, *Ballet in the Cold War: A Soviet-American Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Katz, *Build*, 46.

¹⁵ Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19.

am indebted to Croft for her conception of the rhetoric-practice gap, though I see covertness and overtness operating as more of a spectrum in the programs I study. The covert-overt spectrum emerges throughout Next Level and OneBeat’s programming, particularly during the orientations and opening residencies for new artists. As such, I examine orientations and early encounters between participating artists throughout this dissertation, exploring the multiple levels across the covert-overt spectrum in which politics and political agendas are discussed.

Agendas

At their core, cultural diplomacy programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of State seek to advance U.S. interests and policies abroad. This agenda is hardly a surreptitious one. The U.S. State Department’s Congressional Budget Justification for fiscal year 2020 describes the mission of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) as follows:

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) designs and implements educational, professional, and cultural exchange programs that create and sustain the connections with other countries necessary **to advance United States foreign policy and national security goals.** ECA programs cultivate ties among current and future global leaders, benefiting American communities, building mutual understanding and enduring networks, and promoting U.S. values.¹⁶

In other words, ECA-sponsored programs promote American policies, goals, and influence abroad in ways that ultimately benefit the American people (“American communities”). However, as Mark Katz reminds us (based on his research and experience as Next Level’s Founding Director), “There is no singular US government agenda, or State

¹⁶ “Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs,” The U.S. Department of State and USAID, March 11, 2019, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1868/FY_2020_CBJ.pdf, emphasis added.

Department agenda, or even ECA agenda. The bureaucracies that execute US foreign policy are never wholly unified. They are complex and opaque, guided by an ever-evolving and sometimes contradictory pressures.”¹⁷ As documents like the fiscal year 2020 Congressional Budget Justification illustrate, cultural diplomacy programs are often justified as part of an overall strategy that addresses national security issues. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo even referred to the Department of State as “The Department of Swagger,” noting, “Swagger is not arrogance; it is not boastfulness, it is not ego. No, swagger is confidence; in one’s self, in one’s ideas. In our case, it is America’s essential rightness. And it is aggressiveness born of the righteous knowledge that our cause is just, special, and built upon America’s core principles.”¹⁸ But contrast this American exceptionalist, hyper-masculine rhetoric with an exchange that occurred during a discussion during Next Level’s 2018 orientation. After legendary New York-based DJ Kevie-Kev Rockwell expressed his desire to teach Turkish youth “*real hip hop*” through his Next Level residency, MC Angelique “Giddy” Perez immediately jumped in, adding that artists needed to balance their desire to teach with open-mindedness, humility, and a sincere desire to learn from their students abroad. This moment also reveals complexity regarding hip hop as a genre. Rockwell was an early hip hop pioneer who began his career as a DJ in the late 1970s when he was 17. Perhaps his evocation of “real hip hop” was an impassioned defense of a genre, history, and culture that have been marginalized both domestically and internationally within the global music supraculture.

¹⁷ Katz, *Build*, 5–6.

¹⁸ Matthew Lee, “Pompeo Extols ‘America’s Essential Rightness’ at State Dept.,” *AP News*, March 16, 2018, apnews.com/article/a3acea975cd045558bf70eb5beb35ec9.

Unlike the hip hop artists whose music tops today's hit charts, Rockwell and other hip hop pioneers never achieved widespread fame or financial success. Rockwell was displaying his musical and cultural authority as one of hip hop's earliest practitioners—a type of authority that is not always understood or appreciated by fans of mainstream hip hop today. As such, Rockwell's claims to authenticity are intended to be defiant against cultural imperialism. At the same time, a Turkish audience might understand this to be an arrogant statement in which U.S. hip hop artists are authentic and Turkish ones are not—a stance that Perez's intervention implied. As a young, woman-identified hip hop artist, Perez operates from different understandings of power, authority, and representation than Rockwell. Throughout Next Level's orientation, conversations between artist educators, such as the one that occurred between Rockwell and Perez, illuminate the power asymmetries and disagreements that exist among artists and practitioners who identify with hip hop culture.

Through her response to Rockwell, Perez advocated for a type of engagement predicated on cultural awareness and responsibility rather than a belief in "America's inherent rightness," to quote Pompeo, or the United States' right to claim "real" hip hop, as Rockwell articulated. Such a conception of American identity is critical in today's political moment, at a time where former President Donald Trump launched his presidential bid by describing Central American migrants as criminals, rapists, and animals and deriding "shithole countries."¹⁹ Perez continued that while Trump was part of the U.S. government, she considered herself part of that same government body as a cultural ambassador. She could—and would—offer a different perspective on U.S. identity and ideals through her

¹⁹ Time Staff, "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech," *Time*, June 16, 2015, <http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech>.

involvement with Next Level.

In conceptions of cultural diplomacy as soft power, the performing arts are viewed as powerful entities with the capability to transform the hearts and minds of foreign citizenry. Coined in the late 1980s by political scientist Joseph Nye, soft power is defined as “the power to get others to want what you want.”²⁰ Yet many practitioners believe that cultural diplomacy has value outside of its ability to advance national interests, and resist the conception of cultural diplomacy as soft power.²¹ Throughout my interviews with self-identified cultural ambassadors, many were quick to note their skepticism regarding U.S. government–sponsored performing arts programs. In a phone interview, Zephyr Ann Doles, a DJ, teaching artist, and alumna of Next Level’s 2017 Morocco residency, described her initial hesitancy about participating in Next Level. When she found out about her acceptance to the program, she wondered, “To what extent am I representing the U.S. government? I’m not a fan of *this* administration [the Trump administration], but I’m also pretty anti-U.S. government in general in terms of my politics. So I was like, I want to do it, but at the same time, what am I signing myself up for?” Doles linked her skepticism with an ethos among hip hop artists, noting that other participating artists expressed similar views during orientation. She added, “We’re [hip hop artists selected to participate in Next Level] excited but we’re a little bit skeptical because a lot of us in the hip hop world don’t come from a very pro-government standpoint.” Doles’ wording indicates a sense of conflictedness—not about whether or not she was representing the U.S. government, but the *extent* of this

²⁰ Joseph Nye, “Soft Power and American Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2004): 256.

²¹ Business scholar Ying Fan addresses varied definitions of soft power and critiques Nye’s framing of the concept in “Soft Power: Power of Attraction or Confusion?”, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4, no. 2 (May 2008): 147–58, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2008.4>.

representation and what it might entail. There is no easy answer here. Members of the U.S. State Department who attend Next Level’s orientation assure participating artists (known as artist educators) that they represent themselves rather than U.S. politics or policy. While Doles continues to grapple with how her participation represented the U.S. government, she felt more comfortable about her affiliation with Next Level once she attended the program’s 2016 orientation, particularly because she was not required to espouse any type of pro-U.S. sentiment during her residency abroad. According to Doles,

It’s written into the design of the program that you represent yourself as a teaching artist and your politics are your politics, and we don’t expect you to try to, you know, convince the world of something that’s not true for you. But also that it’s not your responsibility to make people feel good about America or anything.²²

Such perspectives about representation persist across ECA-sponsored programs. During a lecture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Next Level alumnus Konshens the MC explained that he primarily represented himself, his culture, and hip hop. He expressed, “Representing a culture, a people, a music that connects people. That’s what I was representing. Though since it’s a government-sponsored program, I looked at it as I’m being contracted by America to do great work in different places.”²³ Konshens offers an idealistic view that does not acknowledge the potential that he is being coopted or that his art (and his idealism) might serve broader, unarticulated state agendas, whether coercive or imperialist. This does not mean that cultural diplomacy artists are necessarily naïve or cannot be skeptical, however. Such justifications reveal artists’ priorities, whether in spreading hip hop

²² Zephyr Ann Doles, interview with the author, March 29, 2018.

²³ Konshens the MC, public lecture, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, February 11, 2020.

culture, creating global community, developing international networks, or securing competitive pay and professional opportunities.

However, it is impossible for artists *not* to represent the United States at some level, and audience members and workshop attendees who encounter U.S. artist educators abroad may assume that these artists represent the U.S. government. For instance, most Next Level public performances prominently feature the American flag and U.S. State Department seal. The American flag and State Department seal are also present in OneBeat and Next Level’s banners and signs, promotional materials, YouTube videos, and, in the case of Next Level, on the backs of program t-shirts. While participating artists are repeatedly told that they represent themselves and do not need to espouse pro-U.S. sentiment, these symbols frame their performances, flattening the complexities of artists’ individual identities, political stances, and views about representing the United States into an image of sponsorship and support—both for and by the state.

The title song of Dave and Iola Brubeck’s jazz musical *The Real Ambassadors*, captures the tension that representing the United States as a cultural ambassador entails: “Who’s the real ambassador?/ Certain facts we can’t ignore/ In my humble way I’m the USA/ Though I represent the government/ The government don’t represent some policies I’m for.”²⁴ State Department officials and policymakers argue that U.S. art and culture can be used to convey and promote American “values,” ideas, and institutions. As such, artists who participate in U.S. cultural diplomacy become representatives for the nation—and they are

²⁴ Dave and Iola Brubeck, “The Real Ambassadors,” with Louis Armstrong, on *The Real Ambassadors: An Original Musical Production by Dave and Iola Brubeck* (Original Cast Recording), Columbia Records, 1962, streaming audio, 3:07.

perhaps most effective when challenging certain narratives about the United States and Americans and when providing nuanced perspectives of U.S. identity.

In her book, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues that theories of cultural production should begin with the study of friction, a result of encounters and interactions (both short- and long-term) across sites of difference. By looking at points of friction between participants, ethnographers can engage in

a study of global connections [that] shows the grip of encounter, or friction. A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air, it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power.²⁵

For Tsing, friction is necessary to studies of the global and the universal, as friction “refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine.”²⁶ Friction can also be used as a way to refuse the lie that cultural diplomacy operates as a well-oiled machine, allowing us to engage with its specificities while examining U.S. cultural diplomacy as a type of global power. Discourse surrounding cultural diplomatic endeavors makes a series of claims to the universal, including mutual understanding, peace and stability, and even the very notion of culture. For example, OneBeat’s mission statement describes the program as seeking to “be the nexus of a new way of thinking about how music and artistic expression can help us collectively build healthier communities, prosperous societies, and a more peaceful world.”²⁷ To study the universal or claims to the universal, Tsing writes, we “must

²⁵ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

²⁶ Tsing, *Friction*, 6.

²⁷ OneBeat, “Mission,” accessed July 1, 2021, <https://1beat.org/mission>.

become embroiled in specific situations. And thus it is necessary to begin again, and again, in the middle of things.”²⁸ The global and the local, the universal and the particular, are entangled in cultural diplomatic endeavors, encountering particularities at every level. This entanglement is present in the words that introduce the OneBeat website’s homepage: “Hear Local, Listen Global.”²⁹

Alliances between State Department officials and musicians involved in cultural diplomacy programs hardly indicate shared consensus. As Tsing reminds us, “Collaboration is not a simple sharing of information. There is no reason to assume that collaborators share common goals.”³⁰ Collaboration and participation in cultural diplomacy programs represent sites of tension across difference, moments of rigorous debate where knowledge is created and continuously negotiated. MC and former Next Level team manager Mahogany Jones encourages artists to “just get in the door and do what you do.”³¹ In other words, sometimes the work artists find most meaningful lines up with U.S. State Department and embassy objectives; other times, these aims and desires conflict. This is particularly important in light of the reality that many hip hop artists do not “get in the door” of U.S. cultural or artistic institutions, often because of issues of race, negative perceptions about hip hop, or a lack of institutional connections.

We can also observe conflicting agendas and motivations in the ways different parts of the U.S. government respond to perceived security threats—moments of stark

²⁸ Tsing, *Friction*, 1–2.

²⁹ OneBeat, “Overview,” accessed July 1, 2021, <https://1beat.org/about/overview>.

³⁰ Tsing, *Friction*, 13.

³¹ Mahogany Jones, interview with the author, April 28, 2018.

juxtaposition where cultural diplomacy's goals of creating global community and mutual understanding clash against large-scale, government-sponsored violence. Sometimes these moments occur across a broad region. For instance, on November 25th, 2018, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency fired tear gas on unarmed Central American migrants, including children, to prevent them from crossing the border into the United States at Tijuana. That same day, a group of Next Level artist educators began their first day of their two-week residence in Guatemala City, Guatemala to promote international exchange, mutual understanding, and conflict transformation through hip hop. Sometimes these juxtapositions take place within the same country, as they did in Nigeria, also in November 2018. Following a particularly energizing and uplifting workshop in Abuja, Christopher "Def-i" Mike-Bidtah, an MC and Next Level artist educator, shared the following post on Facebook:

Today's writing workshop focused on "Cultural Heritage." We learned some new vocabulary from [one] another and then applied pieces of #DinéBizaad, #Hausa, #Igbo, #Yoruba, and #English languages into the rhyme. Learning so much each day and am very honored to help build connections between our local community.³²

However, while Next Level artists participated in workshops focused on art, cultural heritage, and conflict transformation, in Karia, Nigeria, the Nigerian army massacred Shia protestors from the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN). Armed only with rocks, the IMN protestors had gathered to demand the release of their jailed leader, Ibrahim el-Zakzaky. The Nigerian army's justification for these horrific acts? Incendiary rhetoric from a recently televised speech by then President Trump, posted to the Nigerian army's official Twitter account:

³² Quoted in Katz, *Build*, 134.

Anybody throwing stones, rocks, like they did ... to the Mexican police, where they badly hurt police and soldiers of Mexico ... we will consider that a firearm, because there's not much difference where you get hit in the face with a rock . . . If they want to throw rocks at our military, our military fights back.³³

In these and other instances, while one arm of the U.S. government, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), deploys a message of global peace and friendship, other areas of the U.S. government continue to wage unjust wars, back military coups, overlook human rights atrocities, and enact other policies that tear entire families and communities apart. This is the context in which cultural diplomacy practitioners operate. On the one hand, they are told very specifically about bridge-building, people-to-people diplomacy, and the power of the arts and culture. On the other hand, they hear U.S. leaders adding fuel to international crises.

For these and other reasons both personal and political, many cultural diplomacy artists, including Zephyr Ann Doles, label themselves as having anti-government views. Yet even if cultural diplomacy participants *do* challenge members of the U.S. government or particular U.S. policies, their expressions of dissent can be spun to support a desirable U.S. image, particularly regarding freedom of expression.³⁴ There is a history of U.S. government officials' interest in viewing dissenting intellectuals as an asset to the United States' image abroad, rather than a liability. During the Cold War, CIA operative Tom Braden advocated for the promotion of U.S. intellectuals in public diplomacy projects, recognizing that

³³ See Rick Noack, "Nigeria's Army Cited Trump's Remarks To Justify Opening Fire On Protestors—Then Deleted The Tweet," *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/11/02/nigerian-armys-defense-after-it-shot-killed-protesters-trumps-remarks-migrant-caravan/?utm_term=.ec96007f0aad and Christal Hayes, "Migrant Caravan: Trump Suggests Immigrants Could Be Shot If They Throw Rocks At Military," *USA Today*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/11/01/donald-trump-suggests-migrants-could-shot-throwing-rocks/1850582002>.

³⁴ Danielle Fosler-Lussier discusses this in more detail in *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy*, 121.

“dissenting intellectuals who believe themselves to be acting freely could be useful tools in the international propaganda war.”³⁵ While artists are encouraged to create and speak “freely,” both their work and their words can be used by others to suit their own purposes, agendas, and needs. The very agency and autonomy of the cultural ambassadors who vocally oppose certain U.S. government policies can be coopted to cultivate an aspirational U.S. image.

The assertion that cultural diplomatic endeavors are separate from politics is a central feature of U.S. cultural diplomacy. In a 2019 interview, Jeremy Thal, one of OneBeat’s co-founders and co-directors, deemphasized OneBeat’s political aspects in his description of the program:

The State Department is the funder and people [participating artists] are aware of that. But I also think that at the end of the day, it’s a free trip to the U.S. to hang out with a bunch of great musicians to have this career-boosting and awesome experience. And then we don’t push this political thing once we’re here at all. We don’t talk about politics. The only way that we talk about it is just to say that we should be having conversations and collaborations in this circle.³⁶

In U.S. government–sponsored cultural diplomacy programs focused on the performing arts, music is characterized as having both distinctive national identities *and* containing universal ideals, and as being both political *and* apolitical.

Participating artists and U.S. State Department officials share an investment in music’s power. A 2018 interview I conducted with Next Level alumna Mahogany Jones speaks to artists’ understanding of this power and the potential for its cooptation. In reference

³⁵ Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (London: Routledge, 2000), 154.

³⁶ Jeremy Thal, interview with the author, October 5, 2019.

to prominent rapper and cultural figure Kanye West’s endorsement of President Donald Trump, she notes, “You see the uproar, everybody’s upset about Kanye’s alliance with Donald Trump. And I think Donald Trump’s camp is probably excited about the alliance. Why? Because they understand the power and influence that musicians have.”³⁷ Both West and Jones could be considered tools of soft power, different in degree rather than in kind. Jones reveals how treacherous it is for musicians whose power is recognized—and coveted—by the government. “I think a lot of people don’t always take musical diplomacy seriously, but being a musician is just as powerful as being a politician,” she claims. Her comments expose the tensions within music’s power, a power that leads politicians and government agencies alike to enlist musicians to achieve their desired aims—aims that may or may not serve the musicians. As Jones articulates, the power of music and musicians is not to be understated—even if its impact is nuanced or difficult to quantify. And while government officials often bemoan the difficulty of assessing cultural diplomacy’s success and merit, this very resistance to analyzing effectiveness makes music a potent way to form relationships and shape international relations.

Power

The concept of power guides my thinking about cultural diplomacy because, too often, cultural diplomacy practitioners and facilitators view art and culture as neutral spaces for engagement or extol music’s supposed universal or transcendental qualities. As Rebekah Ahrendt, Mark Ferraguto, and Damien Mahiet posit, “This belief in music’s universality—another source of its empowerment—has underpinned many musical-diplomatic initiatives to

³⁷ Mahogany Jones, interview with the author, April 28, 2018.

the present day, not least of which were the Cold War orchestra tours where the repertoire often consisted of canonic works—especially the symphonies of Beethoven, often seen as the most universal composer of all.”³⁸ The Art as Cultural Diplomacy program offered by the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, a New York and Berlin-based NGO, has three guiding principles: The Universality of Art, The Power of Art, and the Transformative Nature of Art. The introduction to the Art as Cultural Diplomacy program states, “[Art] provides, on the one hand, a medium through which cultural heritage and identity can be experienced and interpreted. On the other hand, it can create a unique space for artists, audiences, and other stakeholders in cultural management to come together on a neutral platform.”³⁹ Such a conception ignores the asymmetrical power relationships between parties involved in the processes of making art together. It also does not acknowledge varied stakes that come into play during these spaces of artistic and cultural encounter. For instance, who funds these programs and why? Who is allowed access into these spaces and who are the gatekeepers that prevent others from participating? Do the processes of creating art and making music together allow for a complicating or challenging of power asymmetries? If so, how might this transfer to the relationships that develop outside of creative spaces?

Because cultural diplomacy practitioners and U.S. State Department employees regard mutual understanding and cultural exchange as admirable goals, these concepts can go unproblematized. Even the most prestigious or well-intentioned international exchange and public diplomacy programs (Fulbright and Rhodes, for instance) are inescapably linked to

³⁸ Rebekah Ahrendt, Mark Ferraguto, and Damien Mahiet, *Music and Diplomacy from the Early Modern Era to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5.

³⁹ “Art as Cultural Diplomacy,” Academy of Cultural Diplomacy, accessed March 19, 2021, https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en_acd_about.

imperialist, colonialist, racist, and/or orientalist histories.⁴⁰ In her study of musical humanitarianism, Rachel Beckles Willson argues that contemporary Western classical ensembles such as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra are motivated in part by the same orientalist underpinnings as colonial-era music projects.⁴¹ In examining music and humanitarianism, Beckles Willson critiques the supposed benevolence of cultural exchange programs focused on the performing arts—a stance I apply to statements that link cultural diplomacy programs as being equally beneficial for all parties involved.

The U.S. government and the U.S. State Department are not monolithic entities. Viewing them as monoliths denies full understandings of how power moves and operates, of how individual choices and policies radiate outwards from Washington, D.C. and U.S. Embassies abroad to affect people around the world. Through her participation in Next Level, MC Angelique “Giddy” Perez described herself as a U.S. government employee and ambassador with the opportunity to complicate and even potentially counteract Trump’s ideologies, both at home and abroad. Throughout Next Level’s 2018 orientation, I heard Perez voice her opinion that her newfound presence on the international stage added a new and vital voice to the discourses regarding American identities and American exceptionalism.

⁴⁰ Senator J. William Fulbright, the initiator of the Fulbright Scholarship, signed the Southern Manifesto in 1956, a resolution that condemned the 1954 Supreme Court’s *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Ntokozo Qwabe, a South African Rhodes Scholar and co-founder of Oxford University’s “Rhodes Must Fall” protest movement, has continually argued that Cecil Rhodes’s legacy is presented in highly uncritical ways as it highlights his economic gains and successes in place of addressing the devastating worldwide impacts of his ardent British imperialism. Following the controversy facing Qwabe, over 200 Rhodes Scholars at Oxford signed a statement proclaiming that their fellowships did not “buy [their] silence” over Cecil Rhodes’s colonialist legacy. See Nadia Khomami, “Oxford Scholars Reject Hypocrisy Claims Amid Row Over Cecil Rhodes Statue,” *The Guardian*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/12/cecil-rhodes-scholars-reject-hypocrisy-claims-amid-row-over-oriel-college-statue>.

⁴¹ Rachel Beckles Willson, *Orientalism and Musical Mission: Palestine and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

But in reality, Perez was never hired by the State Department. She is not even a government contractor, as her contract is with Meridian International Center, the Washington, D.C.–based NGO that administers Next Level. This is not to say that she does not have a connection to the State Department and certainly does not eliminate the possibility of complicity. But it is important to note that ECA award recipients are not technically government employees. Rather, Next Level and OneBeat are funded through cooperative agreements. A cooperative agreement differs from a grant “in that it provides for substantial involvement between the Federal awarding agency or pass-through entity and the non-Federal entity in carrying out the activity contemplated by the Federal award.”⁴² “Substantial involvement” refers to the amount of direct involvement federal employees are engaged in the award program’s implementation and execution. Even so, the differences between a cooperative agreement and a government grant remain ambiguous.

Empire

Cultural diplomacy programs from the United States, a country that boasts unmatched economic power and military might, involve the workings of empire. My understanding of modern empire is informed by anthropologist Catherine Lutz’s definition:

a constellation of state and state-structured private projects successfully aiming to exert wide-ranging control, through territorial or more remote means, over the practices and resources of areas beyond the state’s borders . . . [T]he notion of “empire” is reserved for the systemic and extensive desire and efforts to have, in Michael W. Doyle’s words, “influence over the periphery’s environment, political articulation, aggregation, decision making, adjudication, and implementation.”⁴³

⁴² “What Is a Cooperative Agreement?”, Grants.gov Community Blog, July 19, 2016, <https://grantsgovprod.wordpress.com/2016/07/19/what-is-a-cooperative-agreement>.

⁴³ Catherine Lutz, “Empire is in the Details,” *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 4 (2006): 594.

Though a number of scholars in the humanities have devoted their work to the political-economic underpinnings of empire, Lutz claims that “scholars have virtually no empirical idea how the broad mass of people in the United States see the nexus of their nation, power, and the rest of the world. This is an eminently ethnographic question.”⁴⁴ My project sits at the crossroads Lutz identifies, examining how “people in the United States see the nexus of their nation, power, and the rest of the world.” I explore how artists, musicians, and State Department officials involved in government-sponsored cultural diplomacy projects view their own positionalities of being American, of the inescapable conflicts between advocating for American interests abroad and achieving mutual understanding between actors, and of the inevitable power asymmetries between the U.S. and virtually every other country that cultural diplomacy programs encounter.

I view cultural diplomacy as taking place in a contact zone, one whose contours are shaped by empire. Developed by literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt, the term *contact zones* refers to “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with one another, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.”⁴⁵ James Clifford draws upon Pratt’s concept of the contact zone, advocating for what he describes as a *contact perspective*, which “views all culture-collecting strategies as responses to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization.”⁴⁶ In order to examine cultural

⁴⁴ Lutz, “Empire is in the Details,” 594.

⁴⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 34.

⁴⁶ James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. James Clifford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 213.

diplomacy through a contact perspective, I am attentive to the ways in which historical precedents and past programs inform 21st-century initiatives. As ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong argues in her work on improvisation and sexism within North American taiko, a drumming tradition that originated in Japan, “Social transformation is always incomplete; antihegemonic practices often carry stowaways from incompatible histories. Progressive musical practices are almost always imperfect and uneven.”⁴⁷ Just as Wong describes power imbalances among the fellow members of her taiko ensemble, Next Level and OneBeat also contain stowaways from past cultural diplomacy programs, even as they strive to cultivate mutual understanding among diverse global actors.

Particularly salient stowaways have carried over from Cold War cultural diplomacy programs into those of the present day—a residue that complicates Next Level and OneBeat’s missions to “create global community through hip hop culture” and “redefine music diplomacy,” respectively.⁴⁸ In certain instances, this sense of history, of being part of an esteemed artistic lineage, can be a powerful selling point for artists. During Next Level’s 2020 orientation, Director Junious Brickhouse informed artist educators, “History will speak about us like they speak about Satchmo. They will be talking about that. And this is in your hands. You have this responsibility.”⁴⁹ Brickhouse’s reflection reveals a self-consciousness about representation and what the role of cultural ambassador has meant historically, tying

⁴⁷ Deborah Wong, “Faster and Louder: Heterosexist Improvisation in North American Taiko,” in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 265.

⁴⁸ <https://www.nextlevel-usa.org/> and <https://1beat.org>.

⁴⁹ Junious Brickhouse, closing remarks from Next Level’s 2020 Orientation, June 18, 2020.

his legacy to that of Louis Armstrong and his U.S. State Department–sponsored tours during the Cold War.

Issues of genre and musical authority represent additional historical stowaways. OneBeat co-founder and co-director Jeremy Thal acknowledges the widespread influence and power of U.S. culture, and the way that this sense of dominance shapes OneBeat interactions, even as participating artists (known as Fellows) and staff seek to create an egalitarian space for collaboration. Thal asserts that while OneBeat staff and participating artists “don’t want to take part in the idea of American exceptionalism or American cultural imperialism, I think there’s an element of that that happens, not because of the State Department particularly, but just because of the cultural power of American movies and music.” He continues, “So there’s already a weird cultural dominance to American art in this particular time in history. I think we want to place American art on the same level as art from around the world and have the conversation be between equals, when that may not be the case in terms of geopolitics.”⁵⁰ Thal acknowledges the complexities surrounding musical authenticity and authority, noting that the presence of the U.S. State Department is not the only aspect of OneBeat that creates a power asymmetry. Rather, such power asymmetries are also present in global music markets due to the dominance of U.S. music and culture.

Finances

Who gives money, who receives it, and what different forms do money and capital take in U.S. government–sponsored cultural diplomacy programs? What does this money

⁵⁰ Thal, interview with the author.

mean to those who receive it? I address these questions through conducting ethnographic interviews and consulting primary source documents, particularly ECA's Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs) and Project Objectives, Goals, and Implementation (POGIs). These reveal conceptions of value, both monetary and otherwise.

NOFOs announce current government funding opportunities via the Grants.gov website. They highlight aspects of the particular government program, as well as proposal guidelines and award timelines. POGIs elaborate on the program outlined in the NOFO. In 2017, ECA released a NOFO that focused on a creative arts exchange (CAE) initiative with three themes and four programs: dance (DanceMotion USA), film (American Film Showcase), and music (American Music Abroad and OneBeat.) The total money allocated for these programs was \$5,430,000. Of these total funds, \$1,340,000 was allocated for American Music Abroad and \$1,440,000 for OneBeat. For context: the U.S. State Department's total overseas public diplomacy budget (of which ECA funds represent one component) was \$493 million. This represents a mere 1.014% of the U.S. Government's total international affairs budget.⁵¹ Put differently, the total overseas public diplomacy budget is equivalent to 15 MQ-9 Reaper drones at the FY 2021 cost of \$32 million per aircraft.⁵²

Throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic, widespread closures of concert venues and cancellation of live music events during lockdowns eliminated key money-making opportunities for artists. Next Level and OneBeat provided financial support to their

⁵¹ "Getting Up to Speed: Public Diplomacy Field Operations," Public Diplomacy Council, July 25, 2018, <https://www.publicdiplomacycouncil.org/2018/07/25/getting-up-to-speed-public-diplomacy-field-operations>.

⁵² Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, "FY 2021 Program Acquisition Costs by Weapon System," February 2020, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2021/fy2021_Weapons.pdf.

programs' current participants and alumni through a live concert (the OneBeat Marathon concert), a series of alumni roundtable conversations and performances (Next Level Live), opportunities to apply for small grants (the OneBeat Accelerator) and add-on residencies. In February 2021, OneBeat announced openings for two new programs, OneBeat Virtual and OneBeat Lebanon, and provided specific financial figures. For OneBeat Virtual, Fellows would receive a \$1,500 USD honorarium, a per diem, and a small subsidy for technical support (based on financial need.) OneBeat Lebanon Fellows would receive a \$1,500 USD honorarium and stipend for audio equipment and enhanced internet access.⁵³

In addition to the promise of travel, mobility, and the chance to cultivate an international network or fan base, musicians see cultural diplomacy programs as a well-paying job opportunity, particularly when evaluated against other arts education initiatives. Next Level's stipend was a primary factor that inspired Zephyr Ann Doles's decision to apply. According to her, "coming from a broke, artist, hustling background... it was kind of an incredible opportunity to be like, 'Oh no, we value what you bring to the table as a teaching artist and we're gonna pay you well for it.' And I was like, this is fucking crazy!"⁵⁴ As an artist-educator, Doles is often asked to participate in programs that cannot offer much in the way of financial compensation. By prioritizing artists' pay, Next Level invested in Doles's skills as an artist and teacher, as well as her overall well-being—a combination she continues to find rare. Doles received an honorarium of \$200 USD per day as well as a per diem, and Next Level honoraria have increased over the years. She notes:

Not only do you get to teach and travel and be in this incredible foreign country doing hip hop education, but also part of the ethos of the program is that they pay

⁵³ OneBeat, "Apply," posted February 15, 2021, <https://1beat.org/apply>.

⁵⁴ Zephyr Ann Doles, interview with the author, March 29, 2018.

. . . A lot of teaching artists type of programs, even if they're well-meaning, they might not have the budget to pay you very well . . . Part of the way the program is set up is like, no, we want you to be comfortable because you can only do your best work when you're also comfortable and taking care of yourself.

Dole's statement, which addresses the multifaceted appeal of cultural diplomacy, echoes historian Penny Von Eschen's findings about Cold War music tours: "the irresistible combination of a chance to work, support a big band . . . , serve one's country, meet musicians abroad, and contribute to the civil rights cause made State Department tours highly prized gigs."⁵⁵ While the pay seems generous and competitive to some artists, it does not to others. Dole considered the Next Level stipend generous, but other practitioners, particularly those who are well known, could make substantially more money through their own performances, tours, and gigs. However, these artists also recognized attractive non-monetary attributes such as the ability to travel and a sense of giving back that made taking a pay cut worthwhile.

Methodologies

This dissertation brings together fieldwork, historical research, interviews, the study of government documents, and critical engagement with online discourse, social media, and accessible audio-visual material, such as YouTube videos. From 2018 to 2021, I interviewed participating artists and staff from OneBeat and Next Level, as well as State Department employees and staff at the NGOs that administer the programs (Meridian International Center for Next Level, Found Sound Nation for OneBeat). I observed and participated in Next Level's orientations for new artists in June 2018 and June 2019 in Washington, D.C., and the

⁵⁵ Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World*, 29.

virtual orientation in 2020. In October 2019, I attended the Atlanta, Georgia portion of OneBeat’s U.S. tour, attending performances, workshops, rehearsals, and community events and conducting one-on-one and group interviews. I have also consulted a number of online sources, including government documents, program websites, and social media accounts.

My background and insider/outsider relationship to U.S. cultural diplomacy have undoubtedly shaped my scholarly and personal engagements with cultural diplomacy and exchange programs. My advisor, Mark Katz, is Next Level’s Founding Director. He positions himself as an advocate for hip hop as a form of diplomacy, noting: “I want to argue for the value of hip hop diplomacy. I believe in the life-changing, community-building power of hip hop. I believe in the positive potential of hip hop as a form of diplomacy.”⁵⁶ Our entry points into the world of cultural diplomacy are distinct and multi-layered. Katz entered the field of hip hop diplomacy as a convenor and practitioner; I arrived as a participant and scholar.

My status as an alumna of the Fulbright Program offers an insider perspective that both complicates and enhances my work. In 2015–16, I taught English at a grammar school in Dobruška, Czech Republic as an English Teaching Assistant. This firsthand experience provided me with a nuanced understanding of how power structures are preserved even in public diplomacy and exchange programs that extol benefit for all. Over my 10 months in Dobruška, I also witnessed the ways in which “mutuality”—one of Fulbright’s guiding principles—is often extolled in words but not necessarily in practice. For instance, my salary was nearly equivalent to that of the teachers whom I assisted. While part of this speaks to the Czech Republic’s relatively low compensation for teachers (a failing within the United States

⁵⁶ Katz, *Build*, 23.

as well), having nearly equivalent pay to teachers with decades of teaching experience and advanced degrees in teaching made me uncomfortable.

I also saw how my presence influenced dynamics within school. Some teachers were afraid to talk to me, feeling a sense of shame about their English-speaking ability—meanwhile, the only speaking partner for whom my elementary Czech language abilities were suited was my mentor’s four-year-old son. Many teachers at the gymnázium encouraged their students to attend my weekly English conversation class, arguing that English language fluency would provide access to employment opportunities and studying or even living abroad. At times, such sentiments made me feel like a gatekeeper. More broadly, it was up to each English Teaching Assistant how much they wanted to involve themselves in the communities that graciously hosted us. For instance, not all of my English Teaching Assistant colleagues from the United States made serious attempts to learn the Czech language, whereas others sought out language classes, tutoring sessions, and immersed themselves in the community. Meanwhile, every student in the schools in which we taught was required to take our classes. Though Fulbright’s focus on mutual understanding is admirable, there was an imbalance regarding who was expected to more fully understand whom. Like many of the participating artists I interview, I consider my year in Dobruška to have been transformative, and I value the relationships and connections I built and continue to sustain with my Czech friends, fellow teachers, and students while recognizing the many imbalances that complicate the feasibility of mutual understanding.

Throughout my dissertation, I draw on knowledge gained through an internship that I completed at Meridian International Center from June to August 2019. As a Cultural Programs intern, I researched local hip hop scenes in countries that Meridian and Next Level

considered for prospective residencies, updated artist educators' information on the program's website, synthesized post-residency evaluations for Meridian's annual reports, and assisted with Next Level's 2019 orientation and cypher. I also helped write and edit two applications for small grants from U.S. Embassies to support exchanges and arts exhibitions, and planned and wrote a script for a podcast episode about cultural exchange between Indonesia and the United States, focusing on gamelan ensembles at universities. In working on these projects and simply being in these spaces, I was able to observe hierarchies and relationships, such as those within Meridian and between Meridian and ECA. I had the opportunity to see, from an insider perspective, the joys and frustrations of doing cultural diplomacy work, and understand what insiders considered success and what they considered failure. By helping to plan events, attending staff meetings, and being in the Meridian Cultural Programs office, I gained key understandings of the day-to-day inner workings of a cultural diplomacy program, insights that inform my dissertation findings.⁵⁷

Descriptions of OneBeat and Next Level

Though OneBeat and Next Level are both U.S. State Department-sponsored programs focused on music, their methods and aims differ considerably. OneBeat is a music diplomacy initiative whose mission statement describes it as “a musical journey like no other.” It is organized and produced by Found Sound Nation, the social engagement wing of New York City-based new music ensemble Bang on a Can, along with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). OneBeat was originally

⁵⁷ For additional perspectives on office work, institutional culture, and ethnography, see Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999).

launched in 2012, and Found Sound Nation became a 501(c)(3) non-profit in 2015. Each year, OneBeat brings 25 musicians (ages 19–35) from around the world to the United States for a one-month residency period. During OneBeat’s opening artist residency, Fellows work together to create and record new musical material. Fellows then tour together in select regions of the United States. In addition to these U.S.-based residencies, OneBeat also offers residencies in a series of focus countries/regions for socially-engaged musicians that hail from the particular focus country/region, as well as from the United States. OneBeat Virtual, an online program that brings together 70 Fellows for two eight-week sessions, launched in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. After each residency, the newly written and performed music is recorded and released as a “OneBeat Mixtape.” At the time of this writing, there have been 196 OneBeat Fellows hailing from 48 different countries, forming a network referred to as the OneBeat Collective.

Established in 2013, Next Level is jointly managed by three institutions: the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Meridian International Center, a public diplomacy NGO based in Washington, D.C.⁵⁸ With aspirations of “Building Global Community Through Hip Hop Culture,” Next Level artist educators and facilitators use hip hop music, dance, and graffiti/aerosol art to encourage conflict transformation and entrepreneurship in underserved communities throughout the world. Next Level organizes hip hop artists into cohorts with each member representing one or more of the elements of hip-hop, which include MCing, DJing, beatmaking, producing, beatboxing, dance, and graffiti/aerosol art. During the Next

⁵⁸ From 2013 to 2016, Next Level was run solely by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Beginning in 2017, Meridian International Center became the main administrator of the program, with UNC as a sub-awardee.

Level Global residency, a cohort of artists from each of the residency countries travels to the United States for a fully funded, two-week artistic and professional development program.

Some artists mentioned in this dissertation have participated in multiple U.S. government–sponsored diplomacy programs, using NGO and state support to build their careers, strengthen institutional relationships and networks, and secure job opportunities. In our 2018 interview, Zephyr Ann Doles acknowledged that, had she not been selected for Next Level, she would not have been aware of the job opportunities that cultural diplomacy and exchange programs can provide: “If [Next Level] is something I have on my resume, if I maintain these contacts and connections, there’s probably a ton of stuff on the other side of this program that, if I wasn’t selected, if I wasn’t picked for this, I would never find out about.”⁵⁹ In 2012, Mahogany Jones was selected to serve as an official hip hop ambassador through American Music Abroad to Botswana, Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia, and Ethiopia. In 2014, she was a participant in Next Level’s Team Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Her band, Mahogany Jones-Live, participated in a 2015 AMA tour, and she later became a Next Level site manager. 2014 OneBeat alumnus Dahlak Brathwaite, a producer, songwriter, rapper, and poet, was also a member of Next Level’s 2018 residency in Uzbekistan.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 focuses on Next Level’s annual orientation cypher. The cypher—a term that refers to an informal gathering among hip hop artists, often in a circular formation—shows how moments of diverging intent underscore and animate this performance, which functions as exhibition, advertisement, and bonding experience for participating artists. Throughout, I

⁵⁹ Doles, interview with the author.

identify decisions that imbue the event with generative, creative energy alongside moments that sharpen and deepen Next Level’s power asymmetries. In Chapter 2, I explore OneBeat’s distinctive cosmopolitan vision, arguing that it benefits both participating artists as well as U.S. State Department officials. Chapter 3, which draws upon digital ethnography and data collection, examines how U.S. cultural diplomacy programs have responded to COVID-19, a period marked by the ravaging of worldwide arts and cultural spheres and a newfound reliance on the use of digital media to create connection and co-presence across distance. I describe two online events that took place in 2020: Next Level’s virtual orientation and the OneBeat Marathon concert. In the conclusion, I discuss the presence of what I term “strategic idealism” among U.S. State Department employees, arguing that an interest in lessening power asymmetries between the State Department and participating artists is not born out of naiveté but rather, a savviness that Program Officers have cultivated after years in the field.

CHAPTER ONE: “SHOW AND PROVE”: THE NEXT LEVEL ORIENTATION CYPHER

The dancer bends and twists her arms, rapidly contracting and relaxing her muscles to form the sharp silhouettes that exemplify popping, a style of hip hop dance. Her high-top sneakers glide across the gleaming black and white marble floor. Other hip hop artists encircle her, clapping, singing, and nodding their heads, moving to the beat that some have created using their voices or by tapping on a nearby railing. Though the music they make is not loud, its persistent rhythm echoes throughout the large lobby. While she dances, a small, white visitor ID badge swings and bounces against her body. The other artists around her wear ID badges as well. Three suit-clad employees pause on the steps to watch the dancer’s performance and listen to the music before exiting through the glass front doors.

The hip hop diplomacy program Next Level organized this spontaneous performance—a cypher—which took place in the lobby of a U.S. State Department building in 2014. Within hip hop culture, the term *cypher* refers to an artistic and social practice where hip hop artists gather to perform, most often rap (MCing), dance, and beatboxing, in a circular formation. Mark Katz, then Next Level’s Director, originally proposed the idea of having a cypher in the State Department building during Next Level’s visit during the orientation for the program’s artist educators, the program’s term for these cultural diplomats. Dancer and Next Level alumna Amirah Sackett, the dancer I described, does not recall who started the cypher itself. But she found the spirit of the gathering reminiscent of

many cyphers she had held and participated in as a hip hop dancer. Regarding the cypher at the State Department, Sackett notes with a laugh:

I felt like... wow. Hip hop is so cool because we can do it anywhere. You can do it anywhere, like you can be on the street and start that cypher... In Chicago, I do that sometimes. There'll be a drummer and, yeah, I've totally just dropped everything and got down with drummers. That just happened last summer. I was not even dressed for a cypher, but this drummer was killing it. And I was across the street from him and I just started dancing. And I came over across the street and danced by him. Sometimes spontaneous dancing happens, and that's kind of how this cypher felt in the State Department. I remember being like, this is awesome right now. Like, this is my life. This is so cool. Like, there's a girl in the State Department popping? This is awesome.⁶⁰

The act of having a cypher in a government building remains both joyous and rebellious for Sackett:

I mean, we had to go through security. We had to go through *all* the security. But [the cypher] was really cool, though! Like it was really exciting for me to be like going into this government place and having to go through these metal detectors and then we have a cypher. It was really crazy.

Here, Sackett identifies a feeling of clashing contexts and an unexpected joining together of vastly different worlds: hip hop culture and the U.S. government. Mark Katz connects the cypher at the State Department, an experience he describes as being “both exhilarating and odd,” to cyphers from hip hop’s early days:

In some ways it evoked the early history of hip hop, when dancers in New York would sneak into posh apartment buildings to practice their moves on smooth lobby floors. Here, the security guards watched warily but didn't intervene. The dark-suited stream of civil servants flowing into and out of the elevator banks slowed to witness the spontaneous performance, some stopping to clap along or capture the moment on their phones.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Amirah Sackett, interview with the author, February 24, 2020.

⁶¹ Mark Katz, *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 52.

Since 2014’s spontaneous gathering in a State Department building, Next Level has held a cypher involving its artist educators each year during the program’s orientation. The cypher has been held in various locations throughout Washington, D.C., including the Lincoln Memorial, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), and virtually on Zoom in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Next Level’s orientation cypher is critical to a number of stakeholders, but ideas about what constitutes a successful cypher—and even what a cypher is—vary considerably.

Hip hop cyphers are often but not always improvised and spontaneous gatherings. While the cypher may seem simple on the surface—a group of artists performing over a beat—it is a site of artistic, social, and even spiritual complexity vital to hip hop culture. Cyphers may occur among artists from one particular discipline of hip hop, usually MCing or dance, or combine different methods and modes of artistry. If a beat is used in a cypher to provide rhythmic grounding, the method or instrumentation can vary, including live DJing, recorded loops of music, or bodily percussion—beatboxing, clapping, and the like.

In this chapter, I examine Next Level’s orientation cyphers by drawing upon interviews, observation, and my own participation in the planning and post-cypher briefings as an intern at Meridian International Center.⁶² In his song “Show and Prove,” rapper Big Daddy Kane states: “If you’re down with the groove/Get on the mic and won’t you show and prove.”⁶³ The phrase “show and prove” describes the call for hip hop artists to enter the

⁶² In May 2019, I received a Richard Bland Professional Pathways Fellowship from the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill to support a summer internship at Meridian International Center’s Center for Cultural Diplomacy. I applied to work with Meridian both because of my interest in cultural diplomacy and because of their role in administering Next Level. I describe this experience further in the introduction.

⁶³ Big Daddy Kane, “Show and Prove, track 4 on *Daddy’s Home*, MCA Records, 1994, compact disc.

cypher's center and demonstrate their skills. But it carries additional resonances when applied to Next Level's orientation cyphers. For artist educators, the cypher is an opportunity to build and bond with one another while showcasing their skills. Employees at the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), meanwhile, view the cypher as an opportunity to reach diverse audiences, including members of the public who are unfamiliar with cultural diplomacy and State Department officials who are skeptical about government-supported hip hop programs. Thus, these cyphers contain a multitude of tensions and moments of diverging intent. While some of these moments imbue the event with generative energy, others sharpen and deepen the power asymmetries between various stakeholders.

Next Level Orientation

Each June, Next Level brings all the artist educators who will be participating in the upcoming residency cycle to Washington, D.C. for three days. During orientation, artist educators spend time together and share conversations about hip hop and the goals of Next Level. Orientation is the first opportunity for the artist educators to collaborate together and is the only time where all Next Level participants and staff gather in one location.⁶⁴ Artist educators meet with others on their residency team and within their discipline (MCing, dance, beatmaking, DJing, beatboxing, or graffiti art) and participate in conflict transformation training, roundtables with Next Level alumni, discussions about the principles of Next Level and cultural diplomacy programs more broadly, and meetings with public

⁶⁴ Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the entire 2020 orientation, including the cypher, was held virtually on Zoom.

diplomacy officers from various regional bureaus.⁶⁵ It is also one of the only times in which the artist educators will meet ECA and Meridian staff face-to-face. The importance of the orientation is continually highlighted in my interviews with Next Level artists and staff. DJ Zephyr Ann Doles, an alumna of Next Level’s 2017 Morocco residency, informed me that the three-day orientation experience was what convinced her to participate in the program. When she was notified about her acceptance to Next Level, she was excited but admittedly skeptical because of the program’s ties to the U.S. State Department. She notes,

I had to tell myself, no, go to the orientation, meet the other people, ask your questions, see what it’s about. And I thought I was gonna be the weird one questioning these people who want to give us money to go teach in foreign countries or whatever. And then, it turns out, everybody had that question. Everybody at the orientation was like, what’s up with this? . . . That orientation, that three days of meeting the other participants, that was kind of the big thing that I was like, this is definitely something for me.⁶⁶

Doles’s initial skepticism about Next Level’s relationship to the government is akin to sentiments expressed by young cultural diplomats touring during the 1960s.⁶⁷

Beatmaker and Next Level alumnus Glen “DiViNCi” Valencia describes orientation as a profoundly moving experience that set the tone for his entire Next Level experience, including his 2016 residency in Tegucigalpa, Honduras:

To see so many people from all over the country invested in the same pursuit and living it... And I remember tearing up at the last day of that orientation, because I was just so grateful to be among so many people that were just... that were *doing*

⁶⁵The State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs is one of the bureaus that reports to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Other bureaus that report to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs are: the Bureau of Global Public Affairs, Expo Unit, Global Engagement Center, Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources, and U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy. A full list of all State Department bureaus and offices can be found at: <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-and-offices-list>.

⁶⁶ Zephyr Ann Doles, interview with the author, March 23, 2018.

⁶⁷ Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up The World: Jazz Ambassadors Play The Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004). Members of the Oberlin College Choir also expressed similar views in “‘Tour of Tours’: The 1964 Oberlin Choir in the Soviet Union,” March 12, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/122021714>.

*it, you know? Overall, what Next Level showed me is that the bubble that I've been working in for so long exists on a much larger level, a global level. That made such a huge impact so that when we went to our country, which was Honduras, and went through the motions that were set in motion from that orientation, I just had a lot of fire and inspiration to go in there and do it in a way that properly represented the spirit that I was so grateful to be a part of.*⁶⁸

DiViNCI is not the only artist educator who remains inspired by the like-minded hip hop artists he connected with throughout orientation. Like DiViNCi, Amirah Sackett describes with near reverence how impressed she was by her fellow Next Level artist educators. She notes,

*That group, obviously, was just amazing. When we had that meeting, when I became part of Next Level, I sat in that group of people and I realized like, these people are on the same wavelength as me. We are sharing the same types of visions. I was really surrounded by peers. I was surrounded by people that I felt like, some of them were above me in where they are in their career and then others are on the same level as me.*⁶⁹

When cultural diplomacy is described as a force for “winning hearts and minds,” these hearts and minds are understood as belonging to foreign citizenry. But in this case, Next Level’s orientation serves to win over the U.S. artist educators—a necessary action given the complex relationship between hip hop artists and the U.S. government. While artists such as Doles, DiViNCi, Sackett, and many more point to Next Level’s orientation as a memorable experience and a lasting site of personal and professional validation, it is not free from disagreement and conflict. Rather, these conflicts inform the orientation cypher’s tensions.

In 2015, the cypher was formally added to the orientation schedule. When I asked Jill Staggs, the U.S. State Department Affairs Project Coordinator who helps to administer Next

⁶⁸ Junious Brickhouse, Mark Katz, Toni Blackman, and Glen “DiViNCi” Valencia, “Next Level Live: Part I,” virtual program series, May 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyA0rI7NAFw&ab_channel=NextLevelUSA.

⁶⁹ Sackett, interview with the author.

Level, about how and why a cypher was added to the Next Level orientation after 2014, she noted:

I think the idea for the cypher originated because we were thinking it would be a good way to demonstrate for our colleagues and for the desk officers from the different regional bureaus what happens at a hip hop Next Level residency. So, that's why we came up with the idea, and it also seemed like a good time, or a good opportunity for everyone in my office, and . . . the people in the regional bureaus, to see how interactive a hip hop cypher can be, and how it can really pull people in from all different walks of life, and that it's so inclusive and a good way to create a community.⁷⁰

For Staggs, the Next Level cypher serves multiple purposes, including its ability to create a sense of community, an idea that has been vital to hip hop culture since its early days. The cypher also offers a window into the day-to-day workshops that take place during one of Next Level's international residencies. While ECA has sponsored hip hop diplomacy tours and residencies since the early 2000s, beginning with Toni Blackman's work as a hip hop ambassador, not everyone within the State Department is equally familiar with hip hop. Some are likely skeptical of the use of hip hop in government-sponsored cultural programming. One Program Officer at the State Department I spoke to attributes the lack of awareness about hip hop in part to a generational divide, noting: "I think the younger people in my bureau are probably really tuned in to hip hop and fully realize the potential for creating great cultural exchange projects, but I'm not sure that older people, who don't have much of a context for hip hop, really understand it."⁷¹

The Cypher in Hip Hop Culture

⁷⁰ Jill Staggs, interview with the author, January 17, 2020.

⁷¹ The names of some U.S. State Department employees have been anonymized at my collaborators' request.

Dancer and Next Level alumna Amirah Sackett describes cyphers as “both a sharing circle and a battleground.”⁷² Historian and music critic Jeff Chang considers the cypher to be “the core of hip hop.”⁷³ He writes, “the cipher is the circle of participants and onlookers that closes around battling rappers or dancers as they improvise for each other.” Yet there are distinct differences between cyphers and other types of improvisatory musical activities, such as jams and open mics, live shows in which audience members (often amateur musicians and aspiring professionals) are given opportunities to perform onstage.⁷⁴ MC and Next Level alumna Toni Blackman breaks down the differences between cyphers and open mics with the following:

A lot of people are producing cyphers. Ninety percent of the time, those are open mics. If a community of artists, a gathering of artists, and they’re not listening to each other, it’s not a cypher. If they’re not looking at each other it’s not a cypher. If they’re just taking turns going, and there’s no exchanging of energy, information, or ideas, technically, it’s not a cypher. So the word is being used to describe these gatherings, which I think is very beautiful, but I do like to point out that that’s not a cypher. And that’s why I proselytize the cypher all the time.⁷⁵

For Blackman, a cypher requires not only co-presence among artists, but also mutual focus, listening, and reciprocity. A generative ethos, one created and cultivated through the exchange of what Blackman identifies as “energy, information, and ideas,” is not only desirable but necessary.

⁷² Sackett, interview with the author.

⁷³ Jeff Chang, “It’s a Hip-Hop World,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 163 (2007): 58–65.

⁷⁴ In the early days of hip hop, cypher was spelled “cipher.” Some hip hop scholars and practitioners, including Jeff Chang, continue to use the “cipher” spelling. Today, the “cypher” spelling is more prevalent in the United States, so I will use this spelling throughout the dissertation. I echo Toni Blackman’s sentiments: “It used to be spelled cipher in the 90s, but now the young people spell it with a y, so I thought I’d join them.” Toni Blackman, “Toni Blackman on the Wisdom of the Cypher,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8W4yro7ESWU>.

⁷⁵ Blackman, “Toni Blackman on the Wisdom of the Cypher.”

The cypher as a term and concept within hip hop culture was pioneered by the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, also known as the Five Percenters. The Muslim sect, which separated from the Nation of Islam in the late 1960s, was instrumental to the development of hip hop culture.⁷⁶ In Five Percenter thought, the term *cypher* refers to anything in a circle, including the number zero, a sacred symbol within Five Percenter numerology. The cypher's circular shape references a 360-degree circle made up of 120 degrees of lessons, 120 degrees of knowledge, and 120 degrees of wisdom. According to ethnomusicologist, hip hop scholar and Next Level staff member Joseph Schloss, "it is often referred to as 'the' cypher, rather than 'a' cypher, which suggests that all cyphers are, in some abstract way, connected."⁷⁷ In this sense, the cypher extends beyond that particular gathering's temporal moment. In his work on the cypher as a form of literacy, Bharath Ganesh describes the cypher as a process that "implicitly rejects teleology and linearity, representing instead a notion of becoming, of always incomplete fulfilment and self-realisation."⁷⁸

Within hip hop, the cypher is a multifaceted social space. Each component carries an important set of implications for the cypher's atmosphere (often referred to as the "vibe") as well as the sense of community of those present in the cypher. As Schloss describes, many hip hop dancers, also known as b-boys and b-girls, regard the cypher "with an almost

⁷⁶ For further information about the Five Percenters influence on hip hop, see Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁷⁷ Joseph G. Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 99.

⁷⁸ Bharath Ganesh, "The Politics of the CIPHER: Hip-Hop, Antiphony and Multiculturalism" (PhD diss., University College London, 2016), 139.

mystical reverence, befitting its status as the most authentic, challenging, and raw environment for b-boying.”⁷⁹ Participating in a cypher also entails following a set of agreed-upon rules—some spoken, others unspoken. In their work using hip hop cyphers in therapeutic group work, Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin, and Edmund S. Adjapong cite some of these rules:

[I]n any hip-hop cypher, the following unspoken norms are always present: (1) everyone stands equidistant from one another in a circle, (2) everyone has a chance to share, (3) all voices have equal value, (4) praise is awarded to individuals when they share, and (5) equal support is provided to participants when in need. In cyphers, these norms converge to create a sense of comfort, safety and belonging for group members.⁸⁰

While the performers who enter the cypher to showcase their craft are undoubtedly important, the audience surrounding the featured performer is equally critical, as the audience consists of performers waiting to take their turn in the cypher’s center. The cypher has traditionally served a dual purpose, providing an audience for artistic validation and risk-taking as well as attracting new practitioners and artists to the culture. Just as Schloss identifies the cypher as a site of personal and even spiritual transformation, many artists also view the cypher as a critical site of knowledge production. As Junious Brickhouse, Next Level’s Director, confirms, “Where I grew up, in a dance community, cyphers are where you got all your information. There weren’t dance schools back then, and if there were, they definitely weren’t teaching what we were trying to do, because we were making it up as we went.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Schloss, *Foundation*, 99.

⁸⁰ Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin, and Edmund S. Adjapong, “Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work,” *Social Work with Groups* 41, no. 1–2 (2018): 106.

⁸¹ Junious Brickhouse, interview with the author, January 22, 2020.

As Toni Blackman emphasizes, cyphers are nothing new—nor are they unique to hip hop. She describes the act of gathering in a circle to sing, make music, and more as a human attribute that extends throughout cultures, geographies, and time periods. “People have been cyphering for centuries,” Blackman argues. She continues, “We dance in cyphers, we drum in cyphers, we pray in cyphers, we eat in cyphers. It’s just a circle. We sing in these circles as well. And so it makes a lot of sense that then hip hop would gravitate to this circle as a way for artists to express themselves among one another.”⁸² Amirah Sackett also describes the cypher as shared communal experience that exists throughout cultures.⁸³

Both Blackman and Brickhouse emphasize the cypher as a site of sharing, connecting, and holding space for one another. After defining the cypher as a “giving space,” Brickhouse emphasizes,

I’m trying to be present. I’m trying to be the beginning of an example of holding space for people. For me, that’s what cyphers are. Cyphers are like, I’m holding space for you to self-actualize, to do the things you want to do and be the person you want to be. And that really comes from a giving space. For me, it’s not really about me being seen and me showing people... It’s not about me making a contribution. I’m making a contribution—my contribution is kindness, it’s respect, it’s doing my job to the best of my ability.⁸⁴

For Blackman, vulnerability and trust are essential for creating a type of cypher that generates lasting community beyond that particular gathering. In the cypher, she states, “We learn to trust. We learn to trust ourselves and that it’s okay to make mistakes in front of other people. And when we do that, we learn to better trust others. And that is how the collaboration *improves*.” Further, for Blackman, the cypher generates a vital type of

⁸² Blackman, “Toni Blackman on the Wisdom of the Cypher.”

⁸³ Sackett, interview with the author.

⁸⁴ Brickhouse, interview with the author.

collective energy, an energy that everyone participating in the cypher (not simply those in the circle's center) is responsible for creating and maintaining.

Next Level Orientation Cyphers, 2014–2018

Members from the different institutions that administer Next Level are each invested in the orientation cypher, particularly Meridian International Center, the NGO that administers Next Level, and ECA. The locations that host the cypher each year, particularly the Lincoln Memorial and the NAS, have staffs who also bring distinct requirements to the table. These institutional demands complicate the very notion of a cypher, which remains a largely improvisatory practice within hip hop culture. Exploring the Next Level cypher offers unique insights into artist educators' self-presentation as hip hop artists and U.S. cultural ambassadors, alongside their contributions to and considerations of Next Level's self-presentation as a cultural diplomacy program. The Next Level cypher is an event with a critical push and pull at its center, as it both highlights the connection and creates distance (largely metaphorical but sometimes literal) between the program and the federal government.

The planned Next Level cypher takes place on the final day of orientation. As one of orientation's final activities and its only public musical performance, the orientation cypher occupies a uniquely complex position. The cypher has to accomplish a number of tasks in order to be experienced as successful—tasks often imbued with conflicting ideologies. Next Level's staff and incoming artist educators, members of the Meridian's Center for Cultural Diplomacy team, employees at various State Department bureaus, and more share an investment in this performance. At the simplest level, the cypher must, simply, happen—

particularly after months of detailed, inter-institutional planning. Dozens of artists need to be transported to the site of the cypher with all necessary equipment. Power sources for the DJ equipment have to be accounted for. An inclement weather plan must be developed. The cypher's location must be within a short distance of the State Department so employees can attend when their schedules permit without needing to contend with finding a parking spot.

Members of Next Level's staff hope that the cypher will promote feelings of collective effervescence and belonging among artists. Meridian and ECA employees are eager for photos and videos to share on their websites and social media platforms. And, as Next Level's largest and most public U.S. performance, there is an additional pressure on the cypher to captivate and entertain certain audiences, inspiring them to want to learn more about Next Level and leaving them with favorable impressions of U.S. cultural diplomacy initiatives, the U.S. State Department, and the federal government more broadly. The cypher is also a way to leave State Department staff with favorable views of Next Level, hip hop diplomacy, and even hip hop itself.

In 2015, the cypher was formally added to the orientation schedule and took place in the evening in the hotel where the artist educators were staying (see fig. 2). Throughout the cypher, the artists formed a complete circle with one another, and each jumped in the circle's center. In 2016, the cypher took place outdoors near an area with food trucks that are popular with State Department and other government workers. Like the 2014 and 2015 cyphers, the 2016 gathering was also intimate, and artists were able to form a complete circle with one another. In 2015 and 2016, the artists faced each other rather than an audience. But in 2017, 2018, and 2019, the artist educators would face an audience instead of one another, forming a half circle.



Figure 1: MC One Be Lo raps in the 2015 orientation cypher's center. "Next Level Orientation Cypher: One Be Lo." Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHhJubYJFTM>.

The planned Next Level cypher is not the only cypher that occurs during orientation. Many Next Level artist-educators hold small cyphers in their hotels or participate in cyphers throughout D.C. during their free evenings. Additionally, the first night of each year's orientation is marked by a shared meal and discussion that often becomes a cypher at Busboys and Poets, a restaurant, bookstore, and performance venue. Self-described as a "community gathering place" and cultural hub, Busboys and Poets is named after poet Langston Hughes, who had worked as a busboy prior to gaining notoriety as a poet. I had the opportunity to attend both the 2018 and 2019 Busboys and Poets dinners and continue to be struck by the differences between them. In 2018, Junious Brickhouse and Mark Katz (then Next Level co-directors) posed a question for the artist-educators to discuss: "How does hip hop heal?" After a lively conversation that included testimonies from MC Christopher "Def-i" Mike-Bidtah and DJ Kuttin Kandi that described how hip hop helped them heal themselves and their communities, tables were cleared and a cypher began, initiated by MC Joshua "Rowdy" Rowsey. Rowsey, a passionate advocate for the cypher, founded two cyphers in

North Carolina—the UNC Cypher at UNC Chapel Hill and the Med City Cypher in downtown Durham. As soon as someone from the Next Level group suggested a cypher, Rowsey walked to the front of the room, grabbed the microphone, and immediately began chanting “cypher, cypher” into the mic. A call and response began, as the Next Level artist-educators began to echo Rowsey’s “cypher, cypher” with calls of their own.

In 2017 and 2018, the Next Level orientation cypher was held on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Originally, the cypher was going to be at the State Department, but several ECA employees worried it might attract the wrong kind of attention. Though it was not the original plan, the Lincoln Memorial ended up being a venue that not only attracted a robust audience but also generated powerful collective feelings among artist educators, especially those who identify as Black Americans. The Lincoln Memorial has been a site of many pivotal moments in Black American history, including Martin Luther King Jr’s speech during the March on Washington and Black contralto Marian Anderson’s history-making performance in 1939. Brickhouse in particular felt a powerful connective pull to the cypher “being on the Mall where all these famous, legendary people shared their stories and talked about the things that they believed in.”⁸⁵ In 2019, however, the Lincoln Memorial steps had already been booked by a marching band, leaving staff at the State Department, Meridian, and Next Level to search for other options. Jill Staggs suggested the Albert Einstein memorial as a possibility because of its close proximity to the State Department’s main buildings.

⁸⁵ Brickhouse, interview with the author.

2019 Next Level Orientation Cypher

According to Staggs, “The Einstein statue idea came up because... we had an idea to partner with the National Academy of Sciences, and it just seemed like a good way to find a way to collaborate. They have a pretty extensive cultural programs department, so we wanted to find a way to work together.”⁸⁶ In a May 2019 email correspondence between Junious Brickhouse, Mark Katz, Jill Staggs, and Lindsay Amini (Director of Cultural Programs at Meridian), Staggs points out that the NAS needed additional information in order for Next Level to obtain approval to hold the cypher near the Albert Einstein statue. Katz wrote a short email containing three primary reasons why a cypher at the NAS would be “relevant and appropriate.” He touches on science as a theme in hip hop (including the importance of the phrase “dropping science”), the fact that Albert Einstein is frequently mentioned in hip hop, and the opportunity to connect hip hop and science to encourage and excite young people who might not think that science is for them. Katz also offered to share all footage from the cypher with the NAS. After Katz sent his email and a meeting was held with the National Academy of Science’s Events and Operations Coordinator, Patsy Powell, Next Level was allowed to use the Albert Einstein Memorial for their cypher.⁸⁷ But there was one condition: the cypher had to focus on science and science education. Demanding that the Next Level cypher focus on a theme was new for the orientation. While some artist educators embraced the science education theme as an artistic challenge, others felt that the need to focus on a theme took away their sense of artistic agency. Throughout his work on hip hop and education, Christopher Emdin calls attention to the cypher as a space of cogenerative

⁸⁶ Staggs, interview with the author.

⁸⁷ Mark Katz, interview with the author, May 25, 2020.

dialogue. According to Emdin, cyphers cannot be led by any particular individuals and all voices must have equal value.⁸⁸ Yet within the Next Level cypher, crossing between different circles of institutional pressures and demands remains a difficult task. Indeed, the power dynamics between these circles remain highly asymmetrical, particularly for Next Level artist educators. When I asked Mark Katz to respond to Emdin’s definition in the context of the 2019 orientation cypher, he found that “constraints [were] put on cogenerative exchange. People felt going in that there was a power dynamic exerted, whether they saw it as NAS or the State Department or Meridian.”⁸⁹ Requiring that Next Level’s artist educators adhere to a theme they did not choose, that does not relate to Next Level’s mission and goals, created a power asymmetry that runs counter to a cypher’s very ethos.

In 2019, the annual Busboys and Poets dinner occurred the night before the cypher at the NAS. It took place amidst massive protests surrounding go-go music, a heavily percussive style of music made popular by Chuck Brown in the 1970s, and gentrification in Washington, D.C. After weaving through throngs of anti-gentrification protestors railing against the ruling that forced shop owner Donald Campbell to stop playing go-go music from the front of his Central Communications store, I was late to the Busboys and Poets’ dinner and discussion, both of which were well underway by the time I arrived. Only once I stepped inside did I see the text from one of the dinner event’s organizers: “Heads up—big protest on the street. Kinda chaotic.” As always, the event was held in the back room at Busboys and Poets, but with one unfortunate difference from years past—the air conditioning was broken. The room was sweltering. Breakout discussions were taking place at each of the small tables

⁸⁸ Christopher Emdin, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood—And The Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2016), 64.

⁸⁹ Katz, interview with the author.

where Next Level artist educators and staff were seated, with many participants using the restaurant's menus as personal fans. As the conversation died down, the idea of having a cypher was raised. Perhaps it was the lack of air conditioning, or maybe it was the passionate civil discourse occurring just outside, but unlike the previous year in which Rowsey had answered the call to cypher with gusto, nothing happened. An awkward silence fell.

Eventually, two beatboxers—Mark Martin and Kaila Mullady—took up the microphones and launched into a virtuosic vocal percussion performance. Their performance was greeted with cheers and other artists joined them, using their vocal percussion as a backbeat for rapping and dance. However, a cohesive cypher such as the one that took place in 2018 did not occur. The energy never quite coalesced and the long pauses between performances only drew more attention to the room's temperature. This reveals the importance of spontaneity in a cypher's generation and the difficulties of trying to plan or even force this type of gathering. As we left Busboys and Poets, some artist educators joined the anti-gentrification protest, while others returned to the hotel or made plans to go out together.

The next day dawned hot and humid. By the cypher's afternoon start time, the temperature was already approaching triple digits. We arrived at the Albert Einstein Memorial, and a small group of State Department employees were already gathered in front of the statue. A white tent had been set up to protect the DJ equipment and speakers from the sun's glare and possible rain.⁹⁰ However, there was no tent to protect the artists or audience members from the sun. As young people came to watch and participate in the cypher, they climbed over the Albert Einstein statue's giant frame while trying not to grab the hot metal of

⁹⁰ As in previous years, the DJ equipment was provided and set up by members of Urban Artistry, Junious Brickhouse's dance education and cultural heritage organization.

the statue. Artists downed tiny water bottle after tiny water bottle to stay hydrated as the sun blazed. The artists formed half of a circle while the audience formed the other half, with the Einstein statue observing from the side.

Mahogany Jones and Jaci Caprice Clark served as the cypher's Masters of Ceremony. Throughout the cypher, Clark, a producer, MC, and singer, who has participated in Next Level since its early stages and now serves as one of the organization's site managers, connected the elements of hip hop (MCing, DJing, beatmaking, dance, and graffiti/aerosol art) with states of matter (solid, liquid, gas) as well as the elements of air, water, fire, and earth. Artist educators and audience members alike smiled and laughed as Clark evoked "the elements." As dancer and 2019 Next Level artist educator Queen Dinita performed a series of fast-paced house dance moves in cypher's center, Clark began repeating, "We got solid, we got fluid, we got air, we got flow." Clark improvised material in order to combine Next Level's mission with that of the NAS. Her flexibility and artistry were also a testimony to her skill as a performer and her adeptness in responding to and maintaining an audience's interest. During one artist educator's dance solo in the cypher's center, Clark applauded his versatility as an artist involved in multiple elements of hip hop. Snaps were doled out for Clark's clever wordplay. Throughout the event's two-hour duration, Clark held the audience's attention, whether she was rapping or taking the time to explain more about Next Level and hip hop culture. Her frequent shout outs to Einstein delighted the audience. And this creative, energetic atmosphere encouraged audience members to participate—particularly young people.

When the group of children first arrived, they positioned themselves on the Albert Einstein statue, to the side of the cypher itself (see fig. 3).



Figure 2: A young audience member dances at the NAS cypher’s center. From the Cultural Programs of the NAS Instagram account, accessed September 1, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/By33UhchbGt/>.

Chase “Bboy Chase ‘Em Down” Evered, a dancer and 2019 Next Level artist educator who runs a dance studio in Colorado, decided to bridge the gap between the young people, students from a hip hop STEM summer camp, and the Next Level cypher. He approached the students, crouching down in order to make eye contact with them. After talking to them for a while, he motioned to a young student to take his hand. She grabbed his hand as he led her over to the cypher. More students followed, each holding one another’s hands to form a line. Before long, the students had closed the ring of the cypher—creating a cypher within a cypher (see fig. 4). With Evered’s encouragement, a number of young people from the

summer camp participated in the cypher—both students and counselors alike. The crowd erupted in applause and cheers as each student danced in the newly made circle.



Figure 3: Bboy Chase ‘Em Down, in black tank top, creates a cypher within a cypher with young audience members. Photo by the author.

Despite Clark’s virtuosic performance and the participation from the young students, the cypher did not contain a suitable amount of science for Patsy Powell, the NAS’s Events and Operations Coordinator. Throughout the cypher, she approached members of Next Level staff, including Junious Brickhouse and Mark Katz, and staff from Meridian’s Center for Cultural Diplomacy. While I did not witness the interactions between Powell and Next Level staff, I heard about Powell’s palpable frustration at the lack of a focus on science from both Next Level and Meridian personnel. After learning about Powell’s response, I approached Brickhouse and asked him about how things were going. He mentioned that he had a tense interaction with her, but brushed it off, saying, “We’re not a science education program.” It came as somewhat of a surprise, then, when I learned that Powell had emailed Brickhouse,

Staggs, Katz, and Amini after the cypher, letting them know that the performance had been a great success.

Many artists did not participate in the cypher at the NAS. Some watched the performance while others walked around the periphery on their phones. Part of this lack of participation was undoubtedly due to the heat. For others, the location and venue contributed to their unwillingness to join. Throughout the afternoon, I heard Brickhouse stress the importance of holding next year's gathering at an indoor location as he wiped sweat from his brow. As I walked around the cypher taking pictures, I heard one artist educator ask another, "Who is this cypher even *for*?"

Back in 2018, during the bus trip back to Meridian's headquarters, the artist educators appeared energized and upbeat. Throughout the cypher, the artists fed off of each other and cheered each other on, an energy that permeated the day's remaining orientation events. Though the day's weather had made performing challenging—it was so windy that the tent serving as the DJ booth nearly blew away on multiple occasions—the artist educators kept the cypher's energy going during the ride back and excitedly tagged their newfound friends in photos and videos on social media. After the 2019 cypher, however, the energy was much more subdued. Many artists kept to themselves during the bus ride from the NAS to Meridian.

Following the NAS cypher, artist educators were asked to fill out a survey about their experiences at orientation. These orientation surveys reveal that many artists were unhappy about the cypher, which they felt had placed artists and their needs and interests last. Several criticized the cypher's venue and lack of atmosphere. Like many hip hop artists, Amirah Sackett describes a cypher's atmosphere, also described as its energy or vibe, as a critical

component of the gathering. When I asked Sackett about the role that energy plays in a cypher, she responded,

Energy, it's everything. It's everything. Because it's like, you know, you got the music, you have the facility, but you need the energy around you that's encouraging and positive. And that feels supportive. And if you don't have that . . . it doesn't feel the same, you know? Or if you have people that aren't like focused on the cypher and they're on their phones, it's really stupid. It's like, why do I even want to go in there? Nobody's even watching me, nobody's paying attention. Nobody's giving me their energy. They're just filming me.

Several artists, including Bboy El Niño, a hip hop dancer known for his virtuosic head spins, refused to participate in the cypher at all. In Bboy El Niño's case, this could have been because he did not want to risk hurting himself, given that proper flooring was not provided. Annoyed by this unwillingness to participate, one artist educator I spoke to referred to the dancers who would not participate as divas, insisting that they should have joined the cypher. The artist educator continued, "Anyway, there probably won't be the kind of flooring they're used to when they're doing their residency."

For Brickhouse, the imposition of the science education theme separated the NAS cypher from an "authentic" cypher. But he also remains acutely aware of the performative nature of this cypher, one in which hip hop artists were gathered not for each other, but to be ambassadors for Next Level and cultural diplomacy more broadly. He explains:

This is another part of our work, you know, doing cultural diplomacy as hip hop artists. We are often on display. We are performing. That's what we do, we are performers. But giving context to what it is we do and why, sometimes we need more time. We just flow and we talk about the things that we want to talk about, what moves us. We don't necessarily want to talk about science, math, you know? That might not be our topic for the day. But people try to be good sports about it. They complained to me later on, though. They're like, "We didn't like that." I was like, "Yeah, neither did I."⁹¹

⁹¹ Brickhouse, interview with the author.

By describing Next Level artist educators as being “on display,” Brickhouse draws attention to the Next Level orientation cypher as a type of exhibition—a carefully curated display of hip hop culture that is made to stand alone, separated from its everyday cultural context. Here, the product becomes more important than the process—the very inverse of a hip hop cypher’s goals, as argued by Toni Blackman. This also goes against one of Next Level’s stated principles: process over product.⁹² The Next Level cypher represents a staged performance framed by a specific type of cultural encounter: one in which audience members consisting largely of State Department employees and tourists observe an event that many (if not most) do not understand. In this sense, the orientation cypher represents a type of objectification of hip hop artists, not only through the act of staging of the cypher itself, but by using the cypher as a tool to educate audience members about hip hop and cultural diplomacy. As anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues: “Live exhibits as a representational mode make their own kinds of claims. Even when efforts are taken to the contrary, live exhibits tend to make people into artifacts because the ethnographic gaze objectifies.”⁹³ But Brickhouse rejects turning hip hop artists into artifacts and pushes against the objectifications that come from audience members’ surface-level encounters with the orientation cypher. By prioritizing the agency of hip hop artists to “talk about the things we want to talk about, what moves us,” Brickhouse stresses the need for the Next Level artist

⁹² The Next Level Principles are a list of guidelines that encourage artist educators to: “show respect, be humble, be self-aware, be present, be flexible, stay safe, share yourself, be professional, recognize your privilege, listen as much as you speak, learn as much as you teach, value process over product, do your homework, and stay in touch.” Mark Katz discusses the Next Level Principles further in *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*, 104.

⁹³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 55.

educators to have control over their own stagings and representations in addition to accommodating State Department staff and the performance's audience.

As Director, Junious Brickhouse was part of the decision-making that led to having the cypher at the NAS, in large effort to accommodate the interests of Next Level's government partners. After the cypher, he gathered Next Level and Meridian staff together to begin making plans for next year. He notes,

We sat down and we debriefed, and we started making in plans then. In our meetings to follow, we came up with a new plan. We're like, "So, we're not going to do that anymore." In previous years, I couldn't make that decision but I can make it now. I can make it and I can say, "Oh, why don't we do something else?"

The atmosphere at the NAS cypher remains one of Brickhouse's chief complaints. The need to focus on science and science education, neither of which are tenets of Next Level, negatively impacted the atmosphere, transforming the cypher into a space that was not only restrictive, but also uninspiring and even unprofessional. Brickhouse observed,

In previous years, the cyphers we had at the Lincoln Memorial on the stairs, those were inspirational. I felt like this year's [2019] was kind of rough. You know, the scenery was off, and we had a standard, like someone's asking us to talk about a subject that we didn't necessarily want to talk about. And at some points, it was laughable. It was like, why are we doing this?⁹⁴

In comparing the 2017, 2018, and 2019 cyphers, Mark Katz identifies the Lincoln Memorial setting as special, filled with profound historical resonances. In contrast, the NAS was not an inspirational setting.

Other 2019 cypher organizers have also expressed additional frustrations with this particular gathering. For instance, the turnout from State Department employees was not nearly as high as Meridian and Next Level staff members had hoped. This remains

⁹⁴ Brickhouse, interview with the author.

particularly disappointing, as proximity to the State Department was one of the primary reasons for holding the cypher at the NAS. I spoke with one State Department Program Officer who had recently attended an event at the Diplomacy Center Museum. As she compared the two events, she lamented, “It was just pretty frustrating that 180 people came to that event [at the Diplomacy Center Museum], which was at a place that’s not so easy to get to, and yet we couldn’t get very many people to the Einstein statue.” The event at the Diplomacy Center Museum, though far from the State Department, was an indoor, catered event. Even though the NAS was close by, perhaps State Department employees were unwilling to attend the event because it was held outdoors on a hot summer afternoon. Additionally, the term *cypher* may have caused confusion among ECA employees, and a lack of familiarity with the performance may have contributed to the low State Department turnout. An event held at the Diplomacy Center Museum would likely have been more familiar to a crowd of Washington, D.C.’s government bureaucrats.

The cypher functions as a significant photo opportunity for the program. Staff at Meridian International Center’s Center for Cultural Diplomacy went into the cypher hoping for dynamic photos to use for branding, promotional materials, and social media. One priority was to procure a photo to serve as the new background for the Next Level website’s homepage (as shown in fig. 5). This was, in part, to keep the website updated and showcase the 2019 artist educators, as Meridian staff told me when I was an intern. It was also to replace a photo that Meridian staff felt did not represent the program, as the dancer at the center of the picture ultimately withdrew from the program. Though selected for Next Level as a part of Team Australia, he did not attend the residency.

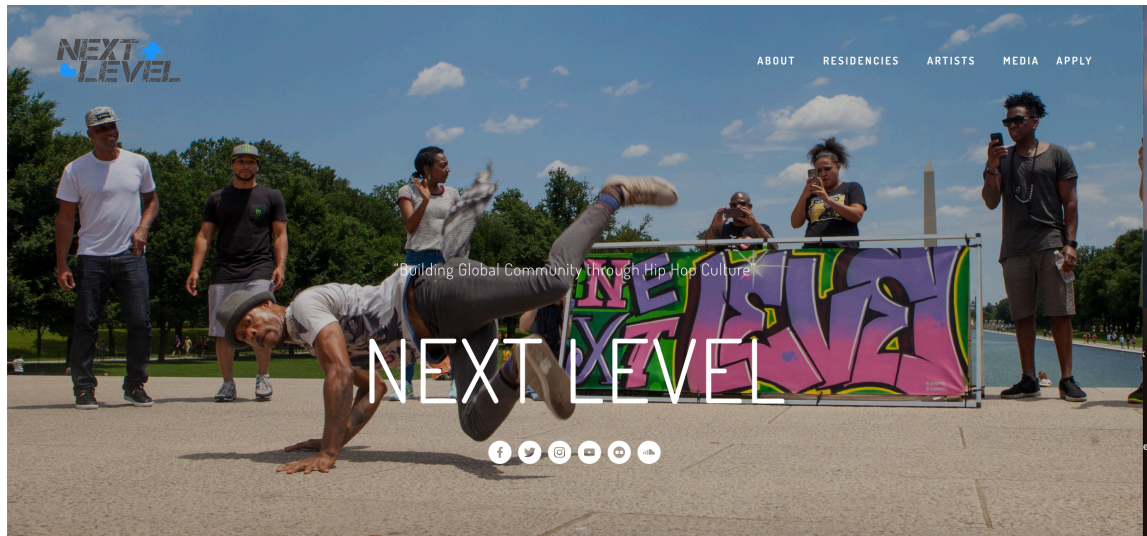


Figure 4: The Next Level website's homepage. Accessed September 1, 2019.
<https://www.nextlevel-usa.org/>.

As I watched the staff at Meridian's Center for Cultural Diplomacy review the photos from the day, they all admitted that none were quite as eye-catching as the picture from the 2018 cypher. One MCCD team member repeatedly asked me: "Erica, did you get all the photos from Mark?" When I answered that I had, she paused, then asked: "Are you sure?"

For the entirety of my summer internship at Meridian, the homepage picture remained unchanged. From June through August 2019, I made frequent updates to the website, reorganizing the overall format for clarity and consistency, updating artist biographies, and adding media from past residencies. Each day I logged on, I wondered when the homepage's background would be changed. In early 2020, the picture on the website's homepage was finally updated. I was eager to see which 2019 photo had been chosen. To my surprise, the replacement photo was another from the 2018 Lincoln Memorial cypher rather than the 2019 cypher at the NAS (see fig. 6). Ultimately, the four Meridian Cultural Programs staff members I worked with found that the 2019 event did not yield the right visuals for the

website. The absence of the powerful, symbolic Washington Monument did not pack the same visual (or indeed, symbolic) punch.



Figure 5: The updated Next Level homepage. Accessed May 18, 2020.
<https://www.nextlevel-usa.org/>.

While the 2019 cypher was certainly a challenging one, some of the tensions behind the NAS cypher injected the event with generative energy, particularly regarding audience participation. At the 2018 Lincoln Memorial cypher, audience members sat on the stairs, watching Next Level’s artists perform. In more traditional cyphers, distinctions between performers and audience members are blurred, as the “audience” often consists of artists who will eventually take their turn at the circle’s center. However, at the 2017 and 2018 Lincoln Memorial cyphers, the designations between performers and audience members were clear, further delineated by differences in height. While traditional cyphers are participatory performances, the 2017 and 2018 orientation cyphers were largely presentational performances, a term defined by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino as “situations where one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who

do not participate in making the music or dancing.”⁹⁵ There was some audience interaction during the 2017 and 2018 cyphers, but a clear separation between performers and audience members remained throughout.



Figure 6: Three Next Level artist educators dance at the 2017 cypher. Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8YuFzq8RI0>.

Occasionally, members of the crowd would raise their hands up and down in accordance with the beat created by the featured DJ. Many took pictures or videos on their cameras and phones. While all of the artist educators participated in the cypher, when they asked for audience members to join them on the dance floor, only one or two members of the crowd participated during the event’s entire two-hour duration. The seated audience and overall lack of participation made this performance less like a cypher and more like a concert or jam session.

While the Next Level artists had mixed opinions on the NAS location in 2019 (with some, like Katz, noting the venue’s sense of “ordinariness”) the area surrounding the Albert

⁹⁵ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.

Einstein statue created a sense of intimacy that previous cyphers at the Lincoln Memorial did not—and could not have—achieved. The Lincoln Memorial’s grandeur, stunning backdrop, and massive stairs do not lend themselves to an atmosphere that welcomes audience participation. Rather, they create a sense of formality, reinforcing presentation rather than encouraging participation. The area surrounding the Albert Einstein statue, meanwhile, was not only smaller than the Lincoln Memorial steps, but also completely flat. While this setting contributed to pictures that were not nearly as dynamic as those from 2017 and 2018, the landscape at the Albert Einstein statue ensured that performers and audience members were on an equal plane with one another.

In some ways, the Albert Einstein Statue’s location, which placed audience members and performers on an equal plane and the presence of children brought a certain cypher spirit back to performance that in 2017 and 2018 had felt more like a concert. Jaci Caprice Clark’s verses created a playful and open spirit that, combined with Bboy Chase ‘Em Down’s engagement of young audience members, created a cypher *within* the Next Level cypher, one that prioritized young people—and engaging young people is, after all, Next Level’s mission. This cypher within a cypher created a space for the young people in the audience to perform, showcase their creativity and talent, and interact with the Next Level artist educators. This atmosphere was quite different from the previous year’s cypher, in which Clark and Mahogany Jones sought volunteers of all ages to join them on the dance floor, with little to no success. The presence and involvement of the children in the 2019 cypher at the NAS rehabilitated some of the cypher spirit, as Next Level artist educators and the children were able to create and build with one another.

A few days after the NAS cypher, Next Level staff and employees in Meridian International Center's Center for Cultural Diplomacy shared a conference call to discuss orientation. Early into the phone call, Junious Brickhouse, and Next Level's Associate Director, Kane Smego, called for an orientation cypher that prioritized artist educators. Brickhouse emphasized that next year's cypher would not be held outdoors. Rather, he expressed interest in renting out a club (or another professional indoor venue) in order to ensure that all artists, particularly dancers, would be able to showcase their skills without worrying about excessive heat or safety concerns. But because of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent stay-at-home orders, the cypher was held virtually, as was Next Level's entire orientation.

2020 Next Level Orientation Cypher

Prior to the 2020 virtual cypher, I was skeptical about the use of the term cypher to describe the Next Level performance. One critical component that separates the Next Level orientation cypher from traditional cyphers is the inherent power asymmetry among the institutions and individuals who plan and execute the event. But the 2020 cypher—held virtually and privately (for program attendees only, with only a few State Department employees invited to attend)—shifted my thinking considerably.

While virtual cyphers are uncommon, they not unheard of. In 2016, after Egypt's strict laws against public protests led to clashes between Egyptian hip hop artists and police, Egyptian rapper Abdelrahim Adham began a virtual cypher called the Flying 16 Challenge (*taḥaddi sit'ashar 'at-ṭayir*.) In the Flying 16 Challenge, MCs performed 16 bars of lyrics

over an unfamiliar beat, then challenged others to follow suit.⁹⁶ In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, hip hop producer and Next Level alumnus Eliot Gann began #GlobalBeat Cyphers, a series of cyphers held online. As a licensed clinical psychologist who is passionate about beatmaking's "therapeutic potential," Gann's #GlobalBeat Cyphers emphasize beatmaking as a way to heal, create, and build community.⁹⁷

The Next Level virtual cypher animated two opposing forces—restriction and freedom. For instance, in order to prevent audio issues (including echoes and microphone feedback), all cypher participants and attendees kept their computer's microphones muted during each performance. All reactions to each artist educator's solo performance had to be entirely visual rather than auditory. To express encouragement, artists and other cypher attendees doled out snaps, nodded their heads, closed their eyes, or posted the applause emoji in their individual video screens. Some also left messages of encouragement in the chat box. But depending on the artist's technology setup, many of these acts of encouragement went unseen. For instance, during his instrumental percussion set, eCussionist sat at his drum set, facing away from the computer screen. He was only able to receive praise for his performance and read the comments posted in the Zoom chat after performance finished rather than in the moment. The virtual format also prevented artists from collaborating with one another. At one point, Corey James Gray and Chane "Big Piph" Morrow, two MCs and Next Level alumni, attempted a live collaboration, and Gray provided a beat for Piph to rap over. But Gray's volume was so loud that it was impossible to understand Piph's words.

⁹⁶ Nicholas Mangialardi, "Entering the Virtual Cipher," *Ethnomusicology Review*, September 30, 2016, https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/entering-virtual-cipher#_ftnref8.

⁹⁷ Today's Future Sound #GlobalBeatCypher, Facebook Group, created March 22, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1316603165395683/about>.

After finishing their performance, Piph was asked to repeat his verse so everyone could appreciate his performance more fully. The virtual cypher also lacked a sense of spontaneity throughout. In order to participate in the cypher, artist educators had to sign up ahead of time. As the host, Gray was responsible for placing them in order. Rather than being moved to jump into the cypher's center, Gray announced which artist would perform, then the artist performed their material.

Yet the cypher's virtual format also provided certain affordances for artist educators. Unlike the 2019 cypher, there was no theme, and artists were encouraged to perform whatever material they wanted. They also used their own equipment and home studios rather than relying on rented equipment as in past orientation cyphers. Several artists performed work that would not have been possible at previous cyphers, which were billed as family-friendly events in which artist educators represented not only themselves, but also Next Level and U.S.-government sponsored cultural work. The May and June 2020 murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade at the hands of U.S. law enforcement were at the forefront of many artist educators' minds and hearts, and several artist educators' performances focused on anti-Black racism and state-sanctioned violence. One of the memorable performances of the night was a set by Jonathan "DJ Akshen" Valdez. DJ Akshen's set combined speeches by Black activists and authors, including Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, James Baldwin, and Kimberly Jones, with musical works about police brutality and revolution. Before he began his performance, Akshen highlighted that even though the activists and artists featured in his set hailed from different eras, from the 1950s to 2020s, their message remained the same because the problem of violence against Black people had not been solved. He shook his head with disbelief. With tears in his eyes,

Akshen's voice cracked with emotion as he asked: "How the *fuck* is this still happening?" Genesis Be, an activist in the movement to remove the Confederate flag from the Mississippi state flag, offered a spoken word piece that she had been performing at Black Lives Matter rallies throughout her home state of Mississippi. Arabelle "AirLoom Beats" Luke closed the cypher with a musical prayer she had written, closing her eyes as she pleaded for peace and safety for her Black siblings throughout the world from whatever powers and energies might hear and respond to her.

Witnessing the artist educators share what was on their minds was striking. The honesty and vulnerability contained within performances by DJ Akshen, Genesis Be, and AirLoom Beats created a bond that stood apart from past years, in which the need to appease various institutions and audiences was a primary objective. Unlike past years, the 2020 cypher was not a public event and only a few State Department employees were invited. This was not performance for them; rather, they were guests within the space. Cultural diplomacy's inherent frictions and unresolvable complexities were laid bare throughout the gathering, in which artists participating in a government-sponsored program spoke out against the government, particularly Donald Trump and his administration, and the systemic racism that pervades the United States and weaves its way through every institution. Throughout the cypher, outrage and despair sat side-by-side with light-hearted performances and virtuosic displays of talent, such as when dancer Hannah "G-W" George-Wheeler concluded her performance by scaling her front door and doing an aerial flip. Artist educators had full command of the cypher, using the space as they saw fit to share stories of struggle and moments of joy. The 2020 virtual cypher placed the artist educators in control in a way

that remains distinct within this event's short history, lessening power asymmetries between participants, organizers, and State Department employees.

Conclusion

For Junious Brickhouse, the challenge of the annual orientation cypher is planning a gathering that typically emerges organically, spontaneously. He notes, "I think the hardest part about the cypher, planning it, is we shouldn't be planning it. Cyphers happen when people are motivated, you know, when it's authentic. So our goal [for 2020] is, and from here out, is to create authentic environments where people feel comfortable sharing." Back in 2019, he described the type of orientation cypher he hoped to see in 2020, identifying the 2014 cypher as an example of what he sought to plan and emulate: "We're having the cypher because we want to connect with our friends at the State Department in spaces where they can see what it is that we do. I think that's where that started. That first year [2014], when we did that, people were like, 'Oh, this is great.' So how about we do that again? We just start planning in that way." During the 2020 virtual cypher, the State Department employees were able to "see what it is that [artist educators] do" as audience members and guests. Due to the orientation cypher's institutional nature, the orientation cypher cannot be purely spontaneous. However, by seeking to bridge the gaps between rhetoric and action, staff from ECA, Meridian, and Next Level can address diverse institutional needs while attending to artist educators.

Next Level holds the orientation cypher in order to show and prove the value of hip hop diplomacy to employees at the U.S. State Department. Artist educators use the cypher to show and prove their skills to each other, as well as staff at ECA and Meridian. The Meridian

Center for Cultural Diplomacy relies on the cypher to demonstrate the importance not only of Next Level, but of cultural work more broadly within an organization that has only five employees dedicated to cultural work. Jill Staggs conceives of the cypher as an important community event with the ability to bring together artists, audience members, and U.S. government employees. Each Next Level orientation cypher contains personal and institutional pressures to “show and prove.” In its mission to bring together diverse state and non-state actors to pursue shared goals on behalf of the United States, the various iterations of the Next Level orientation cypher offer a microcosm of U.S. cultural diplomacy.

CHAPTER TWO: ONEBEAT'S COSMOPOLITAN VISION: ASPIRATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

On October 5, 2019, I meet with three musicians at American Deli & Takeout, a hole-in-the-wall restaurant in the small town of East Point, Georgia. The sounds of a football game blare from a small TV in the corner of the room as we munch on hot wings and burgers. The three musicians are participants in the U.S. State Department–sponsored OneBeat program. Though their day has been a long one, filled with rehearsals for upcoming shows, photoshoots, and an early morning workshop at an elementary school, they are eager to discuss OneBeat with me during their lunch break. Throughout our meal, all three musicians refer to the program as “life-changing.” Each of these artists is a highly skilled musician and established community leader—none of them are new to the world of government-sponsored arts programs. Yet, they insist, OneBeat feels different from programs they have been part of in the past. Dylan McKinstry, a multi-instrumentalist from Brooklyn, New York, comments: “A lot of times, things like this can feel really forced. This sense of forced diplomacy, like we’re all friends and Kumbaya and you all have to sing together and that can sometimes feel a little trite. But yeah, not real.” Sarra Douik, a vocalist and oud player from Tunis, Tunisia, chimes in, “But here... you can find yourself.” Fanni Zahár, a Budapest, Hungary-based flutist, nods in agreement, adding, “The staff, I mean, they are geniuses at organizing and putting the program together because it’s super hard to take so many people and make them feel comfortable.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Dylan McKinstry, Fanni Zahár, and Sarra Douik, interview with the author, October 5, 2019.

Throughout the time I observed OneBeat’s fall 2019 residency in Atlanta, Georgia, I was continually struck by the close relationships among OneBeat’s participating artists, who are referred to as Fellows. Closeness was not simply expressed through conversation, as demonstrated in my lunch with the three Fellows at American Deli, but also through musical collaborations and physical manifestations such as hugging, hand holding, and dancing. Figure 1 depicts 2019 Fellows Oyuntuya Enkhbat and Bailak Mongush walking together with their arms around one another during OneBeat’s opening artist residency. Featured on the OneBeat website, the photo does more than showcase a close bond between Fellows—it promises closeness, friendship, and connections as intended outcomes of program participation. But meaningful bonds between Fellows do not simply occur. They are not merely a welcome result of the program. Rather, they are essential to OneBeat’s very existence.



Figure 7: Oyuntuya Enkhbat (left), carrying a bag featuring a OneBeat sticker, and Bailak Mongush (right) walk together during the OneBeat artist residency. Photograph by Alexia Webster, <http://1beat.org/gallery/residency-week-1-2/>.

After McKinstry, Zahár, and Douik, and I returned from lunch, I interviewed Jeremy Thal, one of OneBeat’s co-artistic directors and co-founders. I asked him if Fellows’ perceptions of the program had altered in response to the Trump administration’s xenophobic comments and legislation. Thal discussed changes in State Department funding (which actually increased under Trump despite threats of serious cuts), then asserted: “Once the artists arrive, we don’t talk about politics. It’s not political.” He continued:

I feel like most of the musicians who apply are aware that there’s these political things happening in the U.S. But I think most musicians have a notion that the U.S. is not our politicians. It’s the people. When you’re thinking about Atlanta, you’re not thinking about the conservative Republican governor. But maybe [Fellows have] seen the show *Atlanta*, they certainly listen to Outkast. There’s still a lot of great cultural production. That’s not very political. And that’s what people are interested in. Not politics. The State Department is the funder and people are aware of that. But I also think that at the end of the day, it’s a free trip to the U.S. to hang out with a bunch of great musicians to have this career-boosting and awesome experience. And then we don’t push this political thing once we’re here at all. We don’t talk about politics. The only way that we talk about it is just to say that we should be having conversations and collaborations in this circle.⁹⁹

Throughout his statement, Thal used the terms “politics” and “political” to reference geopolitics and government policy. He separated politics from the realm of cultural production, referencing OneBeat, the tv show *Atlanta*, and the hip hop group Outkast. This conception, however, does not account for the realm of politics that involve one’s identity and experiences, which Thal acknowledged in a subsequent email communication. After reviewing the above quote, he found he disagreed with his earlier statement, writing, “Outkast and *Atlanta* are very much political forms of cultural expression... I guess I was talking about the big P Politics of the US elections and such.”¹⁰⁰ Thal further clarified his

⁹⁹ Jeremy Thal, interview with the author, October 5, 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Thal, email communication with the author, July 7, 2021.

statement from 2019, adding, “I think it’s inaccurate to say that the fellows are not interested in politics.” Although the program is not meant to be explicitly political, Thal explained that, “Many of them [the Fellows] are interested in politics, involved in politics in their own countries, and quite aware of the internal politics and foreign policy of the US.”¹⁰¹ Thal’s internal disagreement reveals the gradations of the concept of the political that distinguish between explicit, clearly intentional political acts and phenomena (big P Politics) and other more subtle, but no less significant forms of the political.

An interest in separating politics from the art and cultural production at the core of cultural diplomatic endeavors is not new. As musicologist Danielle Fosler-Lussier identifies in her work on U.S. cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, “By choosing musical ambassadors who believed that art was more important than politics, the State Department supported the attractive idea that cultural diplomacy was separate from practical political concerns. Ironically, this widely held belief afforded musical diplomacy its political power.”¹⁰² Deemphasizing cultural diplomacy’s connections to U.S. politics and policies (what Thal refers to as “big P Politics”) benefits participating artists and State Department staff. By not identifying cultural diplomacy as political, practitioners feel more aligned in purpose and action, thereby enabling cultural diplomacy’s statecraft-oriented objectives to take effect.

The following passage from a 2017 OneBeat brochure echoes Thal’s statement from October 2019:

¹⁰¹ Jeremy Thal, email communication with the author, June 28, 2021.

¹⁰² Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 21.

In a time when politics has left us with a fractured world, music has a special power to tie together our disparate communities, retracing our common histories, and re-affirming our common humanity, empathy, and creativity. In this spirit, OneBeat convenes 25 musical changemakers from around the world to create and perform new work in the U.S. and explore how artists and institutions can work together to rejuvenate local economies through music, technology and the creative arts. More than a music festival or a simple exchange, OneBeat is an incubator for new forms of musical expression, a hatchery for novel ways to use music as a tool for the betterment of our communities, and an ever-growing web of interconnected artists and change-makers.¹⁰³

Here, politics are described as divisive while music is a transcendent force that brings people together. On the website of Found Sound Nation’s parent organization, Bang on a Can, both Found Sound Nation and OneBeat are introduced with the following: “Found Sound Nation, a technology-based musical outreach program [is] now partnering with the State Department of the United States of America to create OneBeat, a revolutionary, post-political residency program that uses music to bridge the gulf between young American musicians and young musicians from around the world.”¹⁰⁴ However, creating a nominally non-political or post-political space is, in fact, a political act. Connecting artists across borders and encouraging them to reimagine and even transcend current political realities is a political act.

In this chapter, I argue that OneBeat has a distinct cosmopolitan vision and message, one that helps bring the overlapping agendas of participating Fellows, program staff, and State Department employees into alignment. OneBeat’s cosmopolitanism fulfills a number of Fellows’ needs, including: connecting with like-minded people, crossing or challenging borders, traveling, and feeling listened to and cared for—not only as an artist, but as a person. Assertions that OneBeat exists outside of or beyond politics make it appear as though

¹⁰³ “About OneBeat PDF,” OneBeat, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://onebeat2015.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/20161117145526/onebeat-2017-deck-web.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ Bang on a Can, “About,” accessed September 1, 2020, https://bangonacan.org/about_us.

program activities and performances are somehow divorced from power dynamics and even geopolitics, imbuing the program with a particular type of political power that benefits the U.S. State Department. However, like other contemporary cultural diplomacy programs that appeal to a cosmopolitan sense of belonging, OneBeat’s aspirations are complex and fraught. In her work on the Tabadol Project, a State Department–sponsored exchange program between the United States and Lebanon, anthropologist Marina Peterson writes: “An idealism of cosmopolitan membership supports the basic goals of cultural diplomacy, insofar as it affirms the potential for culture to transcend the sticky constraints and potential divisiveness of politics and economics. Yet cultural diplomacy ultimately plays a supporting role to hard diplomacy, using the arts to produce the nation in relation to overlapping pillars of membership, territory, and security.”¹⁰⁵ According to Julia Gomez-Nelson, the Program Officer at the State Department who oversees OneBeat, the purpose of cultural diplomacy is to promote mutual understanding, build trust, and “ultimately, to create opportunity and have influence in the world by creating networks.”¹⁰⁶ For Gomez-Nelson and her State Department colleagues, cultural diplomacy has foreign policy and national security goals.

One State Department Program Officer I spoke to described cultural diplomacy as “the tip of the spear,” claiming, “Culture is less threatening. There’s less skepticism about it.” Culture, then, becomes a way of shaping public opinion, opening the doors to later conversations about policy. After all, State Department staff members have a clear agenda to make sure that the programs they run serve the broader State Department agendas: to

¹⁰⁵ Marina Peterson, “Sonic Cosmopolitanisms: Experimental Improvised Music and Cultural Exchange,” in *The Arab Avant-Garde: Musical Innovation in the Middle East*, ed. Thomas Burkhalter, Kay Dickinson, and Benjamin J. Harbert (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 188.

¹⁰⁶ Julia Gomez-Nelson, interview with the author, October 5, 2020.

promote a favorable image of the United States both at home and abroad. The State Department Program Officer's evocation of the "tip of the spear," a military metaphor, suggests that the work that diplomats do is difficult because they are often the first to address complex situations or relationships. However, the expression still retains the suggestion of violence, and reveals a perspective in which soft and hard power are distinctly linked rather than separate. Soft power is conceived of as helping reduce or eliminate the need for hard power. It also stands in stark contrast to OneBeat's mission statement on its website, which describes the program as "the nexus of a new way of thinking about how music and artistic expression can help us collectively build healthier communities, prosperous societies, and a more peaceful world."¹⁰⁷ In the mission statement, OneBeat is presented as benevolent in its mission to create a peaceful, equitable world. The statement about culture as "the tip of the sphere," meanwhile, portrays cultural diplomacy as less threatening but nonetheless preparing the way for other, perhaps more violent interventions by the United States.

But this does not mean that the State Department and OneBeat program staff are at odds or that OneBeat relies on a type of foundational "bait-and-switch." Rather, it reveals different perspectives: one in which diplomacy is linked with hard power and one in which it is considered separately from hard power. As McKinstry, Zahár, and Douik attest, the program has demonstrated success in challenging preconceived notions about what it means and feels like to participate in a government-sponsored music program. Throughout this chapter, I explore how OneBeat's cosmopolitan vision is articulated and reinforced in the opening artist residency. I then discuss the ways in which social bonds, created and cultivated during the residency and tour, serve Fellows' personal, artistic, and professional objectives

¹⁰⁷ OneBeat, "Mission," accessed July 1, 2021, <https://1beat.org/mission>.

while simultaneously serving State Department goals. Since U.S. cultural diplomacy programs depend on the creation and cultivation of relationships, discussing how relationships form and whom they serve is critical work.

My research draws upon my observations and interviews, as well as OneBeat's online video archive that documents residencies and tours. From October 3 to October 6, 2019, I observed the Atlanta, Georgia portion of OneBeat's U.S. tour, attending rehearsals, roundtables, workshops, recording sessions, and performances with OneBeat Fellows and staff. I also conducted several individual and group interviews with OneBeat Fellows and staff members and assisted with audio recording at the program's concert at Atlanta's High Museum of Art.

Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism's origins are traced to classical Greece, particularly to Diogenes the Cynic's assertion: "I am a citizen of the world" (*kosmou polite*.) The Stoics felt that human beings were located in overlapping webs of connection and obligation that extended from self and family to the world at large. During the Enlightenment, the concept of cosmopolitanism gained prominence among Western intellectuals, most notably Immanuel Kant. While Kant's essay "Toward a Perpetual Peace" envisions a peaceful world order predicated on conceptions of morality that necessarily extend beyond the territorially-bound state, as geographer and social theorist David Harvey points out, Kant's writings are rife with geographical inaccuracies, assertions of racism and white supremacy, and unabashed support

for colonial enterprises.¹⁰⁸ Defining cosmopolitanism as a “translational process of culture’s in-betweenness,” the editors of *Cosmopolitanism: A Millennial Quartet Book* bring together work from scholars across varied disciplines and locations, broadening the discussion of cosmopolitanism beyond a focus on European thought traditions.¹⁰⁹

Scholarly focus on cosmopolitanism has grown substantially in recent years, in part due to the emergence of worldwide media and communication, an ever-growing number of transnational, non-state actors, and other related processes related to globalization. It has become attractive as a way to approach relationships and flows that reject and even transcend territorial boundaries. Cosmopolitanism in contemporary scholarship is multi-dimensional, marked by competing camps and subfields. Contemporary cosmopolitanisms include moral cosmopolitanism, political cosmopolitanism, economic cosmopolitanism, ethical cosmopolitanism, and cultural cosmopolitanism. Critics of cosmopolitanism often describe it as an elitist venture, a lifestyle only accessible to society’s privileged few. According to literary scholar Bruce Robbins, the word *cosmopolitan* as a descriptor “evokes the image of a privileged person: someone who can claim to be a ‘citizen of the world’ by virtue of independent means, expensive tastes, and a globe-trotting lifestyle.”¹¹⁰ But while many U.S. cultural diplomacy practitioners espouse cosmopolitanist visions of global community, their socio-economic status may be far from Robbins’ description. Many U.S. artists are attracted to U.S. government–sponsored cultural diplomacy programs in large part because of these

¹⁰⁸ David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁹ Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Cakrabarty, eds., *Cosmopolitanism: A Millennial Quartet Book* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.

¹¹⁰ Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanisms,” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 246.

programs' funding, as well as opportunities for travel and audience-building that would remain impossible otherwise. I do acknowledge, however, that those who carry U.S. passports enjoy a privileged sense of mobility, an ease of travel, that is denied to many.

Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz describes cosmopolitanism as a particular type of “orientation,”

a willingness to engage with the Other. It entails an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural contrasts rather than uniformity . . . At the same time, however, cosmopolitanism can be a matter of competence, and competence of both a generalized and a more specialized kind. There is the aspect of a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting, and reflecting.¹¹¹

The compatibility of cosmopolitanism with nationalism is hotly-contested, a robust academic debate marked by notoriously slippery concepts such as membership and belonging. As geographer Barney Warf illustrates, “The relationships between nationalism and cosmopolitanism are complex, frequently uneasy, and often marked by acrimony.”¹¹² Some scholars locate cosmopolitanism and nationalism as irrevocably opposed to one another, including legal scholar Martha C. Nussbaum. Nussbaum argues that world citizenship rather than patriotism provides the foundation for an ideal society. For Nussbaum, the concepts of patriotism and nationalism depend on principles of exclusion, which her cosmopolitanist vision rejects.¹¹³

Political scientist Samuel Huntington categorizes American cosmopolitanism as thinly-veiled imperialism. According to Huntington, the United States aspires not to create

¹¹¹ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), 103.

¹¹² Barney Warf, “Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Geographical Imaginations,” *Geographical Review* 102, no. 3 (July 2012): 280.

¹¹³ Martha Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in *The Global Justice Reader*, ed. Thom Brooks (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 306–314.

mutual understanding, but to “reshape those people and cultures in terms of American values guided by the intentions to ‘remake the world.’”¹¹⁴ Because of the U.S.’s unmatched power, wealth, global influence, definitions of “democracy,” “freedom,” and “human rights” are often defined according to U.S. perceptions and interests, leaving little room for debate, let alone pluralism. As musicologist Mark Katz writes, this power asymmetry inevitably affects the practice of cultural diplomacy:

The US is wealthier and more powerful than most of the nations that State Department–funded hip hop artists visit; moreover, it has a long history of often unwelcome interventions in the affairs of countries around the world. This relationship, this history, colors diplomatic initiatives in so many, often unspoken, ways.¹¹⁵

Sociologist Ulrich Beck sees nationalism and cosmopolitanism not as oppositional forces but rather as working alongside one another: “Cosmopolitan realism does not negate nationalism but presupposes it and transforms it into a cosmopolitan nationalism. Without the stabilizing factors that nationalism provides in dealing with difference, cosmopolitanism is in danger of losing itself in a philosophical never-never land.”¹¹⁶ Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah encourages “rooted cosmopolitanism,” which acknowledges ties to the local while also rejecting nationalist xenophobia and discrimination. In his introduction to *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah lays out two elements that define cosmopolitanism: “the idea that we have obligations to others” that extend beyond one’s own compatriots and fellow in-group members, and the need to “take seriously the value not just of human life but

¹¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 363.

¹¹⁵ Mark Katz, *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 84–85.

¹¹⁶ Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 49.

of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.”¹¹⁷

Throughout this chapter, I draw on anthropologist Marina Peterson’s concept of “sonic cosmopolitanisms.” In “Sonic Cosmopolitanisms: Experimental Improvised Music and a Lebanese-American Cultural Exchange,” Peterson argues that distinct cosmopolitanisms emerge in the Tabadol Project, a U.S. State Department–sponsored exchange program that brings Lebanese musicians to the United States. Within the Tabadol Project, Peterson locates a series of cosmopolitanisms which “emerged through a series of turns in the respective logics of cultural diplomacy, improvised music, and national origin.” These cosmopolitanisms include: the vision of cosmopolitanism promoted by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (which, Peterson says, “aspires to transcend the nation through a particular mode of being national”); experimental improvised music as a genre that brings about particular modes of being and relating beyond that of the nation; and within the Lebanese artists’ lived experiences as cosmopolitan subjects.

OneBeat’s cosmopolitan vision is similarly fraught, as its message of global community contrasts with the State Department’s goals of securing U.S. influence throughout the world. One way in which the “overlapping pillars of membership, territory, and security” (Peterson) are present in OneBeat—and all U.S. State Department–sponsored exchange programs—is in the granting of visas. OneBeat Fellows are able to travel to the U.S. under a J-1 Visa, a non-immigrant visa for individuals participating in exchange visitor programs focused on work and/or study. As Peterson notes, giving visas is “done carefully and selectively, making those few who are chosen into model citizens of both their nation

¹¹⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), xv.

and the world through the beneficence of the U.S. government.”¹¹⁸ Visas are a tangible form of gatekeeping between the national and the global in which territory, security, and opportunity converge. This convergence is especially acute when considering U.S. visas in the context of the Trump administration’s travel ban (known as the “Muslim Ban”) which was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. By providing just a handful of visas to only 25 artists out of over 1,000 applicants, OneBeat enacts the political. Although the program creates opportunities for certain artists, travel restrictions remain in place for those who are not accepted to the program.

OneBeat: History and Philosophy

OneBeat is administered by Found Sound Nation, the NGO wing of the New York–based new music institution, Bang on a Can. Bang on a Can has grown substantially since its 1987 founding by composers David Lang, Michael Gordon, and Julia Wolfe. What began as a one-day marathon concert in New York has now evolved into several ongoing projects, including a music ensemble (the Bang on a Can All-Stars), an annual summer artist residency and professional development program (Summer Music Institute), and a social engagement NGO (Found Sound Nation). The partnership between the State Department and Bang on a Can’s Found Sound Nation is just one example of the recent prevalence of partnerships between the U.S. State Department and non-state actors, particularly NGOs, in carrying out U.S. cultural diplomacy programs. For instance, Next Level is jointly administered by three institutions: the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), Meridian International Center, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. However,

¹¹⁸ Peterson, “Sonic Cosmopolitanisms,” 189.

OneBeat remains unique in bringing the world of contemporary classical music, referred to as new music, into a State Department partnership.

OneBeat selects 25 young artists (ages 19–35) from a list of ECA-selected countries, including the United States. Fellows are then brought to the United States for a four-week exchange program that lasts 30–33 days. The process of being selected as a Fellow is intensely competitive. In 2019, over 1,000 artists applied for 25 spots. Fellows come from diverse musical traditions, backgrounds, and cultures, and OneBeat centers on music written and performed collaboratively by the program’s participants. As the OneBeat website states, the program takes an expansive view of musical performance: “We are looking for musicians who have achieved an advanced proficiency in styles and skills such as (but not limited to): folk music, hip hop, electronic music, traditional music, jazz, experimental, classical, sound-art installations, DJing, audio engineering, etc.”¹¹⁹ In her work on the Tabadol Project, Marina Peterson describes the ways in which cultural diplomacy programs evaluate applicants not only according to their musicianship and artistry but through considerations of their potential as “model citizens.”¹²⁰ The same can be said of OneBeat, where the Selection Committee considers leadership, community involvement, and social engagement alongside musical ability. This “model citizen” paradigm is built into the system of U.S. cultural diplomacy. For instance, Fulbright fellowships continue to evaluate applicants based on this element since the grant was established in 1946. The OneBeat Selection Committee changes each year, but is always composed of OneBeat staff, U.S. Department of State employees,

¹¹⁹ OneBeat 2020 Application, <https://apply.1beat.org/faq>.

¹²⁰ Marina Peterson, “Sonic Cosmopolitanisms,” 189.

and accomplished musicians who are referred to in interviews with OneBeat staff as collaborators and “longtime friends” of the program.

The OneBeat residency is divided into two distinct parts, each lasting approximately two weeks. The first half of the OneBeat program is a two-week opening artist residency where Fellows gather at one location to get to know one another and create new music together. The second is a concert tour throughout a particular region of the United States. In 2019, OneBeat Fellows held concerts in Florida (New Smyrna Beach, Orlando, and Gainesville), Georgia (Atlanta), and Tennessee (Knoxville). OneBeat’s 2019 Fellows were described as being from: Algeria, Brazil, China, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Hungary, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mongolia, Morocco, Nepal, Russia, South Africa, Tunisia, and the United States. By prioritizing collaboratively-created music that draws upon multiple musics, OneBeat pushes back against stereotypes of a “national sound” (Peterson) that typify cultural diplomacy programs like the Cold War Jazz Ambassadors.

OneBeat is not the first State Department exchange program to bring international artists to the United States. Several ECA programs have long been dedicated to bringing international experts to the United States, including the International Writing Residency held at the University of Iowa, which began in 1967, and the State Department’s flagship International Visiting Leadership Program (IVLP). Julia Gomez-Nelson, the State Department Program Officer who oversees OneBeat, found that there were few opportunities for musicians to participate in State Department–sponsored exchange programs. Meanwhile, opportunities abounded for other types of international artists, intellectuals, and creatives, such as writers. Rather than solely focusing on musicians’ artistic contributions and achievements, Gomez-Nelson insists, “I felt we needed to see artists beyond their ability to

perform—to see them as leaders and changemakers.”¹²¹ She was also eager to see how diverse musics, from traditional practices to avant-garde styles, would communicate with one another. She notes, “If music is a universal language, each of the OneBeat artists speaks a different dialect.”¹²² In 2011, the U.S. State Department launched CenterStage, the first cultural diplomacy program dedicated to bringing international performing artists to the United States on a large scale. CenterStage, which Gomez-Nelson also administered, would go on to directly inspire the creation and format of OneBeat.

In 2011, the U.S. State Department announced an open competition for eligible NGOs to implement OneBeat. Though Found Sound Nation staff members Christopher Marianetti, Elena Moon Park, and Jeremy Thal were established community music facilitators in New York City, winning the OneBeat grant seemed like a stretch at the time. But, intrigued by the programs’ mission, they applied and eventually won the grant. Prior to receiving the million-dollar OneBeat grant, the largest grant that Found Sound Nation had received was approximately \$5,000, Jeremy Thal recalls.¹²³ Julia Gomez-Nelson admits that selecting Found Sound Nation as an official U.S. State Department partnering organization was a risky choice. Found Sound Nation was not only a new organization, but also one without any previous experience working with the State Department. However, Gomez-Nelson recognized a need to diversify ECA’s partners. She argues that “Found Sound Nation has helped define what OneBeat has become.”¹²⁴

¹²¹ Julia Gomez-Nelson, interview with the author, July 10, 2020.

¹²² Gomez-Nelson, interview with the author.

¹²³ Thal, interview with the author.

¹²⁴ Gomez-Nelson, interview with the author.

Aiming to “redefine cultural diplomacy,” OneBeat is described as follows:

OneBeat is designed with the belief that the collaborative creation of high-quality original music is an ideal vehicle for crossing cultural and political divides. OneBeat begins with an opening residency, when Fellows collaborate to create original material, record new musical ideas, and incubate their projects. Fellows then go on tour, performing for a wide array of American audiences, collaborating with local musicians, leading youth workshops and panel discussions and exploring new strategies for arts-based social engagement. In a closing residency, each Fellows [sic] set out their plans for the future, developing projects in their home countries linked to a mutually-reinforcing network of music-driven social enterprises.¹²⁵

In this mission statement, collaboration is mentioned as both an ethos and a result of the program (“mutually-reinforcing network” of alumni and their projects). Descriptions of music’s value slip from aesthetic evaluations (original music that is “high-quality”) to descriptions of music’s social role as a universalizing and connecting conduit (music as “an ideal vehicle for crossing cultural and political divides”). But emphasizing music’s artistic and extra-artistic qualities is common within U.S. cultural diplomacy. Marina Peterson finds that cultural diplomacy programs focused on music often emphasize music’s malleability. She writes, “In cultural diplomacy projects, political ideologies are worked through and help produce meanings of ‘art’ that are, in turn, autonomous or extra-artistic, as art is construed as outside of social concerns at the same time as it is used for particular social ends such as cross-cultural exchange and understanding.”¹²⁶ Music’s affective powers—how and why music “moves” people, to what ends, and whether or not such movement extends beyond a particular musical moment—are articulated differently depending on whom cultural diplomacy programs are being presented to and why. Such diverse interests and missions

¹²⁵ “About OneBeat PDF,” OneBeat, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://onebeat2015.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/20161117145526/onebeat-2017-deck-web.pdf>.

¹²⁶ Marina Peterson, “Sonic Cosmopolitanisms,” 191.

range from requesting increased funding from Congress to encouraging residents of Boise, Idaho to attend a OneBeat performance at a local skatepark.

OneBeat's opening artist residency, to which we will now turn, bears hallmarks of being developed by practicing musicians operating in new music circles who are eager to capture aspects of artist residencies they themselves attended. OneBeat co-founders and co-directors hoped to create an experience that would lead to inspiration, open-mindedness, and the creation of strong relationships among Fellows. Examining the opening artist residency offers insights into how OneBeat sets the foundations for the U.S. tour during the program's early days, as well as how OneBeat frames itself for varied audiences, from Fellows to U.S. publics and audiences.

The OneBeat Artist Residency

Described as a period of incubation, the OneBeat opening artist residency was based on artist residencies like the Bang on a Can Summer Music Institute (also known affectionately as "Banglewood"), which OneBeat co-founders and co-directors Christopher Marianetti, Elena Moon Park, and Jeremy Thal attended. When Moon Park reflects on the Summer Institute, she remembers how she was inspired by the way the program fostered a sense of community, as well as its open atmosphere that prioritized exploration. When she first attended this residency, Moon Park was searching for a way to reconnect with violin and music-making after a two-year hiatus from playing the instrument following intense, highly competitive classical music training at Northwestern University. At the summer institute, she

found herself embracing a spirit of “less competition, more celebration about creating music,” a refreshing and rejuvenating departure from her musical upbringing.¹²⁷

As they planned the first OneBeat residency and tour, Marianetti, Moon Park, and Thal searched for potential residency sites throughout the United States. Moon Park notes that “the magic and the importance of the space” were at the top of her list while exploring potential locations, as well as the need to find a “beautiful, nature-inspired space with a magical setting.”¹²⁸ Ideally, Moon Park felt, this setting would not only serve as inspiration for the program’s participants, but also emphasize the fact that Fellows were being taken out of their everyday lives, creating a sense of being apart in both space and time. The team eventually decided on the Atlantic Center for the Arts (ACA), located in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, for the program’s first two years.¹²⁹ Set on a pristine, 69-acre ecological preserve on the edge of Turnbull Bay, the seven buildings in the ACA’s studio complex are connected by a series of boardwalks. Each studio has large windows that bring nature and abundant natural light into the space. During the OneBeat residency, the Fellows and staff take over the entire ACA complex, occupying all seven buildings throughout the day and into the evening.

OneBeat has returned to the ACA several times and the co-directors view their partnership fondly. During the residency, Moon Park emphasizes, “there are no distractions, so people can just be inspired and create.”¹³⁰ In an effort to eliminate distractions, the residency period remains closed to outsiders—and that includes me. As such, my findings are

¹²⁷ Elena Moon Park, interview with the author, July 14, 2020.

¹²⁸ Moon Park, interview with the author.

¹²⁹ The Atlantic Center for the Arts, <https://atlanticcenterforthearts.org/>.

¹³⁰ Moon Park, interview with the author.

based on videos and photographic documentation from the artist residency and interviews with OneBeat Fellows and staff, along with the State Department's Julia Gomez-Nelson, who attends parts of both the residency and the tour.

The opening artist residency is a critical time in the OneBeat program, as multiple responses from Fellows can attest. Take, for instance, the following reflection from São Yantó, a 2019 Fellow from Brazil, regarding the opening artist residency at the ACA:

My experience with OneBeat at Atlantic Center for the Arts is engraved in my memory as a magical suspension in time and space. I remember that even before I arrived in the US for the residence, I had fanciful dreams about the ACA. In one of those dreams, ACA was under the sea, like Atlantis, the city of tales. Which would not be a lie from a poetic point of view. All that architectural structure, surrounded by forest, wild animals and a team of people who were always kind and helpful, were a constant invitation to creation, reflection, and the construction of affections. I remember that one of my most radical wishes during the residency was a desire to close the ACA's borders to the outside world, found a new community with my fellows from OneBeat and start a new civilization (which was obviously just a beautiful delusion!). Sometimes, when I get lost in my processes, when I lose the courage to believe in my ideas, I close my eyes and try to imagine myself again in the ACA, given over to music and affections.¹³¹

In his reflection on ACA, Yantó reflects on the beauty of the ACA space, including the buildings themselves, as well as the surrounding lush jungle landscape. For Yantó, the influence of the OneBeat opening artist residency has been lasting, continuing to inspire him and boost his confidence even in difficult times. His reflection also illuminates one of the artist residency's central tensions: between openness and closedness, between a sense of expansiveness alongside the presence of borders. While there is an openness regarding musical genres and Fellows' collaboration, the residency's borders remain closed. Yantó even expresses a desire for the borders surrounding residency to have remain closed in order

¹³¹ OneBeat, "2018 [sic] Fellow São Yantó on the Atlantic Center for the Arts," Facebook, August 5, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/1beatmusic/posts/3174033666050092>.

to build “a new community” and “start a new civilization” of like-minded artists and creators who share one another’s values. MITYA, a 2013 Fellow from Russia, shares similar sentiments with Yantó regarding the ACA:

The Atlantic Arts Center is the Art Paradise on Earth. I’m more and more sure in that statement every year. It was a magic-almost-month we spent in the middle of the jungle, near the Ocean, with the best people, talented musicians and kind mentors, with all the instruments, coolest studios – the best time of my life. This experience felt like a really beautiful, exciting and luxury movie I played the main part in. And I believe that each of us felt the same.¹³²

MITYA describes the ACA as a “paradise,” and both he and Yantó use the word “magic” to describe their experiences. Providing artists with the time, space, and resources to collaborate and create fostered a powerful sense of inspiration and community, which Yantó continues to engage in times of creative struggle.

2019 Fellow Jess Tsang and I discussed the opening artist residency over the phone while she drove to Brooklyn to pick up her drums and other percussion instruments, none of which she had access to in the nearly four months after she left New York City due to COVID-19. Tsang said she would give anything to be with the OneBeat musicians who had become her friends and most trusted, inspiring musical collaborators. “To go back and capture even 10% of that creative flow, of that energy... I’d give anything for that,” she laments.¹³³ The longing in her voice was palpable, and we both paused. In that moment, I was transported back to a memory of two 2019 Fellows dancing bachata during a break following rehearsals, holding each other close as they circled the black box theater. The ongoing pandemic that Tsang and I were living through had made such connections and encounters

¹³² OneBeat, 2013 Fellow MITYA on the Atlantic Center for the Arts,” Facebook, August 6, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/1beatmusic/posts/3176889352431190>.

¹³³ Jess Tsang, interview with the author, July 9, 2020.

impossible. What was once a joyful memory became, for me, impossibly fragile, illusory, a relic from a time “before.”

Tsang then returned to recounting her memories of the artist residency, describing the strong sense of isolation she experienced throughout the opening residency, which was reinforced by the lack of public access to the residency space. She recalled, “There was a sense of, let’s hold off on interacting with other people.” But this isolation, the intense focus on oneself and other OneBeat fellows, also made it possible for Fellows to “not be distracted by the world in the way that we normally would.” This residency set the stage for Tsang’s OneBeat experience, helping her feel at ease with the other Fellows and creating a sense of trust among the artists she collaborated with in various ensembles. This sense of trust was particularly important for Tsang, who did not identify as an improvising musician prior to participating in OneBeat. Sharing all of her meals with OneBeat fellows and staff and being encouraged to “be like a kid” when it comes to sound-making also made a lasting impression. She laughs: “It was kind of like band camp!” The artist residency fulfilled a number of Tsang’s professional, creative, and personal goals, providing a meaningful way of bonding with others and a sense of inspiration that she craves to this day, particularly amidst a time of pandemic-imposed isolation and despair.

A Day in the Life of OneBeat’s Artist Residency

Each day of OneBeat’s artist residency begins with a morning meeting filled with group creative exercises dedicated to deep listening, group singing, and movement. Elena Moon Park and other OneBeat staff members find great importance in doing “things that make us feel unified as a large group,” especially during the residency’s early days—a period

of particular intensity marked by artists arriving from all over the world, adapting to a new time zone, getting to know one another, and feeling apprehensive about the pressures of creating new music in a short timeframe with new and unfamiliar musicians. Fellows are encouraged not to play their instruments during this time. Moon Park believes that keeping the Fellows' instruments out of these activities encourages them to step away from the pressures of their musical traditions and training, and from having to prove themselves to each other. Instead, OneBeat staff members hope that the focus can be on making sound and discovering the joy of making sound together—a sentiment that echoes Moon Park's experience at Banglewood. Throughout the residency, OneBeat participants share meals together, all of which are prepared by a longtime guest chef that Moon Park describes as being “like part of the family.” OneBeat Fellows and staff also live on-campus in the ACA's guest housing.

The new music world makes its presence known throughout the OneBeat artist residency in varied ways. For instance, many of the residency activities are inspired by the works and philosophies the late Pauline Oliveros, a new music composer and 2012 OneBeat collaborating artist. Each year, all OneBeat participants learn and perform Oliveros' “Teach Yourself to Fly” from her *Sonic Meditations* (1970). When I ask how and why this particular piece was selected, Moon Park points to the power contained within group singing, particularly the piece's signature swell of sound, followed by the sound dying back down. Jess Tsang remembers learning this piece and performing it as a group during the first OneBeat concert. “Oliveros,” she chuckles, “is always great for getting people out of their comfort zones.”¹³⁴ In her introduction to *Sonic Meditations*, Oliveros notes:

¹³⁴ Tsang, interview with the author.

With continuous work some of the following becomes possible with Sonic Meditations: Heightened states of awareness or expanded consciousness, changes in physiology and psychology from known and unknown tensions to relaxations which gradually become permanent. These changes may represent a tuning of mind and body. The group may develop positive energy which can influence others who are less experienced. Members of the Group may achieve greater awareness and sensitivity to each other. Music is a welcome by-product of this activity.¹³⁵

This passage reveals the ways in which Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations* can be used to create meaningful social bonds through sound generation, deep listening, and reflection as a group practice. OneBeat uses this particular piece, and many others, to achieve these effects.



Figure 8: OneBeat Fellows gather for a group singing exercise during the 2012 opening artist residency at the ACA. Photograph featured in the OneBeat Brand Manual, <https://onebeat2015.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/20171204161212/1b17-brand-manual3.pdf>.

¹³⁵ Pauline Oliveros, quoted in “Pauline Oliveros’ *Sonic Medications* (1974): The Complete Text and Scores,” <https://blogthehum.com/2016/09/13/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditations-1974-the-complete-text-and-scores/>. Published September 13, 2016.

Mark Stewart, a multi-instrumentalist and founding member of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, also leads workshops during each OneBeat opening residency. Stewart joined the All-Stars in 1992 and has spent the past two decades working alongside legendary singer and songwriter Paul Simon as a guitarist and musical director. Stewart facilitates workshops about making sound with found objects, another way in which OneBeat Fellows are encouraged to bond with one another, and Moon Park admires the ways in which he “approaches music with a child-like wonder.”¹³⁶ Stewart also leads workshops about making sound and music with found objects at Banglewood; he refers to these workshops as the “Orchestra of Original Instruments” (nicknamed the “O of OI”).¹³⁷ One of his signature workshops at both the OneBeat artist residency and Banglewood involves the use of an instrument he refers to as a “Whirly,” a plastic vacuum tube. He encourages the OneBeat Fellows to create sounds with Whirlies in a variety of ways that include crinkling it up, whipping it around through the air, or, as Yantó demonstrates in Figure 3, blowing into it using a balloon as a mouthpiece.

¹³⁶ Moon Park, interview with the author.

¹³⁷ Mark Stewart’s workshops are described at length in Maggie Molloy’s article, “Bang on a Can, Sing through a Vacuum Tube,” <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/soundcheck/articles/bang-can-summer-festival-marathon-2018-pre-concert-hijinks>.



Figure 9: 2019 Fellows, including São Yantó (front), make music with Whirlies during one of Mark Stewart’s workshops. Photograph by Alexia Webster, <http://1beat.org/gallery/residency-week-1-2/>.

All residency participants and attendees, including Julia Gomez-Nelson from the State Department, are required to participate in the opening residency’s workshops, exercises, and activities. Gomez-Nelson explains: “In OneBeat, everyone is considered a peer, so everyone has to participate in the exercises.” She finds that these exercises, particularly group singing and movement, encourage meaningful bonding because “you can laugh together, you can blush together, you share a common experience.” But while her participation is required, Gomez-Nelson does not merely go through the motions; rather, she is passionate about her presence in the residency space. She says with conviction: “I participate as much as I can. I want people to see that the government, the State Department, has a human face. We believe in our work and we believe in them.”¹³⁸ Gomez-Nelson’s

¹³⁸ Gomez-Nelson, interview with the author.

presence and participation in the residency make a powerful statement, one that signals her personal commitment to the program and humanizes the State Department and U.S. government. Her presence and involvement in the residency also represent how the State Department performs and sounds itself—particularly in ways that counter perceptions of insincere or “forced diplomacy.”

One particular need that OneBeat fulfills for its Fellows is a desire to cross, transgress, and challenge geopolitical borders as well as musical ones. The bond between Dima El Sayed (a poet and singer from Beirut, Lebanon) and George Kandalaft (an oud player and composer from Nazareth, a Palestinian town inside Israel) is just one example of a relationship that challenges borders and bordered realities. El Sayed and Kandalaft’s friendship, captured in OneBeat video from the 2013 opening artist residency, speaks to these Fellows’ desires to connect despite political situations that actively prevent such connections when they are at home.¹³⁹ The video begins with El Sayed gesturing to Kandalaft as she turns to the camera, “He cannot even send me an email.” Her voice borders on exasperation as she continues, “We were discussing, and he has to send it to someone else and this someone else will have to send it to me.” For El Sayed and Kandalaft, borders are not only physical landmarks—even their virtual worlds are bordered, forcing them to activate a network of acquaintances to connect their email inboxes. Kandalaft adds: “So the only way for us to make music is for me to record at my place and her to record at her place. But you know, we can’t really...” For Kandalaft, it is not the same to make a recording for El Sayed or receive a recording from her. In-person collaboration, for him, is something that cannot be replicated.

¹³⁹ Rather than being described as hailing from Israel or Palestine, all OneBeat materials list George Kandalaft as being from Nazareth. He is the only 2013 OneBeat Fellow said to be from a city rather than a country. Next Level faced a similar struggle regarding what to call their residency in the Palestinian territories. Eventually, “Next Level Jerusalem” was decided upon.

This relationship proves that it is impossible to create distinct categories of “musical” and “extra-musical,” complicating Peterson’s notion of these ideas as being distinct from one another. El Sayed and Kandalaft’s artistic and musical experiences throughout OneBeat are intertwined with the political.

Kandalaft then discusses his own music project back in the Middle East, an ensemble called Mosaic that consists of members from several different countries: “What I’m doing, we have a group called Mosaic, it’s a Middle East group/band. We have [members] from Egypt, Jordan, and from the Middle East, and Israel/Palestine even... We are doing something that we call ‘Border Rehearsals.’ We meet in Sinai or in Jordan at the border or something. So if I want to meet her, she has to travel to another country and me too.” After this, El Sayed recounts an experience she had of watching Kandalaft react to her singing during the OneBeat residency. She describes, “When I was singing, George was crying. I usually close my eyes when I sing, but when I opened them, the first face I saw was George, and he was crying. And he told me, ‘It doesn’t matter what *maqam* you sing on, it is just very touching.’” It is clear that they share a connection and strong sense of mutual admiration—as musicians, as artists, and as people.

Kandalaft then places his emotional response to El Sayed’s moving performance within the context of his own personal and political desires for border crossing, cosmopolitan sentiments that are shaped by his experiences living and making music with his ensemble back home. He asserts:

All of the conflict in the Middle East and all of that situation... I’m living in a place with all borders around me and walls and a lot of I don’t know what. And I just don’t want that. So when I’m here singing about this thing and in so beautiful and emotional way, my tears just start to fall down. I just don’t want it... I just want to be open and that’s it. It’s so hard to start to think about that and how hard

to meet in other places. We need to travel 14 hours away to play, to just sing together.

Dima turns to George and then back to the camera: “Yeah, there’s nothing like it after this.”¹⁴⁰ El Sayed and Kandalraft find joy in performing with one another and are happy to have found each other, but the future of their musical collaboration, shaped by geopolitical issues beyond their control, feels uncertain, if not outright impossible. The 2013 video of their conversation captures dueling senses of joy and grief.

In an earlier statement, 2019 Fellow Fanni Zahár refers to the OneBeat staff as geniuses, not only because of the ways they are able to bring people together, but how they make Fellows “feel comfortable.” Fellows such as Zahár and Jess Tsang repeatedly mention how comfortable and cared for they felt as OneBeat Fellows, from their initial acceptance to the program through the U.S. residency and extending after the program’s conclusion. Many Fellows find that OneBeat staff are able to anticipate and meet Fellows’ needs because they, too, are practicing musicians and artists, not government officials who are unfamiliar with the lived experiences of full-time, working musicians. Fellows not only notice but outwardly appreciate the care that OneBeat staff members put into the program, coupled with the ethic of care OneBeat staff embrace regarding the Fellows. That the OneBeat staff members are professional musicians is not just a bonus, but indeed central to the program’s feel, experience, and core ethos.

As Dylan McKinstry notes, OneBeat staff members’ backgrounds as musicians allow them to not only understand but prize flexibility. They, too, have experienced the demands of being touring musicians, so they are willing to make adjustments when necessary to

¹⁴⁰ “OneBeat 2013- Discussion Groups,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acctD9J7Aww>, published September 16, 2013.

accommodate Fellows. During the tour portion of the OneBeat U.S. residency, the planned schedule often changes from day to day. McKinstry greatly appreciated the ways in which staff members embraced flexibility, just one example of the ways in which staff members remain attuned to Fellows and their needs. He and other Fellows attribute to this sense of care to staff members' shared experiences as professional musicians. McKinstry explains: "The fact that [the schedule] feels sometimes really disorganized actually lends itself to the overall vibe of the project experience—that it's not this rigid, unchangeable U.S. government thing, but instead it's a group of real musician-staffers who are going with the flow and things are changing and ebbing and they're listening to us and to our needs."¹⁴¹ One Beat staff members understand the work involved in musicking and performing, incorporating periods of downtime and rest into the schedule and changing the plan in response to Fellows' needs.

McKinstry's response also speaks to OneBeat staff's ethic of care, one that centers on attentive listening. As education scholar Nel Noddings posits, "Receptive listening is the very heart of caring relations."¹⁴² Staff members check in with Fellows in both formal meetings and informal settings in order to understand and respond to Fellows' expressed needs rather than assuming their needs. OneBeat staff members understand and value Fellows' affective and emotional labor alongside their artistic work and output, in part because they have firsthand experience of what this labor feels like themselves. Staff members continually

¹⁴¹ Dylan McKinstry, interview with the author, October 5, 2019.

¹⁴² Nel Noddings, "The Caring Relation in Teaching," *Oxford Review of Education* 38, no. 6 (December 2012): 780.

establish relations of care and trust with Fellows by offering opportunities for feedback and by prioritizing listening.

Conclusion: “The Kind of World We Need To See”

Jeremy Thal, one of the OneBeat co-founders and co-directors, defines OneBeat as egalitarian and continually asserts that the program rejects hierarchies. In a 2017 interview, he described OneBeat as

part of the zeitgeist of cultural connections—egalitarian, peer-driven exchanges that forge new musical genres, and allow for new socially engaged artistic practice that serves both cross-cultural understanding and the health of local communities. OneBeat is an incredible mechanism for the proliferation of deep listening, the contagion of funky rhythm. It’s a rare international space where there is no competition, no graduation ceremony, no negotiation of territory—but rather an open forum for the bright light of the human creative consciousness to shine through one another.¹⁴³

Positioning OneBeat as a program without hierarchies or competition, as Thal does, is a central part of the program’s cosmopolitan vision and branding. But Thal’s descriptions of the collaborations that occur in OneBeat do not fully address the realities of collaborative group musicking. While OneBeat seeks to set hierarchies aside in order to allow for cooperation—and, in many cases, accomplishes this successfully—this is not to say that hierarchies and moments of tension or outright disagreement do not exist within the program.

Thal frames OneBeat as a space that rejects hierarchies while portraying all Fellows as peers gathering together on equal ground. Even so, OneBeat operates according to several considerable asymmetries of power as a U.S. State Department–funded program that is ultimately dedicated to serving U.S. interests. OneBeat itself is foregrounded in a conception

¹⁴³ Rock Paper Scissors, “Bang on a Can’s Found Sound Nation,” Grateful Web, September 24, 2017, <https://www.gratefulweb.com/articles/bang-cans-found-sound-nation>.

of politics that, while gesturing toward modes of cosmopolitanism, is fundamentally linked to the nation-state and policy. Throughout U.S. cultural diplomacy programs, Marina Peterson argues, “aspirations of cosmopolitanism toward openness, commonality and harmony entail transcending the national while depending on the nation as the basis for that transcendence.”¹⁴⁴ Several realities underlie the “transcending” rhetoric, including visas and money. The State Department has the power to ensure Fellows cross borders safely; most international musicians cannot simply come to the United States. As a U.S. State Department program, OneBeat remains grounded in bordered territoriality through its dedication to advancing the goals and interests of the U.S. as a nation-state.

OneBeat is not the only U.S. State Department–sponsored cultural diplomacy program that declines to mention U.S. interests in their informational materials, such as brochures, websites, and social media. Next Level’s website engages a discourse that highlights shared prosperity and beneficence without any mention of U.S. interests:

Next Level is an initiative of the U.S. Department of State, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Meridian International Center. Its mission is to use hip hop music, dance, and art to foster cross-cultural creative exchange in diverse communities. We work to promote understanding and conflict transformation in these audiences, and support the professional development of artists in those communities.

Next Level brings people together and encourages greater understanding through the universality of music as a form of creative self-expression. It also builds on the historic legacy of the Department of State’s Jazz Ambassadors, who first traveled the world in the 1950s to connect with people through music.¹⁴⁵

Like the excerpt from the 2017 “About OneBeat” brochure, this description of Next Level highlights global connections and cross-cultural exchange, appealing to understanding,

¹⁴⁴ Peterson, “Sonic Cosmopolitanisms,” 186.

¹⁴⁵ “Project Objectives, Goals, and Implementation (POGI) FY2020 Creative Arts Exchange: OneBeat,” U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2020, emphasis added.

conflict transformation, and professional development as shared values. While OneBeat and Next Level articulate a commitment to peace and prosperity and promote professional and economic opportunities for U.S. and international program participants alike, note how the framing of these programs' priorities compares to the language used in official State Department documents known as POGIs, which describe the Project Objectives, Goals, and Implementation of each program. OneBeat's Fall 2020 POGI begins by describing the program's ability to address U.S. foreign policy goals:

The goals for OneBeat exchanges are to promote civil society, youth engagement, increase mutual understanding and encourage professional networks between the United States and other countries through multi-national musical collaboration.

OneBeat activities:

- 1. Advance and complement U.S. foreign policy;**
2. Promote industry and entrepreneurship through the arts;
3. Share professional standards through arts training and mentorship;
4. Empower emerging creative leaders;
5. Foster dialogue and collaboration;
6. and Engage key audiences and influencers.¹⁴⁶

Of course, State Department POGIs and the OneBeat and Next Level websites have vastly different levels of "public facing-ness" and serve different needs. POGIs are written by State Department ECA officials to be read by potential partnering organizations, whereas OneBeat and Next Level's websites are primarily written for past, current, and prospective program participants and general readers. The mission of these websites is to leave readers with favorable impressions of their programs and U.S. cultural diplomacy more generally; the mission of the U.S. State Department is not to promote cultural diplomacy but rather to use cultural diplomacy to promote its mission.

A OneBeat Fellow who wished to remain anonymous told me that he was dedicated to remaining attuned to the language about OneBeat’s purpose and goals, emphasizing the savviness of the U.S. State Department. While OneBeat uses the language of peace, prosperity, and equality, he noted, all U.S. State Department–sponsored programs ultimately exist for the benefit of the United States and for Americans. In the end, however, he chose to participate in the program as a way to secure better professional musical opportunities for himself when he returns to his home country. He was dedicated to using OneBeat for his own agenda, particularly when regarding professional opportunities.¹⁴⁷ Despite the uneasy relationship between OneBeat and the spectrum of politics/the political, one thing remains certain: if OneBeat feels like “forced diplomacy” to Fellows, the program simply will not work—not for OneBeat staff, not for U.S. State Department officials, and certainly not for the artists. Cultural diplomacy programs like OneBeat depend on being able to fulfill participating artists’ needs in order to serve U.S. interests.

Mandla Mlangeni, a 2017 Fellow from Johannesburg, South Africa, describes the deep satisfaction he experienced at OneBeat’s opening artist residency at the Caldera Arts Center in Portland, Oregon:

I fondly remember the Caldera Arts Center and the amazing strangers who went on to become lifelong friends. In hindsight the Caldera Arts Center was the best place to have the OneBeat program as the space was an oasis of creative energy. I remember the share sessions in the library, the long hikes along the lake. What resonates most are all the diverse people, with their personal truth and realities were able to get together and create long lasting friendships is the kind of world we need to see.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ OneBeat Fellow, interview with the author, October 4, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Mandla Mlangeni, “Quotes,” OneBeat Resources, <https://1beat.org/resources>.

In order for OneBeat to be a successful program, it must create the kind of world that Fellows, OneBeat staff, and State Department employees “need to see.” Mlangeni is grateful for the lasting friendships gained through the program; Julia Gomez-Nelson highlights the network of OneBeat alumni as one of the program’s ultimate strengths from creative and foreign policy standpoint. In their article “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?” cultural studies and policy scholars Ien Ang, Yudhishtir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar argue that using cultural diplomacy to “go beyond the national interest” may indeed be in the national interest.¹⁴⁹ By advocating for modes of feeling and belonging that appeal to global citizenship and shared humanity, OneBeat conjures worlds that many diverse stakeholders want to see, even as they themselves pursue divergent aims.

¹⁴⁹ Ien Ang, Yudhishtir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 378.

CHAPTER THREE: U.S. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021—a time of closed concert halls, canceled tours, and performances put on hold or moved online—both OneBeat and Next Level worked to offer exchanges and programming in new ways. In this chapter, I discuss two online events dedicated to conducting cultural diplomacy in a digital space and building community among participating artists and program staff. The first is Next Level’s June 2020 Orientation—held entirely online for the first time since the program’s inception. The second is the November 2020 OneBeat Marathon concert, a four-hour event featuring performances and interviews from 16 OneBeat alumni. Examining OneBeat and Next Level’s online cultural diplomacy programming provides an opportunity to explore what happens to participants’ feelings of co-presence, being and feeling together, in online spaces.

These two online programs offer opportunities to investigate the multitude of ways in which U.S. cultural diplomacy programs have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵⁰ In addition to widespread feelings of loss, devastation, loneliness, and anxiety, there is also a sense of excitement and spirit of innovation arising from new digital possibilities for artistic creation and audience engagement. Many cultural diplomacy practitioners have found themselves thinking about performance in new ways and developing new skills in the global pandemic’s crucible. The organizers of Next Level’s 2020 Orientation and the OneBeat

¹⁵⁰ This chapter was written as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, rather than in retrospect.

Marathon concert sought to create a sense of community in a time of widespread alienation and isolation; both also incorporated an ethic of care, honoring artistic labor through holding space and providing financial compensation.

This chapter compares the online programs to previous in-person programs and experiences to explore the contrasts and lessons learned about the operations and outcomes of the programs. The online platform, while shaping participants' actions and interactions, did not fundamentally alter the character of the programs; in fact, the virtual environment served to highlight key values of each. Online cultural diplomacy harbors its own particular tensions, expanding accessibility in some ways while erecting new barriers in others. The study of virtual programming therefore allows us new ways to understand the gaps between rhetoric and practice within U.S. cultural diplomacy.

The realities of the pandemic required me to refine and expand my methodological toolkit. "Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic," a crowdsourced document initiated by sociologist Deborah Lupton, contains 38 pages of methods and resources for doing field-based research in this current moment, spanning from advice about wearable cameras and data collection to creating podcasts.¹⁵¹ But studying online music communities and conducting online ethnography are not new. In the 2012 study, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, musicologist Kiri Miller weaves together varied portraits focused on digital media and participatory culture, including the video games *Guitar Hero* and *Grand Theft Auto*, YouTube videos, blogs, and the communities they bring together. Drawing upon ethnomusicologist and dancer Tomie Hahn's concept of "sensational knowledge," Miller

¹⁵¹ Deborah Lupton, ed. "Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic (Crowd-Sourced Document)", 2020, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cIGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a#>.

argues that participants become connected by sharing sensory, performative experiences.¹⁵²

In 2011, ethnomusicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay offered an expansive definition of musical communities that also applies to relationships:

A musical community is, whatever its location in time or space, a collectivity constructed through and sustained by musical processes and/or performances. A musical community can be socially and/or symbolically constituted; music making may give rise to real-time social relationships or may exist most fully in the realm of a virtual setting or in the imagination . . . [A] musical community is a social entity, an outcome of a combination of social and musical processes, rendering those who participate in making or listening to music aware of a connection among themselves.¹⁵³

In the 2003 article, “Musical Community on the Internet: An On-line Ethnography,” ethnomusicologist René T.A. Lysloff argues that “on-line communities . . . are as ‘real’ (or imagined) as those offline, and that the internet as a technology has allowed for new social practices along with the creation of new communities.¹⁵⁴

There is a newfound urgency to internet-based research as an unprecedented number of scholars have postponed or reimaged projects amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. As I moved into the space of conducting online fieldwork, two key questions guided my pursuits: How does participation in online spaces affect research? How do observation, participation, and participant-observation change when conducting research in virtual environments? Attending OneBeat’s 2019 tour in Atlanta required significant preparation to ensure that my presence would be welcome. I met with Elena Moon Park (one of OneBeat’s co-founders and co-directors) in Washington, D.C. in summer 2019 to introduce myself and

¹⁵² Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁵³ Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): 364–65.

¹⁵⁴ René T.A. Lysloff, “Musical Community on the Internet: An On-Line Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (May 2003): 236.

corresponded with Kyla-Rose Smith (OneBeat’s director of programs) via email, requesting permission from both Moon Park and Smith to attend the tour. Without this permission, I could have attended OneBeat’s public performances, such as the concerts at the High Museum of Art and the ArtsXChange, but other opportunities, such as attending rehearsals and a tour of Atlanta’s arts non-profit sphere, would have remained closed to me.

Conducting virtual ethnography required me to attend to new relationships and interactions between myself and my interlocutors. Although I had met many of my interlocutors in-person in 2018 and 2019, there are a number of number of interlocutors whom I have never met face-to-face, interacting with them only online or over the phone. As communication scholar John Postill and anthropologist Sarah Pink argue, it is critical to see how researchers become “part of both digital and offline crowds in real, experiential ways.”¹⁵⁵ My experiences in the “crowd” at the OneBeat Marathon Concert and Next Level orientation were distinct. The OneBeat Marathon Concert was broadcast as a Zoom webinar, meaning that audience members could not see each other’s screens or ascertain how many people were in attendance.¹⁵⁶ At the Next Level orientation, I attended the large-group Zoom meetings, alternating between turning my camera on and off, taking my cues from Meridian staff members with whom I interned. Unlike previous years’ orientations, during which I introduced myself at the beginning and wore a name tag with my Meridian affiliation, I only used my name during orientation on my Zoom screen. As I am not a hip hop practitioner

¹⁵⁵ John Postill and Sarah Pink, “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web,” *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture and Policy* 145, no. 1 (November 2012): 132.

¹⁵⁶ At the time, Zoom offered two platform options: meeting and webinar. In a Zoom meeting, all participants are able to interact with each other through audio, video, and the availability to share screens. Zoom webinars allow for attendees to only view the event, though they can interact with hosts and other attendees through Zoom’s chat function and polling feature.

myself, I made the choice to not attend the scheduled breakout meeting among artists from the same hip hop disciplines. And even in the small group meetings that I was encouraged to attend—such as the breakout session among artist educators attending the Ukraine residency (scheduled initially for November 2020 but postponed due to COVID-19)—I felt like an interloper.

In their work on young people’s internet activity and presence, education scholars Kevin M. Leander and Kelly K. McKim discuss the significance of “lurkers,” defined as “someone who reads but does not post” when doing research in online settings. For Leander and McKim, the term “lurker” encompasses both members of the group being studied as well as researchers, who are often able to conduct research online without their presence being known. While the marathon concert’s inability to see participants made all audience members lurkers to some degree, my presence at the Next Level orientation directly influenced the event. While I do not believe it is possible to do ethnographic fieldwork without a certain degree of lurking, I continually struggled to distinguish whether I was participating, observing, or lurking during these events, often finding myself doing some combination of the three.

Due to lockdown protocols associated with COVID-19, video conferencing has become a regular occurrence in the lives of many in the United States. Video conferencing software (VCS) like Zoom and Cisco Webex are being utilized at exceptionally high levels. According to Zoom, the number of daily users has exploded from 10 million in December 2019 to over 200 million in March 2020.¹⁵⁷ The *Hollywood Squares* layout of Zoom’s grid view has become an all too familiar image. Throughout the pandemic, particularly in times of

¹⁵⁷ Dain Evans, “How Zoom Became So Popular During Social Distancing,” *CNBC*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/03/how-zoom-rose-to-the-top-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic.html>.

state stay-at-home orders and quarantine, many have turned to VCS to maintain social ties and conduct work within an unprecedented culture of social distancing. VCS were used to hold birthday parties and trivia nights, livestream worship services, run business meetings, conduct doctor’s appointments, and more. Zoom funerals became a grim pandemic reality, as mourners sought to honor those who have passed in real-time without gathering in person. As schools throughout the U.S. and around the world suspended in-person classes, teachers began holding classes and engaging in remote learning using VCS. Cultural diplomacy programs have also increasingly turned to VCS in order to conduct their program orientations, host and facilitate roundtables, and even hold performances in real-time, as we see with the OneBeat Marathon concert and Next Level’s 2020 orientation.¹⁵⁸

Holding events via VCS presents numerous challenges. For instance, it can be difficult to facilitate interaction and gauge interest. Participating in long meetings on VCS takes a serious toll on participants and has even acquired its own term: “Zoom fatigue.” There are some moments and experiences that VCS can neither fully capture nor replicate—the hug of a long-lost friend, a knowing smile across the room. The cacophony of simultaneous responses—“Oops! Sorry, you go!”—often propels us into trading monologues rather than a free-flowing exchange of ideas or conversation. Additional difficulties include a limit to how many participants are shown on one screen in a Zoom meeting along with delayed audio and visuals. Continuously seeing one’s own face on screen can feel unnatural, further differentiating VCS meetings from in-person events. But there are also unique advantages to VCS, including its ability for participants to save money on travel expenses and other attendance-related costs.

¹⁵⁸ American Music Abroad, another U.S. State Department–sponsored cultural diplomacy program, will conduct all 2021–2022 programming virtually: <https://americanmusicabroad.org/apply>.

VCS can also increase a meeting's accessibility. And, through VCS, cultural diplomacy organizations have the ability to reach large audiences throughout the world at once. Rather than being strict binaries, the worlds of online and offline are not wholly separate, as anthropologist Sarah Pink describes, "In essence, such conceptualisations of co-presence that take mediated relationships into account challenge assumptions about the role of digital media in facilitating connection and break down binaries such as here and there, virtual and actual, online and offline, absent and present."¹⁵⁹ The co-presence people experience is linked to particular digital media and technologies, Pink continues, including text, voice, archiving, and whether or not communications take place in real time or asynchronously. Though physical co-presence was missing—there were no interactions between bodies sharing a space together—the Next Level 2020 orientation and OneBeat Marathon concert were able to create a sense of being with one another by foregrounding the events in a series of shared emotions: the devastation that the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought on artists' lives and careers and a desire to come together amidst great uncertainty, tragedy, and fear. In their efforts to inspire a sense of being together through online programming, OneBeat and Next Level faced unique challenges, and both the OneBeat Marathon concert and Next Level's 2020 orientation produced noteworthy successes and revealed particular drawbacks and consequences.

As I have discussed throughout the dissertation, Next Level's orientation is a critical program component for many artist educators, particularly those who may feel uneasy about participating in a government-sponsored hip hop program. Orientation also offers a chance to meet like-minded people, establish bonds, and examine the goals of cultural diplomacy, hip

¹⁵⁹ Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2016), 85.

hop, politics, and more. In previous years, Next Level’s orientation was a two and a half-day event where artist educators and staff gathered in Washington, D.C. In 2020, orientation was condensed into two full days of group Zoom meetings. Though several artist educators and staff members knew each other—either through shared friendships, involvement in a common scene, or past performances/collaborations—many of 2020’s artist educators had never met in person before.

The OneBeat Marathon Concert, meanwhile, was able to build on a greater number of established in-person relationships, as alumni and staff had met, worked, and previously toured together before. Using the model of Marathon concerts established by Bang on a Can (the parent organization of Found Sound Nation, which administers OneBeat through a State Department partnership), the OneBeat Marathon concert combined pre-recorded videos with livestreamed performances and interviews between OneBeat alumni and staff, along with Bang on a Can’s three founding composers: David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon. The concert, which was streamed free of charge on Bang on a Can’s website, attracted more than 2,000 audience members over the course of the events’ four-hour duration.¹⁶⁰ Being able to reach an audience of this size and geographical scope was something that could only have been accomplished in a virtual space.

In her April 2020 *Atlantic* article, “Why We Need to Stop Trying to Replicate the Life We Had,” Ashley Fetters offers the following: “Trying to translate your old social habits to Zoom or FaceTime is like going vegetarian and proceeding to glumly eat a diet of just tofurkey, rather than cooking varied, creative, and flavorful meals with fruits and vegetables. The challenge, then, of adapting to an all-virtual social life may lie in reorienting our

¹⁶⁰ Kyla-Rose Smith, interview with the author, December 11, 2020.

interactions around the strengths of the platforms where we can be together.”¹⁶¹ Julia Gomez-Nelson, the State Department Program Officer who oversees OneBeat, has wrestled with this issue, particularly as it relates to music programming. Initially, Gomez-Nelson thought VCS would offer a one-to-one replacement to in-person programming. She soon found that this was not the case and began asking a series of questions, both to herself and OneBeat staff: “How do we do more sophisticated engagement than a Zoom meeting? Organic offline conversations aren’t happening: how do we plan around this? How long do you have any one session? How do you mitigate screen fatigue?”¹⁶² Fetters and Gomez-Nelson arrive at the same conclusion: virtual gatherings can accomplish a variety of goals, but they are not perfect replacements for in-person events. Adapting cultural programs from in-person to online settings requires creativity as well as explicitly discussing new norms and expectations.

Next Level’s 2020 Orientation

As in the past, orientation offered opportunities for small breakout sessions by residency and hip hop discipline (MCing, DJing, beatmaking, dance, beatboxing, and graffiti/aerosol art), as well as large group gatherings. All participating Next Level artist educators were given an honorarium of \$275 for their participation in Wednesday and Thursday’s orientation events (a total of \$550). The 2020 schedule featured two new additions to the schedule (changes made independently of the pandemic): a discussion about assessments for student collaborators (artists that participate in Next Level’s residency

¹⁶¹ Ashley Fetters, “We Need to Stop Trying to Replicate the Life We Had,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/04/why-your-zoom-happy-hour-unsatisfying/609823/>

¹⁶² Julia Gomez-Nelson, interview with the author, October 5, 2020.

workshops) and a session about entrepreneurship, performing rights organizations (PROs), and copyright. Rizqi Rachmat, a dancer, dance educator, and alumnus of Next Level's Mexico residency, ran the student collaborator assessments session. Rachmat, a data analyst in Washington, D.C., works as Next Level's Data Visualization Associate. He led a session focused on ways to track the progress of student collaborators as well as how to create and record workshop attendee data over time, including gender, age, and previous hip hop experience. Kerwin Young, Next Level's Performing Rights Associate and an alumnus of Next Level's Egypt residency, chaired the session on entrepreneurship and PROs. Young is a renowned, Grammy Award-winning composer and producer who is passionate about helping other artists implement tools and strategies to own, protect, and profit from their artistic work. Another 2020 departure involved the artist educators themselves—this was the first year that Next Level allowed alumni to apply to participate in a second residency. The 2020 Orientation also included a panel that featured program alumni from past years discussing their experiences and answering questions about the program. The second day of orientation largely consisted of conflict transformation sessions with Dr. Dena Jennings, a physician and conflict transformation expert. Though Jennings has held conflict transformation workshops in previous orientations, the 2020 orientation dedicated more time to these sessions.

On the morning of June 17, 2020, I attended a breakout session with artist educators from the Ukraine residency (initially scheduled for November 2020 but postponed due to COVID-19 until at least fall 2021 at the time of this writing.) The session participants were Kane Smego (Next Level's Associate Director and manager for the Ukraine Residency), DJ Spiktakular, beatboxer Arabelle "Airloom Beats" Luke, and Dan "Dirty Digits" Chaves, a DJ, producer and Next Level alumnus from the Thailand residency. In previous years, this

conversation would have taken place at Meridian International Center’s historic Meridian House, which was designed by John Russell Pope, renowned architect of many of Washington, D.C.’s most stately and iconic buildings, including the Jefferson Memorial, the National Archives, and the West Building of the National Gallery of Art.¹⁶³ But instead of gathering among the linden trees and statuary in Meridian’s pebbled courtyard or the tapestries and paintings that fill the walls of the Meridian House’s grand meeting rooms, this session took place on Zoom, with artist educators calling in from their homes. For DJ Spiktakular, Luke, and Chaves, all located on the East Coast, the day began at 9am ET. Next Level Associate Director Kane Smego, meanwhile, logged on each morning around 5:30am PT from Los Angeles, California. Not only was a sense of shared place lost at the 2020 orientation—so, too, was a sense of shared time.

“Have you been paying attention to how it’s going over there [Ukraine] with COVID?” DJ Spiktakular asked his colleagues with trepidation. The shadow of the COVID-19 global pandemic—and how it would impact Next Level’s 2020 and 2021 residencies—had lingered over the session’s first 15 minutes, though this was the first time COVID had been explicitly mentioned. While Kane Smego admitted that he did not know the exact numbers of COVID cases in Ukraine, he described positive communication with the embassy, who had even raised the idea of moving the residency to an earlier date to coincide with a large hip hop festival in Kiev. But many questions remained: would the residency proceed as scheduled? Was there a chance that the residency might take place virtually? How soon would Next Level’s participating artists be informed of new plans? Though Smego

¹⁶³ “Our Campus,” Meridian International Center, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.meridian.org/campus/>.

stressed the many uncertainties regarding Next Level residencies, he also encouraged the artist educators to trust the Next Level team. He said,

Again, everything is pending, we're taking a look at it. All of us on the team are watching stuff. Everyone from Kara [Zelasko, Cultural Programs Associate at Meridian], who's gonna be our eyes from Meridian at an institutional level, is taking a look at it. And then, of course, we're in regular contact with the folks who you'll meet tomorrow, Jill Staggs, who is our contact at the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, we call them ECA for short. So they're monitoring whatever the official, US government regulations are . . . We're kind of in the same boat as y'all, but we definitely have our feelers out and we'll let y'all know as soon as we get any kind of official idea of when this will be or what that's gonna look like. Yeah, crazy, crazy uncertainty.¹⁶⁴

Members of each Next Level residency “team” are assigned to their groups before local logistics are planned, so although Smego, Luke, Chavez, and Spiktacular knew they would be going to Ukraine, they did not yet know which areas they would visit more specifically. About 30 minutes into the breakout session's conversations, Luke said she was excited to go to Ukraine and eager to learn more about the country's history, politics, and hip hop scenes. While she was in neighboring Poland, she had been surprised and moved by her students' passion for hip hop, and the ways in which past and present geopolitical conflicts had motivated their embrace of hip hop culture. She was eager to see how hip hop resonated with her Ukrainian students, particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War and in the context of the ongoing war with Russia in Crimea.¹⁶⁵ Smego acknowledged the complexities of Ukraine's political history, noting that Joe Schloss (an ethnomusicologist, hip hop scholar, and Next

¹⁶⁴ Kane Smego, comments from the Team Ukraine Breakout Session at Next Level's 2020 Orientation, June 17, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Arabelle “Airloom Beats” Luke comments from the Team Ukraine Breakout Session at Next Level's 2020 Orientation, June 17, 2020.

Level staff member) would discuss this further in the pre-departure cultural briefings he writes for artist educators.

Throughout the breakout session, artist educators also shared how they adapted their professional lives in the face of the pandemic. Chaves, the Academy Director at Scratch DJ Academy in New York City, discussed the transition to all-virtual classes: “That’s all we’re doing is virtual classes right now. I mean, this it’s been a big shift, to be honest, because we pretty much had to put a hold on our current semester from, like, March. We’re hoping to get back at the end of July or something like that.”¹⁶⁶ Arabelle “Airloom Beats” Luke, meanwhile, found that many aspects of her life remained the same in the midst of quarantine. Smego agreed, adding, “I think of a lot of folks as artists, you know, we’re able a little bit more to be in quarantine and be self-sufficient and try to, you know, stay creative and do something.” Along with Luke, DJ Spiktakular found that much of his professional life had stayed the same amidst the pandemic. He described himself as quarantining before quarantine, as he had been working from home as a DJ since 2016.

The decision to hold Next Level’s 2020 orientation virtually came in early April 2020. For Lindsay Amini, Meridian International Center’s Director of Cultural Programs, the issue of timing loomed large. Postponing the orientation until it could be held in-person was not an option, as this could impact future residencies, forcing them to be pushed back. This sentiment is reminiscent of Julia Gomez-Nelson’s stance regarding OneBeat, and the difficult conversations about whether to postpone, cancel, or transition to online programs. Gomez-Nelson recalls, “When we first started, postponement seemed like the logical response, but

¹⁶⁶ Dan “Dirty Digits” Chaves, comments from the Team Ukraine Breakout Session at Next Level’s 2020 Orientation, June 17, 2020.

we can't postpone forever. Now we have to think—if the program was happening tomorrow, how would we do it? We just have to move forward.”¹⁶⁷ Amini and other Next Level program facilitators decided to proceed with the orientation rather than postpone. This also made it possible to follow the orientation's original, agreed-upon dates, a positive for artist educators, Next Level staff, and the Meridian Cultural Diplomacy team. Since everyone had already blocked out June 16–18 for the 2020 orientation, the virtual orientation was held on those days.

Although the decision to hold orientation online was made in April, Amini recalls feeling the impact of COVID in early January 2020, when she started receiving questions about Next Level's 2020 spring residencies in Bolivia (held in Cochabamba in March 2020) and Nepal (initially scheduled for summer 2020 but postponed due to COVID-19). Unlike OneBeat, whose primary exchange program occurs in the fall, Next Level was forced to make decisions about spring residencies as the COVID-19 pandemic began unfolding. The questions Amini received from artists reflected interlocking concerns. While some artist educators remained excited about participating, others were nervous about traveling. As Next Level's residency in Cochabamba, Bolivia began, Meridian International Center transitioned to fully remote work, a decision that came before formal stay-at-home orders were issued for Washington, D.C. As she recounts the early emails she received from Meridian leadership about the plans to work from home, Amini laughs to herself: “Our leadership is like, ‘No, you're gonna go home for two weeks. We'll do a stay-at-home kind of policy, and then

¹⁶⁷ Gomez-Nelson, interview with the author.

that'll be great. That's all we need, right? Let's fight this virus, we just need to be quarantined for two weeks.' And that obviously, was not the case."¹⁶⁸

The beginning of Next Level's Bolivia residency was not only impacted by artist educators' fears about COVID-19, but also by a last-minute personnel switch. Kane Smego, the original site manager for the residency in Bolivia, was forced to drop out shortly before the trip due to illness. While a mild illness would not have kept him from participating in the past, Smego was replaced out of an abundance of concern that he could have had the virus, and Junious Brickhouse became the new site manager. At the start of the residency, there were no confirmed COVID cases in Bolivia, though numbers in the United States were beginning to escalate. The U.S. Embassy in Bolivia began implementing new changes to try and reduce the potential spread of illness in an effort to protect Next Level's artist educators and their student collaborators. According to Amini, U.S. Embassy officials encouraged artist educators to avoid giving hugs; Next Level artist educators taught the Embassy how to do fist bumps.¹⁶⁹ Several artist educators began wearing masks, as did local student collaborators. At the end of the program's first week, Bolivia announced its first COVID-19 case, and everything changed. As Amini describes, "The country just started going into a shutdown mode, knowing that they did not have the health infrastructure." Over the next 12 hours, Amini and the other members of the Meridian Cultural Programs team worked overtime making transportation arrangements to get all of the artist educators out of Bolivia, a nerve-wracking experience. Amini recalls,

I don't think I've ever tracked flights so much in my life. Just really anxious. Like just *please* get home. Because they were not allowing any flights in from Europe.

¹⁶⁸ Lindsay Amini, interview with the author, October 9, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Amini, interview with the author.

Brazil was starting to do some of the shutdowns, too. Being in this international space and seeing borders close that quickly was quite jarring. It's just not something, you know, I think of Americans who, you know, we used to have one of the strongest passports in the world, but I see it's just not something we think about. . . We don't want people to get stranded, even if it's out of layover. So that was just nerve racking. [In] 48 hours, fortunately, everyone made it back.¹⁷⁰

On March 14, all members of the Next Level team left Cochabamba to return to the United States, never reaching the residency's second site in La Paz. Bolivia was the last in-person residency to of Next Level's 2019–2020 cycle. When orientation took place in June 2020, decisions about future residencies were still being made, but the final call was to postpone the residencies until 2021. As of July 2021, they had still not taken place.

As one of Meridian's Cultural Programs Interns, I assisted in planning and facilitating Next Level's 2019 orientation, allowing me a behind-the-scenes look into the event. In participating in three orientations—2018, 2019, 2020—I experienced and navigated varying degrees of insidership and outsidership. For instance, though I am a practicing musician, I am not a hip hop practitioner, although I enjoy listening to hip hop and draw on hip hop studies throughout my scholarship. Throughout the online orientation, my sense of outsidership felt even more visceral. I had never met any of the new artist educators in person. I was no longer a Meridian intern, so my access to the event was more limited than it had been in 2019. I missed the experiences of gathering with artist educators informally, sharing meals together at the small tables that dot the Meridian courtyard and having conversations on the morning walks from the artist educators' hotel to Meridian House. On the last day of the 2019 orientation, the Meridian House elevator stopped working, and the intern team worked to help DJs and producers get their equipment up several flights of stairs before the cypher.

¹⁷⁰ Amini, interview with the author.

These are the moments in which bonding and building take place. Building, a term in hip hop culture that describes collaborating and coming together, is vital to Next Level's core ethos.¹⁷¹ How, I wondered, would artists build with each other, and I with them, in this new online format?

As in the OneBeat Marathon concert, one source of bonding came from being able to catch glimpses of people's homes, depicted in the following group screenshots from the event. Attending Next Level's orientation online allowed participants to become oriented toward one another by being attuned to each other's home environments. While some orientation participants, including Jorge "Pop Master Fabel" Pabon, Maya "Suzi Analogue" Shipman, Hannah "G-W" George-Wheeler, and Marisol "Pinqy Ring" Vélez used virtual backgrounds, many used their home offices or studios as a backdrop, as shown in the following picture:

¹⁷¹ Mark Katz, *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17–18.

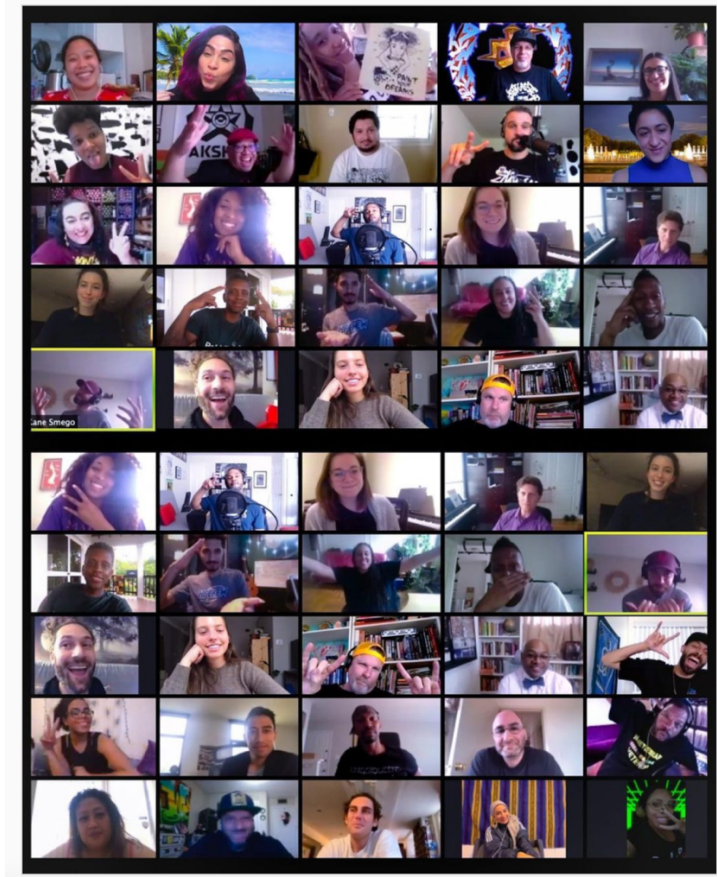


Figure 10: A screenshot of participants at Next Level’s virtual orientation on June 18, 2020.

Arianna “Kala” Brame’s plastic-covered couch became a recurring inside joke throughout the residency. Brame even included a nod to the couch in her introduction to the member of the U.S. State Department’s Cultural Programs Division. After Brame described her work as a multi-instrumentalist and producer, she requested that people refrain from making fun of the plastic on her couch that day, laughing as she referenced the good-natured jabs from the day before. This elicited smiles and laughter from many artist educators, particularly those who had teased her about the couch’s plastic covering. Since the majority of the artist educators had their microphones muted during these introductions, the sounds of laughter were inaudible, but the smiles and visual hallmarks of laughing remained visible.

Throughout the online orientation, lines between life and work were continually blurred. While previous orientations were days in which artist educators focused on hip hop and Next Level in one shared location, the 2020 orientation's online format demanded that artist educators balance Next Level with other demands of work, home, and family. During the orientation's closing, Junious Brickhouse, Next Level's Director, said, "It's my favorite thing about Zoom meetings, kids and cats just popping on."¹⁷² Brame's cat, Marley, and Arabelle "Airloom Beats" Luke's cat, Ramses, made frequent appearances throughout orientation, in addition to other pets. During the orientation's closing, Corey James Gray (Next Level Team Turkey) chopped fruit in the kitchen of his new home in Grenada as he prepared a snack for his family. Agana held her child during several orientation sessions, both of them sitting outside in the California sunshine. 2019 Next Level alumnus and aerosol artist Lance Johnson traveled to Washington, D.C. with his family for orientation, turning the event into a family trip. Johnson attended orientation events by himself, while Agana juggled both childcare and orientation.

Next Level's orientation faced two large challenges: Zoom fatigue and technical issues. To counter Zoom fatigue during the alumni roundtable, Marisol "Pinky Ring" Vélez began an energizing call and response at the session's start. Before asking artist educators to introduce themselves, Vélez asked, "Can everybody take off your mute real quick?" Then, the exchange began. Vélez instructed, "If you're feeling good, let me hear you say, "Yeah!" "Yeah!" the group responded. Vélez continued, "Let me hear you say 'Oh, yeah!'" "Oh, yeah!" we chimed. "And now everybody *scream!*"¹⁷³ The Zoom meeting exploded with

¹⁷² Junious Brickhouse, Closing Session, Next Level's 2020 Orientation, June 18, 2020.

¹⁷³ Marisol "Pinky Ring" Vélez, Alumni Panel, Next Level's 2020 Orientation, June 17, 2020.

sounds, including Arabelle “Airloom Beats” Luke’s signature imitation of an air horn. After the chorus of voices subsided, Vélez said, “I just had to hype y’all up real quick, because y’all lookin’ tired.” It was an energizing start to the session. This energy suffered somewhat in the session’s first few minutes, as one speaker was inaudible due to distortion. Once Vélez requested for all attendees to mute their microphones, the distortion disappeared, and the panel proceeded.

In planning the 2020 orientation, Lindsay Amini was encouraged by the potential of Zoom’s breakout rooms feature to increase bonding among artist educators. Next Level staff and artist educators used breakout rooms in several activities, including small group sessions for artists from the same hip hop discipline and breakout sessions for each residency team. While breakout rooms offered an opportunity for artist educators to get to know one another, they could not fix the exhaustion brought about by Zoom fatigue. Before the session with staff from the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), Junious Brickhouse thanked artists for their willingness to participate in the orientation, which he described as a “marathon Zoom meeting,” noting:

I want to thank you guys also for hanging in here on this format. This is new to us. I do a lot of Zoom meetings. But this marathon Zoom meeting? Yeah. This is that stuff. This is... this is something different. You know, I got to do calisthenics for this one. That’s right, we’re stretching.

In order to stay focused during long, sedentary hours on Zoom, one artist educator played his electric guitar throughout sessions while keeping his microphone muted. Ultimately, the meetings were able to hold artist educators’ attention, though side conversations occurring in the chat were a distraction that would not have been present in an in-person setting. The flow of conversation was also negatively impacted, as Zoom eliminates the possibility of productive cross-talk.

Before the conflict transformation sessions with Dr. Jennings, Brickhouse called for focused attention and linked conflict transformation with service:

This is a very important part of what we do for so many reasons. But I will lead to say that conflict transformation is how we focus. It's how we keep our eyes set on what it is that we're here to do. And that is to serve communities. And it's also how we learn how to treat each other, and navigate some of these things that are just inevitable in doing business and in doing art. So I ask you to please take notes, have your ears and eyes open.¹⁷⁴

The conflict transformation sessions were especially impacted by technical challenges. Jennings has led orientation workshops at Next Level orientations for three years. However, the Zoom format created challenges by limiting many of the interpersonal interactions that are vital to Jennings. Previously, she had gathered Next Level's artist educators in a circular formation, which allows everyone to see each other at once. Due to the large number of orientation participants, Jennings was unable to see all artist educators on one screen, and was forced to toggle back and forth to be able to see everyone.

Conversations about conflict require nuance; in the Zoom format, Jennings and artist educators were unable to give and receive verbal cues that are crucial to the flow of dialogue. During in-person workshops in 2018 and 2019, Jennings asked artist educators to write on a shared whiteboard and prepare group presentations and simulations of potential conflict situations; these were missing from her 2020 orientation workshops. As artist educators posted questions for Jennings using Zoom's chat function, side conversations began to proliferate, making it difficult to keep track of questions and who had asked them. The persistent red notifications that popped up with each new message in the chat box created additional distractions. This session would undoubtedly have been more effective had

¹⁷⁴ Junious Brickhouse, Conflict Transformation Workshop Introduction, Next Level's 2020 Orientation, June 18, 2020.

Jennings and artist educators been able to engage in a free-flowing dialogue, free of chat distractions and multiple Zoom screens, and see one another face-to-face.

In the wake of the 2020 police murders of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, large swaths of the United States reckoned with police brutality and white supremacy. Amidst pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests were held in all 50 U.S. states and throughout the world. The Movement for Black Lives came up frequently throughout Next Level’s 2020 orientation. In the Team Ukraine breakout session, beatboxer Arabelle “Airloom Beats” Luke and Kane Smego described participating in the protests in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively. During the 2020 orientation’s cypher, Jonathan “DJ Akshen” Valdez and Genesis “Genesis Be” Briggs performed moving works addressing anti-Black racism.¹⁷⁵ A member of the State Department’s Cultural Programs leadership attended the cypher and was particularly impacted by these performances. Embracing the term “artist” used by a Next Level artist educator, she said: “As we heard from several eloquent artists last night, there has never been a stronger need to address painful issues and lead the way in conflict transformation.” Tears filled her eyes. After a moment, she continued, thanking members of the Next Level and Meridian teams, adding, “All of you are what make our programs come alive. And alive and vibrant are *meager* words to describe the talents you showed last night during the cypher. DJ Akshen and Genesis—no words. I’m actually getting teary eyed thinking about what you shared last night, I have every confidence that our programs are in good hands with all of you.”

¹⁷⁵ I discuss these performances in more depth in Chapter 1, which focuses on the Next Level orientation cypher.

Lindsay Amini was especially struck by the member of the State Department leadership's response to the cypher performances. She remembers "looking at the screen and seeing ... tears coming to her. I was probably, I think, I was in and out of tears, most of [the cypher performances]. But just how powerful that was to see that and having heard her acknowledge that the next day in her remarks."¹⁷⁶ As Amini notes, attending the cypher certainly influenced the member of the Cultural Programs Division's remarks during the ECA session. But even more than that, attending the cypher performance and witnessing DJ Akshen and Genesis Be's testimony impacted her perceptions of Next Level and hip hop as a genre. Before delivering her closing remarks, the State Department employee thanked the artists and reflected on her newfound knowledge:

I'm really, really thrilled to have the chance to meet you guys and to understand better what it is you do. You might notice I don't come from a background that typically runs into hip hop and I'm just a tad older than most of you, so it's a new thing for me. But a powerful one, too, as I said, to reach audiences that we can't reach any other way. And you certainly speak to both my heart and my mind with regard to the answers that I can give when someone says, "So what is hip hop? Or isn't that just like, for... isn't it just a bunch of violent gangsters? Why do you have a hip hop program?" I have much better answers now, having had a chance just to listen and hear from some of you.

While her statement was intended to compliment the artist educators for helping her better understand hip hop, I was taken aback by her characterization of hip hop artists as "just a bunch of violent gangsters." I wondered if artist educators would be offended by her words. I was further surprised, then, when I did not notice any visual markers of a negative reaction. Arabelle "Airloom Beats" Luke thanked her for her support and even offered to give her a beat boxing lesson any time she was interested.

¹⁷⁶ Amini, interview with the author.

Jill Staggs, the Program Officer at ECA who oversees Next Level, has long believed that the orientation cypher can offer much-needed context to members of her department who might not have much context for understanding hip hop. In 2020, this proved true for the member of the Cultural Programs Division’s leadership who attended the Next Level orientation. She felt more confident in her ability to attest to the need for hip hop in U.S. cultural diplomacy thanks to artist educators’ performances and testimonies. Next Level’s 2020 orientation offered departures from previous years’ orientations while also allowing for new possibilities for situating attention and awareness, and for tending to others. Witnessing DJ Akshen and Genesis Be’s cypher performances was an impactful experience for the State Department employee, one that affected her profoundly by bringing her to tears.

Lindsay Amini was somewhat surprised but nevertheless delighted by the way artist educators, particularly those who had never met in person, were able to bond in a virtual space. Amini herself had participated in a number of Zoom programs and readily admits that not all of them are conducive to creating a sense of connection and community. Artist educators’ responses in surveys about orientation were positive—unexpectedly so, Amini found. While the ratings of orientation were not as high as previous in-person orientations, Meridian staff had anticipated this. After all, Amini recounts, long days filled with video sessions are quite taxing.¹⁷⁷

As musicologist Mark Katz notes in *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*, many Next Level artist educators refer to the Next Level community as a family. And, as Katz describes, the acts of coming together and building are forms of “emotional or affective labor that hip hop diplomats provide. Building is also, as many artists

¹⁷⁷ Amini, interview with the author.

attest, deeply meaningful to them. Sometimes the results of this labor are immediately gratifying. Over the course of a few days or a few weeks the artists may become fast friends with those who had recently been strangers.”¹⁷⁸ Orientation offers one such opportunity for the transformation from stranger to friend to take place. “I barely know you, but I already love y’all!” one artist educator exclaimed on orientation’s first day. This sentiment was shared by several artist educators early on, as a sense of camaraderie became established.

Some aspects of building at the Next Level 2020 orientation were undoubtedly linked to longstanding in-person connections that artist educators shared with one another. As artist educators said their goodbyes during orientation’s final session, several acknowledged friends, colleagues, and mentors by name. Dancer Amirah Sackett addressed her mentor, Jorge “Pop Master Fabel” Pabon with a warm “*Salaam Alaikum*, Fabel.” “*Wa-Alaikum-Salaam*,” Fabel responded with a smile. Geographic proximity also created a sense of camaraderie, even among artist educators who had never met one another before. For instance, Arabelle “AirLoom Beats” Luke and Dan “Dirty Digits” Chaves bonded over shared experiences and fond memories of time spent living in Brooklyn neighborhoods. Such moments highlight the fact that the worlds of online and in-person are not strict binaries, but rather a continuum of interactions, co-presences, and connections that are shaped by the media through which they take place.

As Next Level’s Team Ukraine breakout session came to a close, Junious Brickhouse joined the Zoom meeting to check in. Kane Smego exclaimed, “Oh, man, you missed it! We talked about politics . . . We talked about COVID. We talked about folks knowing each other for 15 years and going way back and beatboxing and quarantine.” “And we’re just getting

¹⁷⁸ Katz, *Build*, 128.

started,” Dan “Dirty Digits” Chaves added. “Just getting started,” Smego agreed as Luke intoned the sound of an air horn in celebration. In this session and others, there was the sense that these events transcended the status of being a poor alternative to in-person programming. Rather, artist educators were building in a way they were excited to continue. In fact, they were just getting started.

The OneBeat Marathon Concert

The OneBeat Marathon concert took place on Sunday, November 15, 2020 from 12pm to 4pm Eastern Time and was re-broadcast later for those in different time zones. The concert contained a series of live and pre-recorded performances from OneBeat Fellows and interviews between program alumni and Found Sound Nation staff, along with staff from Bang on a Can, Found Sound Nation’s parent organization. All participating artists received financial compensation for their participation in the event. The Marathon concert was held as a Zoom webinar, so while audience members could watch the performance, they were unable to see each other, and performers were unable to see attendees. In order to interact with performers and one another, attendees and participating artists and staff posted comments in the event’s accompanying message board, as shown in the figure below.

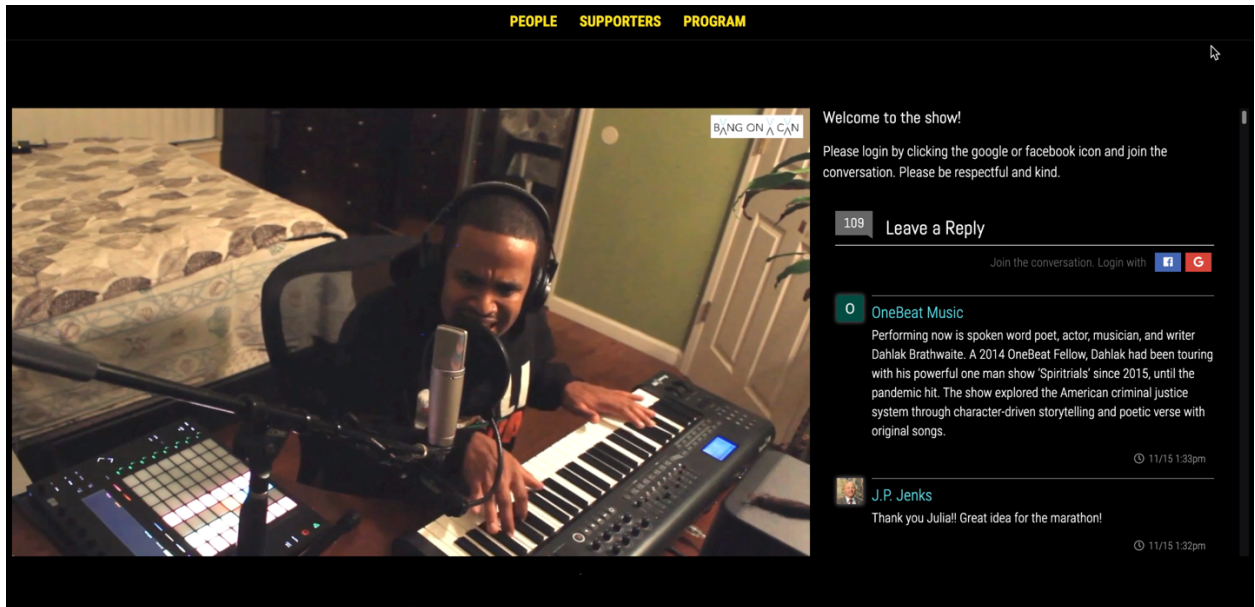


Figure 11: OneBeat Fellow Dahlak Brathwaite performs in OneBeat Marathon concert on November 15, 2020. The event’s message board, which allowed attendees to post comments in real time, is shown on the right.

Marathon concerts have long been a Bang on a Can staple. Bang on a Can’s co-founders, composers Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe created the first Bang on a Can Marathon in 1987, a performance in Soho, New York City that included works by Steve Reich, John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, and Milton Babbitt, alongside composers who were then less well-known. In 2020, Bang on a Can had originally planned to expand the Marathon concert into a three-day festival, Long Play, to be held in varying performance spaces across Brooklyn. However, after Long Play was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe decided to hold the Marathon concert online. The first online Bang on a Can Marathon concert took place on May 3, 2020.

Over the course of two months, Kyla-Rose Smith, OneBeat’s program’s director, and OneBeat co-founder and co-director Elena Moon Park planned the Marathon concert’s logistics, creating contracts, coordinating with OneBeat Fellows and staff, and checking in

with each participating artist individually to see what their setups and stages would look like. Creating a list of 16 performances from OneBeat's over 300 alumni was a challenging task, Smith admits, insisting "that one list is just a version of many. We could do another great marathon tomorrow with the number of artists that we have."¹⁷⁹ Smith's curatorial choices were motivated by two primary factors. One was to have a representation of OneBeat alumni from all over the world, as the program now encompasses five continents. Another goal was to try to represent every year or iteration of OneBeat in the marathon. The program combined alumni from the U.S. program as well as OneBeat Istanbul. Since OneBeat used Bang on a Can's already existing platform and structure for their marathon concerts, financial compensation was built in to the program, but it remained critical for OneBeat staff all the same.

Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe described a shared sense of responsibility for holding the marathon, and were determined to use the concert as a way to provide artists with much-needed financial compensation during the pandemic. As Lang noted, "[W]e have these people who depend on us, who have no money. We have young people who are looking for opportunities. There are so many people who are in need of a venue."¹⁸⁰ The OneBeat Marathon concert thus represented a way for Bang on a Can, Found Sound Nation, and OneBeat to perform a sense of solidarity. While solidarity-building can create a sense of community and support, this strategy also has consequences. One major consequence was the Marathon concert's pervasive flattening of the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted areas

¹⁷⁹ Smith, interview

¹⁸⁰ Walls, "Virus Pushes the Bang on a Can Marathon Online."

around the world in different ways (such as disparities in vaccine access) into a universalist narrative for audience consumption.

For Smith, one of the concert's main strengths was its ability to provide "a little magnifying glass" into each artist's unique world—their homes, their recording spaces, their libraries, the spaces where they practice and jam. And, as one concert, to be able to offer 16 little magnifying glasses featuring artists throughout the world remains unique. In the pages that follow, I highlight several of the Marathon concert's performances, engaging a constellation of interrelated themes: the diversity of experiences Fellows described in their performances, the singular challenges that artists and creatives have faced throughout the pandemic, the resilience of OneBeat Fellows and staff, and the ways this concert both challenged and reinforced feelings of isolation.

The first performance of the OneBeat Marathon concert came from Aleksii Arkincheev, a vocalist and multi-instrumentalist from Siberia. He submitted a pre-recorded video of a solo performance he played amidst the forests surrounding Lake Baikal—a setting that offered a striking "little magnifying glass." After months of peering into interiors during Zoom meetings, of less-than-ideal lighting and beige offices, the green of the trees in the Siberian forest both shocked and soothed, offering a reprieve from my usual squinting to read the titles of barely-visible books on shelves. While each performer's pre-recorded video or live performance carried an echo of a place—from bedrooms and living rooms to studio spaces—the image of Arkincheev seated in the middle of a vast forest provided a particularly compelling atmosphere, to me, with which to begin the concert. Arkincheev sang in the Buryat-Mongolian throat singing style known as *khoomei* while accompanying himself on the *morin-huur*, a bowed and plucked two-string instrument.



Figure 12: Aleksi Arkincheev performs a set for the OneBeat Marathon concert from the forests surrounding Lake Baikal in Siberia on November 15, 2020.

While Arkincheev's was the only performance that featured an outdoor environment—leading commentor Carla Lord to say, “Beats bookcases and weird lamps”—other Marathon concert participants provided compelling atmospheres of their own. OneBeat alumni Gugulethu “Dumama” Duma and Dylan “Hunterchee” Greene performed their set from their Berlin, Germany home studio. Dumama and Hunterchee met during their OneBeat residency in 2018 and, with Algerian-German musician Kerim “Kechou” Melik Becker, created a Berlin-based artist collective called the Out of Time Embassy. As Dumama describes, the Out of Time Embassy emerged from a need for connection with other artists and creatives during the pandemic. She notes: “We all find ourselves in quite a precarious moment as artists, specifically performing artists, in the world. I think Out of Time Embassy emerged as a ‘what are we gonna do now that we’re not performing? What does it mean to be an artist now?’ It’s a collective of curators, cultural researchers, but predominantly musical

performers, music agents.”¹⁸¹ The Out of Time Embassy began as musicians playing music together in the park, “just out of a pure need to make music with people.” OneBeat provided not only the connection between Dumama and Hunterchee, but also inspired particular methods and ways of musicking. Dumama credits her experience in OneBeat to creating new possibilities for collaboration and creating: “We were super inspired by our experience with OneBeat and the idea of street studios and mobile studios and just public performances and site-specific performances. We’re evolving now as a curatorial platform and artist community that’s just trying to be with others during this moment and figure out how we’re going to evolve as artists and maintain that strong sense of community. Week by week, it’s happening.”¹⁸²

Trumpet player Amir ElSaffar performed a set from his home in New York City that combined solo trumpet with works for solo trumpet and modular synthesizer, a newfound passion project. After OneBeat co-director Jeremy Thal asked ElSaffar, “What inspired you to enter the world of synthesis?” he quipped: “Well... Covid!” Both Thal and ElSaffar laughed knowingly in response. As ElSaffar described his path to the world of modular synthesizer, he described the feelings of loss and despair he encountered after his largest ever tours were canceled in April. Latency issues and technical glitches in livestreaming performances prevented his band from collaborating with one another virtually. ElSaffar continued:

Honestly, I was in a state where... Basically, April was going to be the biggest tour that I’d ever organized in my life. A 17-piece ensemble, we were going two weeks around the U.S. and this was *years* of preparation and working with an agent and also my own connections. It was quite a big undertaking. And I know

¹⁸¹ Gugulethu “Dumama” Duma, interview with Kyla-Rose Smith, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

¹⁸² Duma, interview with Kyla-Rose Smith.

everybody's lost gigs, and of course there are many other things, but this wasn't just another tour or another set of concerts. It was really something that had been years in the making. And it just evaporated like that. And I think my way of coping was that I wanted to make music, and not just play trumpet...I wanted to play with *somebody*, and I couldn't play with anybody live. We did some livestreaming performances as kind of little makeup concerts, but it wasn't the same.¹⁸³

He began using synthesizers built into computer programs he already had, but continued to crave “something that was physical and had a live feeling to it.” This desire led him to modular synthesizers [explain why this is more physical. Because of knobs and cables? That's a difference in degree rather than kind from computers, no?). “I think of it not as human versus machine,” ElSaffar notes. “I'm trying to think of it like these are electrons and electrons are the most ancient thing in the universe.”



Figure 13: Amir ElSaffar performs a piece for trumpet and modular synthesizer from his home in New York City on November 15, 2020.

¹⁸³ Amir ElSaffar, interview with Jeremy Thal, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

Along with Dumama and ElSaffar, Dahlak Brathwaite, a U.S.-based hip hop artist, spoken word poet, and playwright, described the ongoing pandemic's devastation alongside new creative opportunities and avenues. Brathwaite's set featured an excerpt from his solo play *Try/Step/Trip*, which premiered right before California shut down. "We've been working on that show for about three years now, and I'm glad we were able to see it manifest before theater no longer existed," Dahlak describes, laughing. But he also felt a sense of gratitude for being able to share and showcase his work as part of the OneBeat marathon. The pandemic also inspired him to create a new setup at home and score an upcoming film.

During his set, Dahlak Brathwaite performed a piece from his 2020 play, *Try/Step/Trip*. In the piece, Brathwaite describes being stopped by police offers over and over throughout his life. The tenth time led to his arrest, and with it, first-hand experiences with the U.S. criminal justice system. Brathwaite's piece offered powerful testimony about the dehumanization of mass incarceration, the relationship between incarceration and drugs, and the struggle to achieve exoneration, decriminalization, and freedom. While the OneBeat Marathon concert contained moments of levity, joy, and connection, stories of devastation and dehumanization were also on display.

Another of the OneBeat Marathon concert's most powerful moments featured program alumna Anna Roberts-Gevalt, known as Anna R-G. Anna R-G shared an experimental video based on her experiences with long-haul COVID symptoms, a debilitating illness that she has been living with for over eight months. When introducing her, Kyla-Rose Smith said, "Anna is coming to us live from Queens"—"From bed," R-G quickly added. After providing a brief description of R-G's video piece, Smith asked R-G to talk about her experiences with this long-term illness. R-G stated that when she initially began

having COVID-19 symptoms—fever, headache, loss of her sense of taste, and an inability concentrate—these symptoms persisted for three weeks, then improved. But after that, things began to get worse. R-G began experiencing symptoms again—but this time, they were worse. She faced periods of time where it was difficult to breathe, brain fog made it difficult to find certain words, and she experienced heart palpitations from even short physical exertion. Anna R-G, a working musician and artist, has barely been able to play her instruments—a departure that forced her to re-examine her very identity. She notes, “I haven’t been able to play my instruments in a kind of concentrated way. I’ve been able to like play little on my guitar and sing a little in a kind of, sing to my boyfriend, like, a song at that end of the night, but not in a way where you’re able to be a focused musician.” R-G was forced to re-approach the very act of creativity, which, though challenging, also provided her with new insights that she feels will serve her for a lifetime:

I think it’s led [me] to be kind of optimistic about what I’ve learned through this very shitty experience of really shifting the way I think about music and getting away from mastery. Because I there’s no way I can master any instrument right now. I just physically and mentally can’t. But it feels like there’s so much to say. And I’m feeling so many things because I’ve been stuck in bed and feel so isolated and alone and scared. And will this go on forever? So really helping me think through ways, when I’m able to re-approach my instruments and re-approach my making as like, what am I able to do with what I have, with what limits this is creating. Which I hope that, when I feel better, I can still use some of those lessons, like: what can I make right now with what I have, rather than this feeling of mastery or domination of an instrument, which is very based on this idea that our bodies are like machines or like that we are never vulnerable. Yeah, this just really hit home about how temporary able-bodiedness is.¹⁸⁴

Eager to embark on creative work and projects, but physically and mentally unable to play her instruments, she turned to creating visual art and videos. Anna R-G’s performance and

¹⁸⁴ Anna Roberts-Gevalt, interview with Kyla-Rose Smith, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

testimony were powerful, and audience members applauded her bravery and honesty, as demonstrated in the following comments:

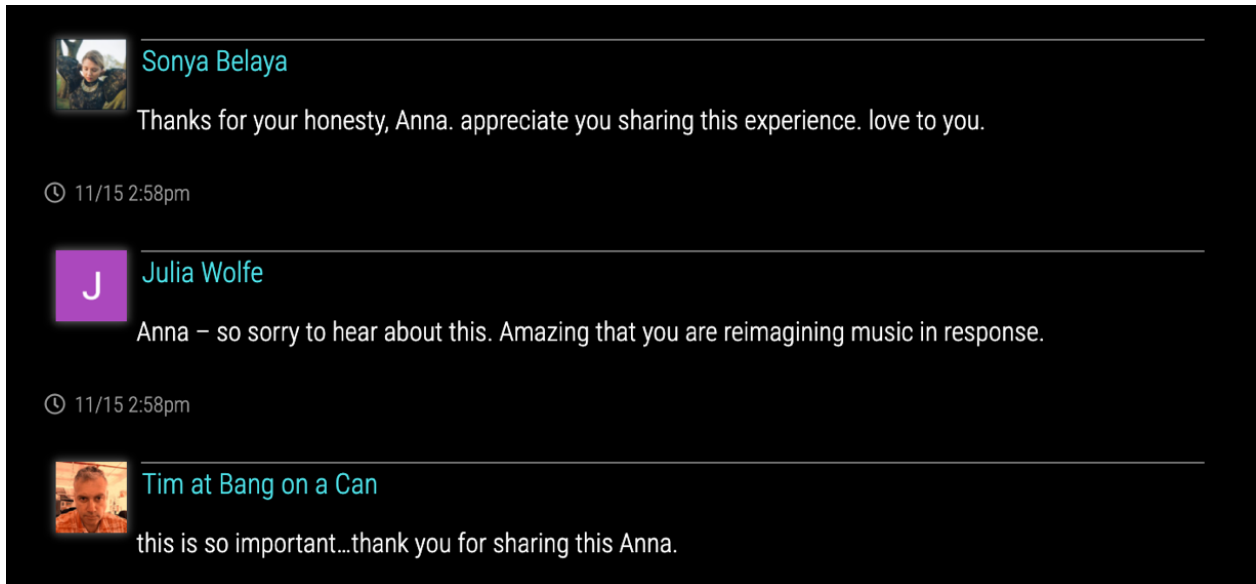


Figure 14: Audience members and Bang on a Can staff post comments following the showing of Anna R-G’s video at the OneBeat Marathon concert, November 15, 2020.

Julia Wolfe applauded R-G’s video, saying it was “beautiful and moving and real.”

Following the video, Elena Moon Park thanked R-G for her contribution to the marathon, then reminded the audiences that the ongoing pandemic is a threat we all share: “a reminder that we’re still at a pandemic, which we know because we’re in all of these boxes instead of in person. So let’s all wear our masks and keep social distancing, as this is not over yet.”¹⁸⁵

Alongside powerful moments like Brathwaite and Anna R-G’s performances were moments of missed connection and technical challenges. Some of these technical difficulties were fixed quickly, and performances were able to proceed without further issues. However, one of the Marathon concert’s most ambitious performances, a live musical collaboration

¹⁸⁵ Elena Moon Park, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

between artists in New York City and Beijing, faced technical difficulties that were ultimately insurmountable. 2019 OneBeat Fellow Jess Tsang and OneBeat staff member Amy Garapic played percussion together in a Brooklyn studio while Meng Qi, a Beijing, China-based synthesizer designer and musician attempted to collaborate with them live on Zoom. While Tsang and Garapic's percussion playing was audible, it was impossible to hear Qi for the entirety of the performance. In our December 2020 interview, Kyla-Rose Smith described technical challenges as one of the largest limitations all types of digital streaming, particularly real-time collaborative performances. She noted that connecting Jess and Amy in New York and Meng in Beijing during the concert

was a little bit more challenging. Also because of Zoom. Zoom preferences the loudest sound, so it makes it difficult to do that kind of collaborative performance. Sound is obviously an issue and something that I think all musicians and they own way in this world are like working through and there are many different, like third-party apps and different ways that you can run your sound. And everybody is at a different level of experience with that. But I think that that's just across the board.¹⁸⁶

Zoom was a new medium for OneBeat's performances. As staff members and Fellows became more experienced with online programming over the course of the pandemic, their confidence with the new technology increased.

One group of OneBeat alumni, the TIGATrio, uses the inherent delays in VCS communication as part of the medium of their performance. Rather than trying to work around the delays that sometimes occur, they instead use the pros and cons of these platforms to fuel their collaborations. When Kyla-Rose Smith introduced the TIGATrio in the Marathon concert, she placed them in the context of their longstanding use of Zoom and distanced

¹⁸⁶ Smith, interview with the author.

improvisation: “The amazing thing about this trio is that they have actually been doing virtual, live, distanced free improvisation performances way before COVID as part of their genesis. They met at OneBeat and in an effort to keep their group going, they found a way to rehearse and have live shows via Skype. We have them on the marathon doing a completely live, free improvised set featuring theremin, double bass, and multiple instruments from Jay Afrisando.”¹⁸⁷ As Kyla-Rose Smith described in our December 2020 interview, the TIGATrio uses the inherent delays in VCS communication as part of the medium of their performance.

Throughout, the OneBeat Marathon concert both challenged and reinforced feelings of isolation. I found myself struggling to remain alert during the concerts’ third and fourth hours, despite the virtuosic performances and thoughtful interviews. Watching the concert alone from my (cluttered) home office, I felt the lines between work and leisure in my own life becoming blurred. Throughout, I also experienced an acute sense of loss—a sense of grief for the missed live music events, the shared experience of watching a concert as an audience member, for artists’ losses in income.

But for many performers, the concert provided a much-needed sense of connection. Following the TIGATrio set, OneBeat co-director Chris Marianetti interviewed the group’s bassist, Daniel de Mendoza. After complimenting the performance and how many moods the group evoked in their playing, Marianetti told de Mendoza that he could sense that the group members were really responding to each other and asked him how his playing and improvisation have changed as a result of playing with the TIGATrio. De Mendoza answered:

I think it’s amazing because I usually play more free jazz improvisation stuff, but I feel like when we’re all playing with TIGATrio, either live improvisation or via internet, we’re each one trying to get into the sound of the other ones. So I think the sound is really far away from jazz or any kind of free jazz sound, it’s more

¹⁸⁷ Kyla-Rose Smith, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

about experimental sound, electro-acoustic sound mixed with acoustic and electronic. So for me, I think I played really different with this really special project. And for me, it's amazing always to be aware of the amazing music that these amazing musicians with the TIGAtrio. So I was listening to them and trying to interact and create with them at the same time.¹⁸⁸

De Mendoza also feels that collaborating digitally and playing live together feel the same. "I feel like if they're both here in the room with me right now, I just play like that, and I think it sounds really similar to the in-person interaction. So for me, it's amazing how we can create such amazing synergy... And we're really good friends, too, and that's also quite important."¹⁸⁹

Although 2013 OneBeat Fellow Aurora Nealand was frustrated with many of the livestreamed concerts she attended throughout the pandemic, she enjoyed participating in and watching the Marathon concert. However, she admitted, her view of the concert's success was inexorably tied to her connections with other OneBeat Fellows:

It's wonderful to watch the other performers. I mean, I think a piece of it is that many of them I know personally. I think it's kind of hard to give a totally unbiased opinion, because it's a little bit like... you're my little sister and there's my cousin! And look at this amazing thing my brother is doing! It's very, very heartwarming to see all these faces that I love.¹⁹⁰

Nealand's description of OneBeat Fellows as family echoes the discourse many Next Level artist educators have used to describe the sense of love, family, and mutual admiration they feel within the program, such as the assertion, "I barely know you, but I already love y'all!"

At the conclusion of the OneBeat Marathon concert, Julia Wolfe effused: "Bang on a Can is so thrilled to be associated with, connected to Found Sound Nation and OneBeat who

¹⁸⁸ Daniel De Mendoza, interview with Chris Marianetti, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

¹⁸⁹ De Mendoza, interview with Chris Marianetti.

¹⁹⁰ Aurora Nealand, interview with the author, December 8, 2020.

put on this amazing day of music. We could point to a thousand things that were so remarkable.”¹⁹¹ The OneBeat Marathon concert attracted an audience of over 2,000 people worldwide—a geographical scope that was only possible in a virtual space. For Bang on a Can and OneBeat staff, one of the OneBeat Marathon concert’s strengths was its ability to make the audience members feel as though they were traveling the world without leaving their homes. At 12:07pm, just after the event began, Tim Thomas, Bang on a Can’s Development Director, posted: “The world is here! All continents represented... waiting on Antarctica!” “More than 20 Countries!” Kenny Savelson, Bang on a Can’s Executive Director, responded.

And though the world was present, the Zoom webinar format and structure of the interviews presented a clear sense of a “center” (OneBeat staff) and a “periphery” (Fellows and audience members). By presenting a global, multicultural COVID consciousness—that we are all impacted by COVID’s devastation, we are all experiencing quarantine and isolation—the Marathon concert also presented a universalist experience of being a musician and artist during COVID. While the view that “we’re all in this together” champions a type of togetherness, one that may have been welcomed during a time of intense isolation, this universalist view also flattens the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted areas around the world in different ways, such as disparities in vaccine access. Put differently, while we may have all experienced a pandemic, we certainly did not experience it in the same way. In addition to deemphasizing difference, the act of prioritizing solidarity also ignores or downplays privilege. For instance, in his closing Marathon concert comments, composer David Lang noted, “[T]he world travel that we, you know, we got to take today, right? India,

¹⁹¹ Julia Wolfe, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

China, Indonesia, Africa. It's pretty great. Makes me want to get on an airplane sometime. Not too soon."¹⁹² Lang's comment regarding his eagerness to travel might not have been well-received by Fellows or audience members who are struggling with unemployment, illness, or the loss of loved ones due to COVID-19. Further, not all audience members enjoy this type of mobility and ease of travel, with or without a global pandemic.

By holding the concert as a Zoom webinar, the OneBeat Marathon concert prioritized the quality of presentation (audio and video) as opposed to interactivity. The concert could have been presented as more of a conversation, but this would certainly have entailed other tradeoffs. For instance, it would have added complexity to technological endeavor that was already complex: presenting virtual performances and interviews with Fellows around the world, all with different set-ups. Throughout the concert, I found myself thinking about the sensory, interactive components of past concerts I had attended—the buzz of excitement prior to the performance, observing audience members' facial expressions and outfits. I was surprised to find I even missed the sounds of crinkling cough drop wrappers. While I enjoyed the performances, the one-way exchange of information and performances, coupled with the inability to see fellow audience members, created an isolating experience for me.

Conclusion: “Playing Into the Unexpected”

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. cultural diplomacy programs have worked to imagine new ways of being and doing, of “playing into the unexpected,” to borrow a phrase from Kyla-Rose Smith. While Smith used this phrase to describe the TIGAtrio's style of musicking, I find it useful to examine how Next Level and OneBeat have adapted to

¹⁹² David Lang, OneBeat Marathon Concert, November 15, 2020.

pandemic times. How have they sounded and performed the unexpected? And how have they embraced the unexpected?

Next Level and OneBeat staff made different choices for their online events in terms of presentational mode. The Next Level cypher prioritized interaction, spontaneity, and collectivity. However, the final product was unpolished. As this event was not meant to be observed by outsiders and audience members, it did not matter that the audio and visual quality suffered or that certain performers re-did their performances. The OneBeat Marathon concert, meanwhile, had a different set of priorities. As a concert produced for audience consumption, the Marathon concert minimized interactivity in favor of enhanced audio and video quality, of looking and sounding professional, over interactivity. If the Marathon concert and virtual cypher had switched formats, both likely would have failed. The Marathon concert would have been chaotic and the cypher would not have been an event that welcomed bonding and participation. Both events and their choices had unique limitations that revealed program priorities.

Throughout Next Level's 2020 orientation and the OneBeat Marathon concert, as well as in my interviews, I was reminded time and again of two key advantages regarding virtual diplomacy: accessibility and audience reach. On the other hand, online cultural diplomacy programs can also create barriers to participation and feelings of belonging. While participants did not have to travel to join together, meeting online requires participants have access to a strong, dependable internet connection. Time zones also presented an issue. Since all of Next Level's 2020 orientation events were held according to Eastern Standard Time, artist educators living on the West Coast were required to start full days of meetings at 6am Pacific Time. The OneBeat Marathon concert was streamed at two different times in order to

reach as many audience members as possible. However, with Fellows on five different continents around the world, the timing was undoubtedly more convenient for some than for others.

During Next Level’s 2020 orientation, artist educators and Next Level staff members sought new ways of building in a virtual environment. The OneBeat Marathon concert provided a way to achieve one of OneBeat’s long-standing dreams: a OneBeat Festival. As Marathon concert attendee Martin Masakowski commented at the beginning of the concert, the pandemic had unexpectedly turned a long-held dream into a reality.

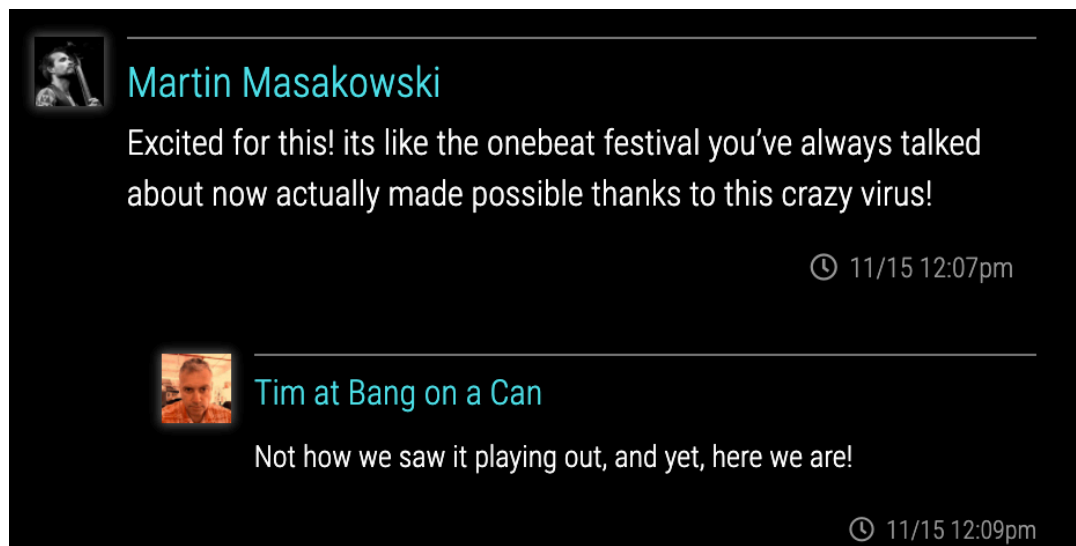


Figure 15: Martin Masakowski and Tim Thomas (Bang on a Can’s Director of Development) discuss the OneBeat Marathon concert as being a form of the long-awaited OneBeat Festival, November 15, 2020.

Over the event’s four-hour duration, the Marathon concert attracted the largest ever audience for a single OneBeat event. While programs like the Marathon concert will never replace OneBeat’s in-person tour and other programming, it remains a meaningful supplement.

Online cultural diplomacy programs offer distinctive temporal and physical affordances. For instance, during orientation’s “holding space” sessions, Next Level artist

educators were able to turn toward one another's experiences without the time limitations that have typically constrained in-person gatherings. In previous years, orientation's ending was chaotic as artist educators left for the airport at varied times while Meridian and Next Level staff debriefed. In 2019, I watched several artist educators, unable to say goodbye to everyone, depart from orientation at Meridian with a sense of sadness, yearning for more time. In 2020, however, all orientation attendees could gather together for as long as they liked. The final "holding space" session extended for over an hour beyond the orientation's official conclusion. OneBeat's 2021 virtual residencies will also benefit from the gift of more time. OneBeat Virtual was scheduled for July 6–September 6, 2021 and OneBeat Lebanon from September 20–November 17, 2021. In previous years, OneBeat's programs have been held over the course of two to four weeks. The 2021 residencies, scheduled for roughly two months, were designed to provide Fellows with more opportunities to connect and collaborate, allowing these programs to close the gap between rhetoric (creating a sense of community, even family) and practice.

In her article, "The Pandemic is a Portal," author and activist Arundhati Roy writes, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew." Throughout, Roy problematizes the longstanding interest of "returning to normal" or regaining normalcy:

This [pandemic] is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal," *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

Rather than longing for a return to broken systems, Roy argues, we should instead seek to bring about new, transformative futures. How will this process of pivoting to the needs of an uncertain present—of playing into the unexpected—lead Next Level and OneBeat to imagine new futures for their programs and for their participants?

CONCLUSION

The Deputy Chief of the U.S. State Department’s Cultural Programs Division paced back and forth in front of three large tables that occupied an elegant conference room. It was June 2019, and throughout her presentation, the speaker provided her audience of Next Level’s artist educators, with advice and guidance about how best to use social media during their international residencies. At the conclusion of her presentation, she turned from the large screen featuring her slideshow to face the hip hop artists seated at the tables. “If anybody asks you, ‘So what do you think about the U.S.’s policy about Iran? You say, ‘Why don’t you ask that question to the embassy?’” After a pause, she smiled then instructed: “Repeat after me.” She continued, “I am here,” “*I am here,*” the artists echoed in unison. “To talk,” “*to talk,*” “about my art,” “*about my art.*” “One more time!” she shouted with growing excitement. “I am here to talk about my art.” “*I am here to talk about my art,*” the artists responded more loudly. “I am here to talk about peace.” “*I am here to talk about peace.*” “I am here to talk about love.” “*I am here to talk about love.*” “And then you turn to the person and say, ‘Talk to me about love.’”¹⁹⁴

The Deputy Division Chief instructed Next Level’s artist educators that they were to leave the politics to the embassies during their residencies. Instead, they were instructed to talk about art, culture, peace, music, and love. Such rhetoric is not unique to this moment.

¹⁹⁴ State Department ECA Panel, Next Level’s 2019 Orientation, June 18, 2019.

Indeed, State Department employees have long engaged in similar practices, as dance scholar Clare Croft notes regarding participants in the DanceMotion USA program:

When State Department officials prepare the dancers for the tours, they sometimes explicitly instruct them to maintain that their work is apolitical. In these warnings, it seems apparent that “political” usually equals what artists say, not what they do as dancers. For example, when DanceMotion companies traveled to Washington for pre-tour briefings in 2010, many dancers reported that State Department desk officers gave them specific instructions to avoid all political conversations while abroad. (It was up to the dancers to determine what constituted a “political” conversation.)¹⁹⁵

The exchange between the Deputy Division Chief and Next Level’s 2019 artist educators reveals a number of disparities between rhetoric and action in U.S. cultural diplomacy programs, particularly in deemphasizing Next Level’s political objectives. In this context, the label “political” only applies to artist educators’ words—what they might say during their residencies—rather than their artistic work itself or to cultural diplomacy’s political objectives. It also does not apply to the politics of representation, such as the political statement made by sending Black jazz musicians abroad on U.S. State Department–sponsored tours during the Cold War or teams of hip hop artists, the majority of whom are people of color, today.

Many of Next Level’s artist educators enter the program’s orientation with concerns about what they will be encouraged or permitted to say during their residencies. Being told to parrot a State Department official, then, insulted the artists’ agency, entirely the wrong way to go about winning hip hop artists’ “hearts and minds.” The “tenuous framing of cultural diplomacy as apolitical,” as Croft articulates, means that artists “must navigate meanings of

¹⁹⁵ Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20.

‘political’ and ‘apolitical’—even when their artistic work is quite politically engaged.”¹⁹⁶ As I witnessed the call and response between the Deputy Chief and artist educators, I was taken aback by the open divergence between diplomacy and artistic practice, between rhetoric and action, when the State Department employee insisted that Next Level artists steadfastly avoid the political.

Cultural diplomacy depends on bringing together groups with different goals, perspectives, and values to work on behalf of the state. Cultural diplomatic endeavors are programmed and carried out by an array of state and non-state actors, from participating artists, employees at the U.S. State Department, and staff at NGOs and U.S. Embassies around the world. Each of these actors has their own sense of responsibility and their own ways of measuring effectiveness or impact. Each brings their own identities to cultural diplomacy’s spaces of international artistic encounter. Each may also have distinctive perspectives regarding what it means to be political.

Throughout my dissertation, I have examined the complex entanglements and rhetorical gaps found in U.S. cultural diplomacy. It is in these very gaps—the moments of diverging intent that animate Next Level’s orientation cypher, the strategic positioning of OneBeat as apolitical or post-political, the tensions in online cultural diplomacy programming—that we can most clearly grasp the nature of cultural diplomacy. Rather than being an indication of cultural diplomacy’s deficiencies, the constant need for compromise and negotiation is essential to the enterprise. Moments of divergence are the sites of greatest risk, but also where the elusive dream of mutual understanding may in fact be realized in the act of endeavoring to cross these chasms. However, one area of mutual *mis*understanding

¹⁹⁶ Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 18.

persists, though it often goes unmentioned: between participating artists, program organizers, and State Department employees.

The approach practiced by Julia Gomez-Nelson, the Program Officer at the State Department who oversees OneBeat, stands in stark contrast to that of the Deputy Chief I mentioned earlier. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Gomez-Nelson not only attends OneBeat's opening artist residencies, but participates fully in as many activities as she can, even though she does not consider herself to be a musician. Her participation and methods of engagement demonstrate a powerful sense of sincerity—a sincere appreciation for OneBeat Fellows and their skills, a sincere interest in building bridges—that can inspire feelings of mutual understanding between divergent groups. In her willingness to create music alongside world-class musicians, she also demonstrates vulnerability.

Gomez-Nelson's presence and participation in OneBeat's opening artist residency are not only beneficial to the program; they represent effective strategies that seek to lessen power asymmetries between Fellows and the State Department. Her approach could have been characterized as naïve or her interest in making music with a selectively chosen group of artists, though she is not a trained musician, might have been thought to reveal a sense of privilege. However, responses from OneBeat Fellows and staff reveal a very different reception. Rather than stemming from a place of naiveté, Gomez-Nelson's actions are based on a certain savviness cultivated through years of experience in the field as a Program Officer. This is what I term “strategic idealism,” a perspective that informs how certain State Department employees approach engagement: aspiring to cultivate mutual understanding with participating artists in ways that accomplish program objectives. By practicing what people-to-people diplomacy hopes to achieve, Gomez-Nelson closes the gaps between

rhetoric and practice. Rather than the didacticism of the Deputy Chief, she willingly places herself in situations to learn from Fellows and their expertise.

Gomez-Nelson's participation certainly had a strong effect on 2019 OneBeat Fellow Jess Tsang, who recalls:

I was so astonished as an American to have seen the face of a government official that had made significant change, that had essentially created the program. That moved me more than I can say. And she was a normal lady, obviously a government official, she had this presentation about the State Department. But she was very, “we want you to do this thing, we love this, we want you guys to come here,” and just really speaking to the version and goals of [OneBeat.] She was around for two or three days, which was super nice. I wrote her an email because I was like, I've never once been in a room with a government official at any level of government. I can't say I have up until I started doing this project. And now all of a sudden, I know a lot! It was pretty cool to be able to thank a person, because the government is so faceless.¹⁹⁷

Tsang was moved by Gomez-Nelson's dedication, that she took several days out of her busy schedule to travel from Washington, D.C. to New Smyrna Beach, Florida and attend OneBeat's opening artist residency. Gomez-Nelson's “strategic idealism” created not only a sense of mutual understanding and mutual interest in OneBeat, but also a sense of admiration. Tsang's experience of seeing and getting to know “a government official that had made significant change” impacted her experience of OneBeat as well as the U.S. government. Other OneBeat Fellows and staff members had similar responses and were also impressed by her dedication. Gomez-Nelson endeavors to make cultural diplomacy participants feel aligned in their objectives and approach—a strategy that enhances OneBeat's effectiveness through a commitment to lessening power differentials between the State Department and artists.

¹⁹⁷ Jess Tsang, interview with the author, October 5, 2019.

Valuing artists' labor and compensating them fairly and generously for their work is not only a best practice—it is another form of strategic idealism. This is vital in the wake of COVID-19, which has had a devastating impact on artists and creatives. Kyla-Rose Smith, OneBeat's program's director, was eager to use the OneBeat Marathon concert to advocate for musicians' compensation and pay, and to challenge the pervasive ideas that musicians will (and deserve to) take gigs no matter what is offered. Through the Marathon concert, Smith hoped to teach global audiences how to support artists by example:

It's actually, you know, credit to Bang on a Can, it's something that they instituted at the beginning of their Marathon concerts is sort of like flat rates for artists across the board. You don't get paid more or less depending on like, how famous you are. Which is great and super important. It's not a ton of money. But it is *something* and I think it's good that it's equitable across the board. And being able to give that to artists, no matter what . . . As we kept saying, we would love people to donate, but no matter whether there are a large amount of donations or no donations, we are guaranteeing a fee for the artist. It's obviously very important always. In this time, where musicians have really been cut off from their predominant revenue stream, it's more important than ever for people to support artists.

In this way, Smith and OneBeat staff members were able to bridge a gap between rhetoric and practice: valuing artists not only in word but also in action. Next Level also has this same practice, as demonstrated by the creation of the Next Level Live series in part as a way to create additional paid opportunities for artist educators. Some State Department employees have already begun the work of supporting artists by respecting their artistic and emotional labor in word and deed. For instance, during Next Level's virtual orientation in 2020, the member of the State Department's Cultural Programs leadership thanked the artist educators for their passion, skills, experience, and work, gratefully acknowledging that they helped her reach new understandings about hip hop, diplomacy, and activism through their artwork and testimony.

During Next Level’s 2020 Orientation, Junious Brickhouse, the program’s director, described how he is using Next Level to close the rhetoric-action gap in his own life:

This is my path, you know. Next Level is inspiring me to continue to be this type of person in the world, and, frankly, be the kind of person that I’m asking all of these racists to be. It starts with us. It starts with us, and we have choices. And I’m doing my best to make some good ones. I just wanted to share that with you because I think a lot of times we talk about how much we love this program. And I just wanted you guys to know that sometimes that I gotta work for that love. And you’re gonna have to work, you know. You’re gonna have to work and you will be tested. We’re being tested now, and I don’t expect that to stop.¹⁹⁸

Here, Brickhouse models the kind of attitude and behavior he would like to see in others. Recognizing this effort as work, Brickhouse encourages other Next Level artist educators to do the same in their lives and communities, forging paths for a kind of love and a kind of work with the power to transform.

One noteworthy rhetoric-action gap that remains absent from this dissertation are the gaps that exist among U.S. artists, U.S. Embassy officials, and the international communities they interact with through cultural diplomacy. During Next Level’s orientation, there is much debate about “authentic” hip hop and musical authority. How do U.S. cultural diplomacy programs that work in art forms recognized as American show pride in homegrown traditions without denigrating the ways in which other embrace and adapt music and culture? Put another way, how does a U.S. hip hop diplomacy program avoid replicating American exceptionalism in its residencies? I am eager to explore these gaps and will pursue the work I had hoped to do—observing Next Level international residencies and OneBeat’s 2020 and 2021 U.S. tours, and interviewing staff at U.S. Embassies—in the future.

¹⁹⁸ Junious Brickhouse, closing remarks from Next Level’s 2020 Orientation, June 18, 2020.

As I conclude this dissertation, I am reminded of Junious Brickhouse’s closing remarks from Next Level’s 2020 orientation, which I mentioned in the introduction. He describes the legacy of 21st-century cultural diplomacy as being in the process of unfolding: “We’re writing this document right now. Like *right now*. History will speak about us like they speak about Satchmo. They will be talking about that. And this is in your hands. You have this responsibility.”¹⁹⁹ While my work here is ending, U.S. cultural diplomacy’s tours, exchanges, and other programs continue—albeit virtually while travel is still restricted as of summer 2021. An artist in Nigeria collaborates with Next Level alumnus Konshens the MC on album art for a new single. The members of LADAMA, a group that formed during OneBeat’s 2014 U.S. tour, hold a series of workshops about music and community engagement with students at Butler University.

When cultural diplomacy practitioners and facilitators are heedless of the gaps between rhetoric and practice, these programs can become coercive, overpowering or even silencing those with whom they are designed to connect. Though these gaps can never be fully closed, cultural diplomacy programs are at their best when practitioners recognize the fundamental tensions inherent to programs that are designed to simultaneously promote state-focused agendas and foster global community. When these goals are attended to, rather than ignored, cultural diplomacy can help us hear one another a little more clearly.

¹⁹⁹ Brickhouse, Next Level’s 2020 Orientation, June 18, 2020.

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