

# PROJECT 2050

## Case Study: New WORLD Theater

### PREFACE

New WORLD Theater’s youth initiative, *Project 2050*, is a multiyear exploration of the midcentury demographic shift, when it is projected that people of color will become the majority in the U.S. Addressing issues compelled by these changing demographics, the project engages youth communities, professional artists, scholars, and community activists in civic dialogue and artistic creation. The project promotes creative imagining of a near future when it will become imperative not only to address issues such as race construction, ethnic balkanization, social inequity, and power imbalance but to move beyond these traditionally disempowering institutional frameworks. This case study is compiled by Chris Rohmann from New WORLD Theater’s reports and evaluation materials. It recaps the history and evolution of this ongoing initiative that is blurring the lines between intergenerational art, activism, politics, and culture. It explores the philosophical underpinnings of the program, the challenges of designing dialogue for and with youth, and the outcomes, including how and why *Project 2050* has become a core program for New WORLD Theater and inspired the creation of a youth action community coalition.

### BACKGROUND

*Project 2050* of New WORLD Theater (NWT) was conceived as an interdisciplinary project, linking artistic creation and youth involvement, to confront several compelling issues arising from the changing racial demographics of the next fifty years. It is projected that by 2050 people of color will be in the majority in the United States and that racial and ethnic hybridity will progressively blur racial categories. The project was designed to consider the effects of this “millennium shift” on the prospects for today’s youth and, beyond that, on power relationships, politics, and social change as a whole. The artistic works created around these themes grew out of a dialogic process and were aimed at stimulating a wider discussion of their implications.

In the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts, about 85 percent of the population is white; African Americans and Hispanics comprise about 13 percent, with Native American, Asian, and other cultures making up the remainder. Whereas many U.S. urban centers already have “minority” majorities or are on the cusp of the millennium shift, New England is typical of most of the rest of the country. Here, the majority culture is still largely white and Eurocentric, but a demographic seachange is visibly underway. The tensions arising from the inexorable swing of the pendulum are already manifesting themselves, as growing communities grapple with established positions and institutions.

*Project 2050* grew out of our five-year experience involving youth of color in explorations of personal and cultural identity, in the *Latino Theater Project* and its multiracial successor, *Looking In/To the Future*. It also sprang from our increasing involvement with artists working at the intersection of theater, performance poetry, hip-hop, and contemporary youth culture. It was

propelled by NWT's increasingly significant position as a regional resource for audiences and artists of color, and our reputation as an institution that assiduously seeks out new work and innovative artists who are crossing boundaries and creating new hybrid forms. It was also a time when, as an organization, we were seeking to further expand our capacity to interact productively with our region's communities of color.

While many established theaters despair of attracting a younger, more diverse audience or rely on outreach strategies that seek to acculturate marginalized groups to traditional theater, New WORLD Theater has been working with gifted young artists of all races who are creating provocative new work for a passionately engaged new audience. Raised on technological media, these creators are guided by youth-based aesthetics that subvert conventional forms while fashioning new ones. Working apart from traditional venues and structures, they have created a large, enthusiastic, and multiracial audience of young adults who jam performance poetry and spoken-word events, particularly where these genres intersect with contemporary music and hip-hop. This innovative use of popular-culture aesthetics and theatrical forms speaks eloquently to nontheater and young adult audiences.

NWT recognized this nexus of theater and contemporary youth culture as a wave of the future. We also saw it as a perfect vehicle for more intensive involvement of the youth communities we were already working with and an effective means of outreach to others. Perhaps counter-intuitively, we also viewed embracing these "Future Aesthetics" as an opportunity for intergenerational dialogue—in a language in which youth can interact with artists and scholars attuned to this aesthetic, and in which they can find means of expression that allow honest and meaningful communication of issues and ideas to adults in their communities.

## GOALS AND OUTCOMES

The 2000-2001 phase of *Project 2050* had three main components: a series of public "Open Studio/Open Dialogue" events in fall 2000, held in three of our target communities; a weeklong Summer Arts Retreat in 2001, where artists, scholars, and youth gathered to mutually consider issues raised by the coming demographic shift and to create artistic responses to them; and performances of those creations as part of NWT's fall 2001 main stage season.

Our aims were to create a community of professional artists, respected scholars, and area youth in an innovative laboratory of exploration and creation, and to share those explorations in both the home communities of the youth participants and the wider campus and regional communities—where they would inform, and be informed by, citizen dialogues. We also sought to challenge the position of artists and scholars as the established leaders, experts, and knowledge-holders in work with youth, by creating an interactive environment where the three constituencies could mutually inform, stimulate, and inspire each other. Out of this process, our goal was to produce new work in response to the *2050* theme, cocreated by artists and youth participants, reciprocally influenced by the interactions and the dialogues they generate.

The specific dialogue goals we had in mind for the 2000-2001 phase of the project were weighted toward formal discussions in civic settings—particularly the series of Open Studio/Open Dialogue evenings. These events were worthwhile but not uniformly successful. The most profound and durable results of dialoging were found in the interchange among scholars, artists, and youth in the summer retreats. Indeed, the whole work of the retreat was a dialectical, dialogic process.

This process had a pronounced effect on the professional work of the participating artists. Again and again in their evaluations they attested to the inspiration they drew from these exchanges and took into their own work. One artist praised the retreat as a valuable “opportunity to create and collaborate.” Another cited the “inspiration to move forward with my own ideas and dreams.” Several relationships formed in *Project 2050* have since spawned collaborative efforts.

Most of the expected outcomes for the project’s 2000-2001 phase were positively fulfilled, while two fell somewhat short. We effectively brought works-in-progress from the summer 2000 planning retreat into our target communities in well-received, innovative programs that included the audiences as participants in discussions of their implications. Building on what we learned in 2000, in the summer 2001 retreat we successfully facilitated a productive interchange among the three participant groups—artists, scholars, and youth—which led to the creation of artworks that responded powerfully and imaginatively to the project themes. The overwhelmingly positive response to the retreat and the community events, by participants and audiences alike, gave the project the impetus to continue and develop.

*Visiting teaching artists commented consistently that performance projects created within the auspices of Project 2050 attained a degree of artistic achievement which far surpassed other youth performance-based projects they have participated in or observed across the country. Postshow dialogues also revealed that the artistic performances of Project 2050’s youth far exceeded local audience expectation, in terms of youth performance. They note that not only are youth performing at exceptionally high levels of merit but that the work performed is entirely created (written and constructed) by youth. “We strongly believe that in our drive to create urgent, socially relevant art, we have effectively raised the bar of youth performance, not only our expectations but also the expectations our youth have of themselves.” (This and subsequent citations excerpted from the evaluation report of Project 2050’s Summer Retreat 2001)*

The two goals that fell short were: 1) the involvement of scholars and 2) the creation of civic dialogue beyond the circle of direct participants in *Project 2050*. These goals were only partially achieved. The Open Studio/Open Dialogue sessions exposed community members to adventurous expressions of issues important to their lives and engaged them directly, not just passively, with the youth, artists, and scholars presenting that material. But the formal discussions that followed these presentations tended to focus on process questions and supportive feedback for the performers rather than engagement with the issues themselves. This outcome was partly due to the style and content of facilitation, which we changed in our subsequent work by training and empowering the youth to lead dialogues. A discussion of the facilitation will follow later in the paper.

When selecting scholars to participate in the retreats and in the Open Studio/Open Dialogue events, we looked for academics whose fields of study related to the project’s themes, whose work has involved diverse communities, and who could communicate their expertise to a young, nonacademic audience. In practice, the scholars we engaged for the Knowledge for Power sessions were very strong in their fields of knowledge but, with some exceptions, inexperienced in communicating with young people below the college level. In addition, as NWT’s artistic director, Roberta Uno, acknowledged, “The scholar sessions will always be problematic for the kids, because of the baggage they bring from school.”

The 2001 sessions were an improvement over those in the 2000 retreat, thanks in large part to Diana Coryat’s work to help the scholars think about creative ways to present material and

engage the youth. But in many cases, the youth were not fully engaged because the presentation was too dry or over the heads of our high-schoolers. This is not to say that these sessions utterly failed in their purpose; indeed, material imparted in the Knowledge for Power sessions was consistently and spontaneously taken up by the youth in their creative work. In each successive summer we have made the scholar sessions more interactive and interesting, but the emphasis on scholarly excellence has continued to be an uneasy match with our youths' need for accessibility.

Several unanticipated and welcome outcomes arose from the retreat and the strong response to the youths' creative work. In fall 2001 the youth ensemble began receiving numerous invitations to appear at public events. For example, they performed extracts from their show—and sparked lively discussion on the topics raised—at the annual Women of Color Leadership reception at the UMass Everywoman's Center, and appeared before an arena full of their peers at a Dead Prez/Saul Williams concert. They became a draw for community fund-raising and outreach events sponsored by our partner organizations. In addition, Open Mic sessions based on the retreat model began to be held regularly both on the UMass campus and in community settings.

*The combination of formal evaluative activities and first-person observations by NWT staff, parents, and mentors in our youths' lives have consistently revealed that youth involved with Project 2050 programming have grown both as artists and leaders. Other identifiable outcomes include: a greater sense of self-worth, the development of critical thinking abilities, and the young person's growing awareness of "sense of place" within Western Massachusetts, a national body, and a global positioning.*



This momentum has only increased. In 2002-2003 there is at least one *Project 2050*-related event every month in New WORLD Theater's community-based programming. We see this ferment of activity as part of, and a direct result of, our intention of creating dialogue around community issues.

#### **PROJECT 2050: ACTIVITIES AND ANALYSIS**

Formal planning for *Project 2050* began in spring 2000 with project participants and community partners. A residential retreat involving youth, artists, scholars, and NWT staff was held in July 2000. During fall 2000, the Open Studio/Open Dialogue series, held in the three target communities where most of the youth participants live, introduced audiences to the project's themes and work-in-progress. Following intensive evaluation and planning during the winter and spring, an expanded Summer Arts Retreat took place in July 2001. The youth theater pieces developed there were further developed in fall 2001 and presented as part of NWT's regular performance season. The same cycle of activities, revised and expanded to incorporate lessons learned from the first two rounds, was repeated in 2002.

## Publics, Stakeholders, and Participants

*Project 2050* targeted an intergenerational, interracial, and cross-cultural public, primarily in underserved communities of color in Amherst, Springfield, Holyoke, and Northampton, Massachusetts, as well the UMass campus population, which is predominantly white. We targeted an *intergenerational* audience because the present youth generation will be the parents of the adult generation of 2050, and an *interracial* and *cross-cultural* audience in order to begin modeling the type of dialogue that it is imperative to develop in the coming decades. New WORLD Theater’s audience has always been notably interracial, intergenerational, and cross-cultural; this project was intended to expand it, deepen our connections to it, and bring its diverse populations into closer contact with each other.

Our youth participants were primarily constituents of our community-based partnerships with community organizations, particularly the Hampshire County Action Commission, the Teen Resource Project of Holyoke, the Youth Leadership Academy of Northampton, RadioActive Youth, and the Outreach Offices of Hampshire and Amherst Colleges, who have actively assisted us in organizing sites for our programs and in nominating youth participants. The youth were nominated by these organizations as well as by teachers, parents and peers, and selected via an interview process with NWT staff. Thirty-five youths participated in 2000 and 44 in 2001.

We sought to attract and engage our primary target audiences through the performances, in which the races, ages, and cultures of the artists—both youth and professional—mirrored those of the audience. We held the initial public events right in these communities, where most of the youth participants live. We followed up on these community-based efforts by inviting these audiences into our theater, both in the summer retreat finales where the nascent works were presented and discussed, and when the finished productions were presented as part of our formal seasons.

The project’s lead artists were Stephen Sapp and Mildred Ruiz, the directors of the performance ensemble, Universes, and cofounders of The Point, a cultural center and economic development project in the South Bronx. Ruiz and Sapp led the planning of *Project 2050* with New WORLD Theater staff, participated in the summer retreats, directed portions of the youth theater pieces, and coordinated the final productions of those works. In addition to Ruiz and Sapp, 23 other guest professionals served as artist-participants and workshop leaders in the summer retreats—eight in 2000 and 15 in 2001.

A total of 11 scholars (all but two of them Five-College faculty members) participated in both the retreat and public-dialogue activities of *Project 2050* in 2000-2001. In the retreats, the scholars led the Knowledge for Power sessions, presenting material within their spheres of expertise that spoke to the chosen project themes. Since we also saw the project as an opportunity to examine knowledge-sharing between artists and academics, particularly the ways in which artists can offer innovative means of presenting content, we worked with the scholars in the planning stages of 2001 to develop accessible interactive ways of presenting factual and theoretical material to a nonacademic audience.

## Dialogue Opportunities

The project incorporated dialogue activities, both formal and informal, in three different spheres. (1) Both planning and evaluation were conducted in collaboration with representatives of all groups of stakeholders: artists, scholars, youth, and community partner organizations. (2) The summer arts retreats were, in essence, ongoing dialogues among youth, artists, and scholars on the project’s themes: Immigration, Identification, Incarceration, Exploitation, and Negotiation—

issues crucial to self-understanding for young people, especially young people of color. Those activities were anchored by Knowledge for Power sessions in which participants engaged with the project's themes, which in turn inspired and informed the artistic creations. (3) The Open Studio/Open Dialogue events, and some of the public performances of the youth theater works, led to structured dialogues between performers and audience that tackled the issues raised in the artistic work.

The artworks created in *Project 2050*—and the very process of their creation—were specifically aimed at stimulating civic dialogue in several ways. Their content, exploring marginalized communities, is directly relevant to our targeted constituencies' lives. The pieces were created and performed by members of the community itself. During the creation stages, the works were introduced at public forums where the dialogues began with responses to the artistic presentation.

### **Summer–Fall 2000**

A residential retreat was held over five days in July on the campus of Amherst College. This was considered part of the planning process. There, with a dedicated group of youth, artists, and scholars, we experimented with our concepts of cocreation and interdisciplinary dialogue. The basic structure of retreat activities was also established: Knowledge for Power informational sessions, leading directly into artistic workshops that explored the topics discussed, and followed up by small-group discussions and individual journaling. The themes chosen for the retreat explorations and follow-up work in the fall were: Space, Money, and Lies.

During the planning for *Project 2050*, we made the unprecedented programmatic decision to suspend our normal fall production and presentation season. In order to do justice to the *Project 2050* concept, we felt we needed to be able to focus all our energies during this period on exploring the process of creating a dynamic “conversation” between art and social issues in which each inspires and informs the other in an ongoing cycle of discourse and response.

Part of this process was NWT's convening of Intersections II, a four-day international, interdisciplinary, intercultural conference and performance festival that brought together artists, intellectuals, theater producers, arts presenters, and arts activists to explore the processes and issues of making theater in the dawning moments of the twenty-first century. The Future Aesthetics that *Project 2050* draws on—the intersection of theatrical forms and contemporary youth culture—was central to much of the performance and discussion material.

### **Open Studio/Open Dialogue**

In October and November 2000, three community-based events showcased the creative and dialogic work of *Project 2050*. Each evening featured excerpts from the youth theater pieces and from the work of one of the guest artists, a talk by a scholar on that evening's theme, and a community discussion of the issues arising from the presentations. These events were organized in collaboration with our community partners in each locality—Holyoke, Springfield, and Amherst—who promoted them through their formal and informal networks.

Of the three, the first was the most successful, thanks in part to a happy serendipity. Because of a last-minute change of venue (caused by a greater-than-expected demand for seats), the evening's theme, “Space,” came into dramatic focus. Scholar Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez and playwright Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas gave the formal presentations on the theme of personal and community space, along with members of the 2050 youth ensemble. But the star of the evening

was the venue itself—the venerable War Memorial, Holyoke’s largest downtown auditorium and, for many, a forbidding symbol of the split between the city’s “old” white majority and its “new” largely Puerto Rican minority.

During the dialogue session, several audience members remarked on being in that building, which they had felt was virtually “off-limits” to their community. Roberta Uno observed, “As people experienced their own bodies coming into that space, they were inspired to speak deeply of their feelings about citizenship and civic participation, their sense of belonging and exclusion.” That sense was expressed, for example, by a woman who said to the youth, “You honored me tonight with your performance. I’m a native of Holyoke, and it’s ironic—I think this is the second time in my life I’ve walked into this building. For a long time I went through everything that you’ve talked about—being bicultural, being called illiterate. You guys are incredible, you’re empowering.” After experiencing the presentation, she said, “I felt like a whole person.”

The second Open Studio/Open Dialogue event was the least successful, also due in large part to the venue. The acoustics in the bare, echoing gymnasium of the Martin Luther King Community Center in Springfield made it hard for people to hear and understand the performances by the youth and artists Mildred Ruiz and Stephen Sapp (filling in for playwright Carl Hancock Rux, who was sidelined by an accident), as well as the presentation, on the theme of “Money”—specifically, the commodification of culture—by scholar Louis Prisoek. Those conditions, plus the lack of separate breakout rooms to allow for smaller groups, made the dialogue session difficult and stilted.

The third program, on the theme of “Lies,” was held at the Amherst Regional High School with writer Alice Tuan and scholar Deirdre Royster. This one went off well. Breakout rooms were available, and the audience was divided into three smaller groups for discussion, making for a more comfortable atmosphere and enabling in-depth conversations. These discussions moved beyond praise of the youths’ work per se to consideration of the issue of lies, manipulations, stereotypes, and who controls what is accepted as “truth”—in society, in politics, in relationships, in families.

Overall, the three Open Studio/Open Dialogue events in the fall were considered worthwhile, but they did not fulfill all our expectations. They were useful in getting the artworks and issues of *2050* out into the communities, where parents, peers, and other people in the youths’ own milieus could see and respond to them. The sessions were greatly appreciated by the attendees, who responded strongly not just to the material itself but also to the event being held in their own community and to their inclusion.

The dialogue sessions drew general feedback and questions about the creative process rather than true interchange on the issues presented. This is a common tendency of audiences at this kind of event, and we have still not managed entirely to overcome it. But as Diana Coryat, who first came in contact with *Project 2050* at one of these events and later became the dialogue facilitator, observed, “The value for me was young people had a dialogue with the audience. There was a lot of glowing praise, yes, but it was empowering for both just to be speaking with each other.”

The approach to dialogue used by Dr. Patricia Romney, the facilitator, and her team was different than what we had envisioned. The questions put to the participants and attendees, derived from a therapeutically based framework, included: How did the performance make you feel? How does this work “honor” who you are? Our feedback from the youth indicated that they felt essentially silenced by this approach, which used terms that weren’t in their frame of

discourse and gave them the impression that the facilitator was looking for particular responses but they couldn't tell what was expected.

*At an evaluation session following the first Open Studio/Open Dialogue, it was agreed that there had not been sufficient planning for dialogue. We had gone into it without adequately briefing the facilitator on either our expectations or our aesthetics, and without preparing the students for this new kind of interaction. No formal dialogue component or training was included in the Summer 2000 retreat, and no preparatory meeting was held with the youth before the OS/OD events began. Romney did meet with the youth before the performance at the second event to explain more about what the dialogues were intended to accomplish, and this input— together with using more accessible vocabulary in the facilitation—helped the students respond more freely and participate more actively.*

In the Amherst session there was the opportunity to break out into smaller discussion groups, which was useful. But the feeling of disconnect with the students persisted, especially since the basic questions posed at each of the events tended to be the same. The youth participants reported that they had no sense of growth or development of the “conversation” over the three sessions.

*A partnership with RadioActive Youth, a community radio project affiliated with station WMUA at UMass, and radio station WTCC at Springfield Technical Community College was envisioned for this and subsequent parts of Project 2050. It was planned that the public events would be recorded for later broadcast, with live call-ins taking the place of the original dialogue components. Unfortunately, because of technical and scheduling difficulties, this idea never materialized.*

### **Winter–Spring 2001**

A dialogue component was included in a January workshop reading of a new work by Sapp and Ruiz's company, Universes. Planning for this included identifying and beginning to train several youth peer-facilitators. It was also agreed that the approach to dialogue would be shifted from what had been essentially a focus on qualitative assessment to a more objective evaluative process. As it happened, scheduling problems prevented the youth facilitators from participating, and the facilitation model did not substantially change. Following this event, it was mutually agreed that we would begin the search for a new dialogue facilitator.

Subsequently, Roberta Uno asked Pat Romney to evaluate the dialogues and her participation for NWT. In her evaluation, Pat stated that she felt “there was simply not enough forethought and sharing about how the dialogues would fit with the performances, scholars' presentations etc. I did not know enough about arts organizations or about what the New WORLD Theater planned, and NWT did not know enough about me and how I work, nor did they have enough information about dialogue.”

She made three specific suggestions for improvement:

- Develop a clear, well-thought-out vision of how dialogues will become an integral part of the productions.

- The dialogues should be “coconstructed” by all participants: artists, students, NWT staff, and facilitator(s), so they “emerge out of sustained conversation and mutual participation.”
- Create postdialogue “debriefing” opportunities where participants can discuss what worked, what didn’t, what was learned, what to do differently next time.

The essence of these suggestions has, in fact, been incorporated into NWT’s approach to dialogue since then. Pat’s letter included this credo, which NWT endorses: “I believe that dialogue is neither performance nor monologue. It is not academic discourse or discussion. Dialogue is participation in a conversation that engages the mind and the heart. Dialogue is that enterprise which, through words, develops, builds, and preserves community.”

In April ’01, a different and exciting kind of dialogue opportunity occurred. The Everett Dance Theatre of Providence, R.I., a multicultural, intergenerational company, had appeared at Intersections II in their production “Somewhere in the Dream.” That connection led to an invitation for 15 of our youth to spend a weekend in Providence sharing ideas and creative strategies with their peers. The exchange was fruitful, both in terms of knowledge sharing and in the inspiration both companies drew from interacting with another group engaged in a similar arena: using theatrical skills and a progressive sociopolitical stance to engage the public in new ways of looking at contemporary issues. The success of the event spawned an ongoing series of interchanges with the Everett company that began in spring 2002 and are continuing.

Also in April ’01, as planning for the summer retreat began, Jamille Hazard, a student at Amherst Regional High School and a member of the 2050 youth team, was made youth coordinator. Her role was to coordinate the recruitment of new youth participants and maintain contact with the existing troupe members. We also hired a new dialogue facilitator, Diana Coryat. Her background as the director of a youth development and training organization, with a lot of peer-education experience, made her a perfect fit for 2050. Diana had attended one of the Open Studio/Open Dialogue events and came to us already bubbling with ideas.

In May ’01, formal planning meetings for the retreat were held with Sapp and Ruiz, along with the summer’s participating scholars and the NWT staff. Evaluations of the 2000 retreat by participating artists, scholars, and youth were reviewed, and suggestions were incorporated into the curriculum. The most pressing of these suggestions was to attempt to make the Knowledge for Power sessions more engaging and accessible. Several “youth leaders” who had been identified from the previous year’s participants attended a planning workshop at which the themes of the retreat were chosen. During the spring, new youth participants were selected through our grassroots nomination process. Diana Coryat began meeting regularly with Roberta Uno and lead scholar Daniel Banks to design the Knowledge for Power sessions and finalize the team of participating scholars.

Diana’s approach to dialogue in the summer retreat focused on developing effective youth facilitators and working with the scholars to help them make their sessions more interesting, interactive, and pedagogically appropriate for the young people. Evaluations of the 2000 retreat had almost universally faulted most of the Knowledge for Power workshops as unengaging, too often just a one-way transfer of information, not the dialogic exchange we wanted to create. Diana offered specific activity ideas—for example, at the 2001 retreat a session on Identity used an exercise in which the youth were asked to trace an outline of one of their hands and to write inside it all the things they considered part of their personal identity, and outside it all the things other people say or think about them. She also suggested incorporating some of the artists in

these sessions; that happened in one case in 2001, and to a much greater extent in the 2002 retreat.

Diana came into *Project 2050* with the intention of facilitating, but not running, the dialogue activities. She wanted to train a team of facilitators, comprising two youth and two of the college-student counselors, and to use them both within the retreat and in public events. NWT identified four peer-facilitators—counselors Metta Dael and Abe Henderson, and youth participants Jay Martinez and Hao Pham—and in the weeks preceding the July retreat Diana had several meetings with what became known as the “D-Team.” She trained them in basic dialogue skills, such as running a group conversation, calling on a variety of people, affirming people’s contributions, respectfully cutting people off when they go on too long, etc. She also taught them some of the exercises that would be used in the knowledge-sharing workshops so that these sessions would have youth leaders as well as adult leaders.

### **Summer Arts Retreat 2001**

The 2001 *Project 2050* retreat, held on the campus of Amherst College, ran for eight days, July 6-13, nearly twice as long as the previous year’s. The retreat company included 44 youth, aged 13-19, from Amherst, Northampton, Holyoke, Springfield, Hadley, and Greenfield, Mass.; 18 college-age counselors; six scholars, five from the Five College faculties and one independent scholar from Washington, D.C.; 17 regional and national artists; and the full NWT staff, who functioned in many supportive roles, including project planning and management, technical support, and publicity. Roberta Uno served as the retreat’s supervising director and as director/dramaturg of the final performance.

Eighteen of the youth were *Project 2050* “veterans.” Having participated in either or both of the initiative’s first two phases in the summer and fall of the previous year, they were invited back because of their leadership qualities and designated as peer leaders. The counselors, all of them young artists in their own right, served as mentor figures to the youth and support personnel to the artists and scholars; they also led their own artistic workshops.

Within the overall goal of *Project 2050*—to engage diverse communities in constructive dialogue and artistic creation around the issues and concerns of our world’s future—the retreat was focused specifically on the creation of a new theater work reflecting and responding to the chosen themes. The daily activities were strategically structured to facilitate both the sharing of knowledge and skill, and the personal interactions that would come together in the creative work. Each day’s activities included a four-track system of artistic workshops, bracketed by two Knowledge for Power sessions; there was also a nightly Open Mic and informal collaboration time.

### ***Knowledge for power***

All the youth and counselors were required to attend these daily events. In almost all cases, an effort was made to apply innovative pedagogical strategies to illustrate the issues under consideration and draw the youth into dialogue. This approach was modeled in the very first session, when the participants were divided into five groups in different sections of the large room, and all five scholars engaged in a round-robin, going to each group in turn to present a quick overview of their own topic area within the retreat’s themes: Identification, Immigration, Incarceration, Exploitation, and Negotiation. According to the youths’ evaluations, this fast-moving, small-group context engaged and intrigued them, gave latitude for participation and

interaction, and left them hungry for more information on the various topics, which would be satisfied by further Knowledge for Power sessions.

Youth who had also attended the 2000 retreat universally credited the 2001 Knowledge for Power sessions as a great improvement over the previous year's, while the evaluations in general rated the 2000 sessions higher than earlier sessions. Typical comments about 2001 included: "I thought it would be boring but as long as we are active in the discussion, it is okay." "Everyone had the chance to give their perspective on things." "The kids did more activities instead of just listening." "There was more participation by the youth."

Most of the artists attended the Knowledge for Power sessions, so as to integrate that material into the artistic activities and topics of their workshops and the performance pieces. In one case an artist and a scholar copresented: the session on globalization and labor found Agustín Laó-Montes of UMass collaborating with break-dance artist Kwikstep to demonstrate the historical lineage between mambo and break dancing. In another memorable session, Jennifer Ho of Mount Holyoke College invited Mrs. Kiku Uno to talk about her experience of incarceration in a Japanese-American internment camp during World War II. This deeply moving, intergenerational sharing of oral history expanded the youths' understanding of the topic and became one of the key inspirations for the youths' artistic work in the retreat.

Banks and Coryat worked hard to avoid one-sided, top-down discussions and instead sought to design a reciprocal feed of knowledge within the sessions. As scholars broke apart the issues at hand, the youth were encouraged to expand on the topics by speaking from their own first-person experiences. The most successful example of this interaction was when Michelle Stephens of Mount Holyoke College facilitated a youth-led dialogue on the MCAS mandatory testing program for high schoolers in Massachusetts. Youth gave personal testimonies about their concerns over the system's fairness and effectiveness, and shared some of the protest methods they had initiated or participated in at their high schools to resist the tests. This instructive and empowering exchange was repeatedly cited by youth as the most successful of the Knowledge for Power sessions.

From the beginning, hip-hop has been the dominant art form in the retreat and *Project 2050* as a whole. Most of the participating artists work, or at least have their artistic roots, in one or more hip-hop genres—rapping, break dancing, beat-boxing, graffiti, DJ'ing—and many of the youth are thoroughly steeped in hip-hop culture. Several participants and observers voiced concern that this privileging of one particular, "cool" aesthetic made some participants, particularly white and Asian youth and counselors, feel uncomfortable or marginalized. The same concern applied to the sociopolitical analysis imparted in the Knowledge for Power sessions and basic to the *Project 2050* viewpoint: Did the critique of the dominant culture of class and power relationships—economic, political, racial—leave room for dissenting voices to be raised? As one observer put it, "In the process of revealing traditionally subordinated voices, the retreat might have actually subordinated more voices."

Talvin Wilks, who participated in the 2002 retreat before joining the NWT staff, felt that was not at all the case. He observed, "Youth are often reluctant to go against the group in general, but I do remember a number of young people feeling free to strongly express their opinions, even if they weren't necessarily popular. And although the scholars tend to share a general point of view, you can see a wide variety of perspective. There is a structure for the broadest level of dialogue, and the conversation is student driven. Rarely did I experience a scholar closing out a point of view, and the youth facilitators try very hard to make sure that all points of view are respected."

### **Artistic workshops**

In contrast to the plenary Knowledge for Power sessions, each of the workshop tracks (identified by color—Blue, Orange, Yellow, or Green) contained a variety of activities for the youth to consider and choose. The Orange, Yellow, and Green tracks were primarily composed of workshops, particularly performance skills, from break dancing and beat-boxing to singing and DJ'ing, each one typically led by a single artist. The Green Track workshops were led by counselors and, in one case, by two of the youth peer leaders. The Blue Track was an experiment in cross-disciplinary collaboration. Each of the four sections paired two artists, a writer and a director, to develop work with the youth.

Many of the artists participated in each other's workshops, as time permitted, to gain new viewpoints and learn new skills. Most of the artists also attended the Knowledge for Power sessions, so as to integrate that material into the artistic activities and topics of their workshops and the performance pieces. Conversations begun in Knowledge for Power sessions were often carried into the rest of the day's activities and expanded upon in an artistic realm. This spirit of participation, experimentation, and exchange was appreciated by the youth, and contributed to the retreat's value for participants.

Another element of the schedule that fostered public voice and demonstrated the interaction of artistic expression with social dialogue was the Open Mic sessions, organized and emceed by counselor Felice Bell. For a half hour every night after dinner, youth (and some artists and counselors) shared personal work that grew out of the retreat's activities. The contributions embraced poetry, spoken word, dances, songs, beat-boxing—anything they wanted to share with their peers. Public in nature yet still within the private domain of the retreat setting, the Open Mic sessions served as an important laboratory and testing ground where youth could present their often deeply personal work for a supportive audience.

The development of this event from night to night became a crucial indicator of the youths' engagement with the retreat material and their confidence in their own involvement. Whereas only a few people signed up for the first Open Mic, by the final night the list of performers burgeoned beyond capacity. The youths' desire to present a public voice in the 2050 community was a clear sign of growth, development, and investment. The Open Mic sessions also displayed the extent to which the scholar sessions were influencing artistic production, as the works presented increasingly reflected the retreat's five overarching topics. Post-retreat evaluations indicated that the Open Mic was the most anticipated and popular portion of the day.

While all participants were deeply immersed in a full, intensive day of creation and exchange, each youth's daily schedule was unique, thanks to the wide choice of artistic workshops available. For example, youth participant Dionne Walker's day began, like everyone else's, with the morning Knowledge for Power session. She then attended the Blue Track workshop with the collaborative team of Kamilah Forbes (director) and Alice Tuan (writer), followed by lunch and an hour of free time. The afternoon found Dionne in Rha Goddess's Orange Track workshop in Lyricism (vocal expression), followed by the Yellow Track's Videography dance session with Rocafella. After dinner she sat in on the Open Mic session, where some of her peers were trying out material they had been working on that day. Her evening Green Track workshop was



in Caribbean dance, taught by counselor Irene Shaikily. Afterward, Dionne had a choice of three open-studio spaces, where she could collaborate with her peers or work with one of the artists before heading to the dorm for the daily small-group checking-in session with her counselor, to raise and solve any problems that arose during the day.

### ***Culminating activities***

The retreat ended with two performances of the artistic work created during the week. The final two days were given over to technical and dress rehearsals, the performances, and an evaluative closing session.

A full day was reserved for technical rehearsals. While each group worked through their pieces in the college's Experimental Theater space, members of the other groups spontaneously began to rehearse and fine-tune their work. With the growing anticipation of performing for the public, many youths who only six days earlier had been reluctant to speak up now became adamant participants in decisions regarding their show's aesthetics and presentation. The youth had begun to own their work.

A 90-minute closing session, attended by all retreat participants, was held on the last day before the performances. Led by Diana Coryat and Daniel Banks, the session gave time for the youth to fill out their formal evaluation questionnaires (see appendix), but most of the time was spent on interactive activities. For instance, participants were asked to stand if they had learned something new, met someone new, surprised themselves in some way, or tried something for the first time. By the last question, everyone was standing. Following up on this indication of personal growth, the youth were invited to relate their experience to parts of the body. On Post-It notes each wrote something that had moved or touched them (heart), something they had learned or tried (head), and something they would change about the retreat (hand), and then attached them to the corresponding part of a life-size drawing of a woman.

Coryat also prepared the youth for the public dialogue that was scheduled to follow the evening performance, asking them discussion-provoking questions such as: "Why have a dialogue with the audience?" "What would you like to get out of it? What would you like the audience to ask you?" She also prepared them for possible audience responses, for example, to the openly personal nature of some of the work and the nonmainstream aesthetics. She noted that audiences sometimes see things in the work its creators aren't aware of, which can give the artist added perspective on the themes and help make the work more articulate.

In an unplanned moment, many of the youth offered personal reflections on their time at the retreat, explaining how the experience had changed them and how it would affect their personal goals and ambitions. These heartfelt, spontaneous testimonials were contagious, one expression inspiring another's follow-up, often giving thanks to specific artists, scholars, counselors, or other youths who had especially helped or touched them.

Because of an overwhelming demand for tickets, a matinee performance was added to the final day's schedule, giving the youth two opportunities to perform for an audience. Both sold-out shows were received enthusiastically, with standing ovations. After the final performance, the audience was invited to stay for a dialogue session. It was facilitated by the two youth members of the D-Team who had been assisting in the Knowledge for Power dialogues throughout the retreat. This peer-led approach proved very successful, not only eliciting useful questions and comments from the audience, but making the youth company feel more comfortable and animated in discussing their work.

Summing up the 2001 retreat, NWT's production manager, Marion Wright, had this to say: "The retreat gives a lot of youth their voice. When they first come they don't say much—they don't think they have much to say. But as they start writing and questioning and discussing, as they learn more and have more facts to back up what they hear and see in the world around them, their ideas and work become more creative and more sophisticated. Artistically, the work has matured, probably as a result of the variety of artists and a better variety of scholarly topics, and from the youth getting information in a way that can be assimilated. The structure and community of the retreat allow the youth to find their voices and their creativity."

*Youth were also asked to comment on the content of Project 2050: "Project 2050 is about mixing art-making and dialogue, or speaking out. Did that happen? Why or why not?" All youth responses confirmed that this goal was accomplished in the events of the retreat with no identifiable exceptions. Sample responses included comments such as: "Yes, very much because we were all able to speak out about issues, and we were able to mix our talents by collaboration." "Yes, that happened. All of my classes involved 'art making and dialogue or speaking out.' That is what theater is about," "Yes, the youth had a lot of chances to speak their thoughts and use those thoughts and ideas to incorporate into the show." "Yes, because I did art and I was speaking out."*

## **AREAS OF INQUIRY: IMPACT**

### **Artistic Work**

In their end-of-retreat evaluations, almost all the artists and youth spoke to the effect the creative interchange had had on their work and on their aesthetic outlook. When asked to "name three things you got out of *Project 2050*," all but one of the artists responding cited the inspiration they had received from artistic collaboration and exchange of ideas. Several specifically stated that it had affected their approach to their own work. One called the dialogues fostered in the retreat "an amazing cross-cultural exchange"; another "discovered new teaching methods [and drew] inspiration from the youth and the work"; and yet another found "new thought, new ideas for art" in the interchange with other participants.

*The design of Project 2050 and all its components within the retreat succeeded in synthesizing artistic expression with urgent sociopolitical topics concerning the contemporary world and, more intimately, the youths' immediate social realms (home, school, and regional environments). Creative approaches to pedagogy inspired artists and youth alike to inscribe their creative work with themes that engage in an exploration of their world, deter a position of "victim," and grant agency towards making change for the future. The social themes that underlie performances are not merely "lacquered on" to creative expression. Instead, the relevancy of sociopolitical topics is integrated into the making of performance, thereby allowing issues addressed in performance to gain complexity and to be open to intelligent investigation.*

The cooperative spirit fostered in the retreats has manifested itself in at least two collaborations between artists working in different disciplines, who first connected in *Project 2050*. One of them, *Soular Power'd*, premiered at the New Victory Theater in New York and was performed as part of our spring 2003 season. It is the cocreation of five *Project 2050* artists: dancers Rocafella and Kwikstep, beat-boxer Baba Israel, visual artist Garland Farwell, and Steven Sapp, who served as dramaturg and directorial consultant. NWT is currently facilitating the development of

another new work, a collaboration between Steven Sapp, spoken-word artist Rah Goddess, and dancer-choreographer Rennie Harris.

As NWT's interim artistic director Talvin Wilks observed about this process, "What has been launched in 2050 is also our most important developmental laboratory, on a par with the New Works for a New World play lab. Artists are coming into the retreat already thinking about collaborating, and thinking about how they can continue to develop their own work, both with the youth and with each other."

The artistic impact on the youth was evident in the work they produced, and even more so in the perceptible growth so many of them experienced in the course of the short retreat. As previously stated, youth who on Saturday were wary and reserved, by Thursday were elbowing for space on the Open Mic roster and on Friday were offering last-minute ideas to polish their performance pieces. The youths' responses to the "three things" evaluation question cited the opportunities for self-expression, the new abilities they had gained, and the valuable interactions they had had with the artists and a diverse group of peers. (See Appendix.) The continuing commitment of a majority of retreat participants in ongoing 2050 programs further attests to the project's positive impact on the youths' artistic self-esteem.

### **Dialogue**

As discussed earlier, planning for the Knowledge for Power sessions in 2001 drew on lessons learned from the previous summer's retreat and from the Open Studio/Open Dialogue experiences of fall 2000. Largely thanks to Diana Coryat's preparatory work with the scholars, these sessions were more accessible and interactive. They were conceived as active dialogues between scholars, youth, and artists, rather than the informal lectures they had been. They were consciously intended to stimulate ongoing dialogue about the issues presented, especially in the artistic workshops.

*Works produced by Project 2050 demonstrate that discussions concerning race and ethnicity can move beyond the thinking of singular or monolithic narratives of identity. Through consistent cross-cultural encounters, we believe our program has inspired youth to examine not only the intricacies of any one racial/ethnic groups' story of identity, but also seeded new ways in which youth can find cross-cultural points of affinity. This important strategy has produced for our youth a greater level of empathy, understanding, and cognizance of the intricacies concerning racial/ethnic identity. It has motivated them to expand their dialogues concerning both themselves and their communities of origin. In an artistic register, it has also encouraged them to explore and embrace artistic expressions from the African Diaspora, Southeast Asian communities, Asian and Asian American communities, and Latino cultural origins. From this artistic experimentation, cross-cultural learning has produced work that does not stem from one singular tradition, but instead interweaves many traditions to produce unique, wholly new, collaborative forms. In this way, cross-cultural artistic work sheds problematic concerns in art making such as "appropriation," and instead builds upon a base of exchange that is given with joy and received with respect.*

As a result of the changes made in the program, youth response to the scholars' sessions was much more positive than it had been the previous year. The scholars' feedback was equally enthusiastic, e.g., "A very impressive and fulfilling exchange with youth, artists, and other scholars." The scholars' dissatisfactions and suggestions for improvement centered on time

constraints within the retreat, wishing there was more time for both the plenary sessions and for small-group or one-on-one discussions.

Despite her focus on specific dialogue-based activities, Diana Coryat saw the role of dialogue in the retreat in larger terms: “I think dialogue is the whole camp. Everyone facilitates dialogue throughout [because] it’s set up in the beginning that this is going to be a communicative process. So it’s not necessarily one person’s role as dialogue facilitator, but the whole context that we work in that makes it so successful. I couldn’t do my job well if the context for dialogue wasn’t there. The artists working in small groups with the young people, eating meals together, living together, writing in journals—that’s all part of the dialogue process.”

This consciousness informed the 2002 retreat, and planning for the summer 2003 retreat is taking the lessons learned from previous summers one step further. It is envisioned that each day will be devoted to a specific topic. That theme, introduced in the morning Knowledge for Power session, will not only form the basis for continuing discussion and creative exploration in the artistic workshops, but will then be recontextualized in a group event at the end of the day, where thoughts arising from the day’s work can be expressed in a variety of ways.

As detailed earlier, for a number of reasons the formal community-based discussions were not as successful in producing thoughtful civic dialogue as we had hoped. Nevertheless, the fact that they were held in community settings, featured community youth, and tackled issues of shared concern made a profound impression on the audience members, many of whom had never before seen themselves represented so directly and movingly.

Added to this is the considerable impact the dialogue-based creative work had on the project’s youth participants. The broader effect on the community occurred not only through performances but also through the leadership roles some of these youth have begun to take on in their own communities—as activists, peer mentors, and role models. The ongoing involvement of *Project 2050* in these communities means that the project’s issues remain “in the air,” and the impulse toward dialogue persists.

Cathy Schlund-Vials, NWT’s literary manager, observed, “What started as a separate Open Studio/Open Dialogue event has become embedded in the process. Within the retreat environment, dialogues are taking place all the time. Several different experiences in new kinds of languages and vocabularies are being mediated through the lens of the retreat.”

### **The Organization**

*Project 2050* as a whole has changed New WORLD Theater immensely—from a realignment and expansion of staff as the work takes an increasing share of our attention, to a new level of connection with our target communities of color, to a marked shift in our programming priorities as we focus more intently on the Future Aesthetics that inform the project’s creative work. On the staffing level, for example, the position of *Project 2050* coordinator has grown from being part of the Education/Access director’s duties, to a half-time position, to a full-time job.

The intent to stimulate dialogue through *Project 2050* has led to a stronger affiliation with the community organizations we partner with, and to a more direct connection with community members themselves: the *2050* youth, their parents, teachers, and friends, and the wider circle of people in their communities who have been touched by the work. Where previously our community-outreach efforts had been focused on audience building, *Project 2050* has created a

vibrant two-way stream of ideas and associations between NWT and the surrounding communities of color.

The *2050* idea has become a cornerstone of NWT's artistic activity, directly related to our artistic process and development across the spectrum of our work. The ongoing *2050* dialogue has actually created a new framework for our thinking about our artistic process. It has affected our view of the kinds of artists we want to work with—not only the retreat faculty but also the performers we bring to our presentation season, the artists we invite for collaborative residencies, and the pieces we choose for developmental workshops.

In all these areas, we are now seeking out works and artists that more directly engage their audience by actively stimulating debate and dialogue. An example of this in our 2002-03 season is Sekou Sundiata's one-man show, *Blessing the Boats*, in which the performance—which deals with issues of organ donation and transplantation in the context of the modern medical industry—is intended to provoke discussion of those issues, particularly as they affect communities of poverty and of color.

More and more, the artistic and political “conversations” begun in *Project 2050* are shaping our main stage seasons. To take just one of several examples from next year's 25th-anniversary season, *Undesirable Elements: Pioneer Valley* is being developed with community members through stories of their ancestral history. This project came about because of the dialogue we have begun with the region's communities of color about diversity, demographics, and the new immigrant populations. Growing directly out of the dialogue work that was built into *Project 2050* from the beginning, it is being developed with the participation of the *2050* youth.

As Talvin Wilks put it, “Our intention to stimulate dialogue has greatly influenced our understanding of our relationship with the community. It helps us to recognize New WORLD Theater as a member of the community, as a voice in relation to the events that take place there. It gives us feedback about issues that are concerning people. Because we have tapped into—and helped to facilitate—that particular conversation, we continue to investigate what that means for our work, and the types of artists we are selecting for our season and bringing to the community.”