This group interview/dialogue took place first via e-mail, then on a video conference call on December 28, 2017, and then again on e-mail. What follows is a combination of the live conversation and revisions that participants made to the transcript.

Kelly Howe, on behalf of the editors: How would you each describe some of the work you have done around the concept or frame of community? How does the idea of community intersect with your work? Or how do you understand its relationship to Theatre of the Oppressed?

Sonja Arsham Kufinec: I wrote my dissertation and a book (Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater) on a community-based theatre company called Cornerstone. Arguably you could talk about all theatre as community-based, but this particular kind of theatre animated relationships between so-called professionals and non-professionals, or actors and non-actors in Boal’s parlance. They used theatre as a way to engage small towns in theatre. Cornerstone’s initial mission was to try to get more people to come to the theatre. My entry into their work was as a dramaturg and flute player in Watts, Los Angeles. In my conversations with then artistic director Bill Rauch, and in archival research about the company, community was engaged as “good feeling” unification. Cornerstone’s shows purported to celebrate and reflect community. But in my research, I was finding that community as something that’s cohesive was always being complicated by the actual rehearsal process. By trying to engage in a community-based process, drawing on the particular culture of these often-rural communities, Cornerstone was engaging in an ethnographic project. That project often surfaced the many fractures that always exist even in the smallest groups. This idea of community as coherent is a nostalgic fable. I’ve just finished reading Arlie Russell Hochschild’s Strangers in Their Own Land, which is her sociological study of Tea Party members in Louisiana, trying to understand: what is the deep story of the people who voted for Trump, who feel like this man is the flag bearer for our … what we’re feeling? It’s less a political analysis than an emotional analysis. Even in this kind of work, there is attachment to a sense of homogeneity, of closeness, of face-to-face community. I think there is this desire for the
fantasy of the face-to-face, the sense of the group of people who support you and they know you and they hold you up, and that fantasy undergirds nationalism and populism.

I engaged with community-based theatre by proposing to Cornerstone that they were at times reproducing this more nostalgic fantasy, when in fact the more interesting thing that was happening was the coming up against and grappling with community’s complexities and fractures. Through the work of the theatre, participants were surfacing and confronting difference and conflict. Plays often concluded with a moment of unification or imagined resolution. In some ways, it’s powerfully and positively utopic in the way that Jill Dolan talks about performative utopia—as something that actually emerges in the moment. And in some ways it’s not grappling with what’s going to happen when the theatre leaves. How is this community going to continue to encounter itself? And especially when there are splits along lines of oppression like race, like class …

My practical work with Theatre of the Oppressed hasn’t been as deep as Chen’s and Jan’s. I’ve used it more tactically in my work in the Balkans, where my family is from. For many years I created devised theatre with youth in a conflict context. There I found that Boal was really useful. The Image Theatre work was most useful in that context because it enabled metaphor, using language to express something that wasn’t expressible in words. Youth participants were initially thinking about and translating their lives through the tropes of the Hollywood movie as if they were the heroes of this action movie fantasy, rather than really dealing with the trauma of the war. Image Theatre let them into this place where they weren’t having to tell the specific story of their trauma. It enabled a distance and closeness that allowed young people to dwell in the emotional reality of their own experience, without it being so close that it was retraumatizing. It gave them a space to encounter themselves and to encounter the other. Image Theatre worked as counter-narrative to the language of nationalism that had led to genocide.

Jan Cohen-Cruz: In the early 80s, I found Theatre of the Oppressed on a remainder table at a big secondhand bookstore called the Strand, in New York. I had a background in street theatre, and I see this book called Theatre of the Oppressed, so of course I pick it up and I’m paging through it, and I’m saying, “This is amazing! Who is this guy? Is he alive? Why haven’t I heard about him?” I asked a Brazilian friend, and he went, “Oh, you North Americans, you’re so behind everybody else. Yes, he’s alive …” Anyway, that led to bringing him to New York and then very quickly bringing my friend Mady Schutzman into it with me …

But so there I was, a teaching assistant at NYU, finding this book. And when I think about what attracted me so much to the work in that context, certainly it bothered me that, at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, one strove to be a great individual artist, and everything was about the individual. Everything—even the ensemble theatre—was about individuals. Everything was success. There are wonderful things about that school and those programs, yet it bought into narrow ideas of success. There are 1400 majors in undergraduate drama at NYU, and what were they supposed to do? What were they being prepared for? I had done a lot of theatre before I met Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed, and it was clear to me that there was plenty you could do with theatre and that there was a hunger and a need for it among so many different groups of people for so many purposes. A lot of it was not in theatre buildings.

Something else that attracted me about Boal: these great exercises and techniques, like Invisible Theatre, where the usefulness of theatre was off the stage. And it doesn’t
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have to be either/or. I loved his work with *The Jewish Wife*, work he’s done in theatre buildings and not in theatre buildings; one was not prioritized over the other. As the great Liz Lerman says, you can hike the horizontal. You can sometimes be in a theatre building, sometimes on the street, you can be with a group of people on two conflicting sides of a devastating issue. And because there were such delightful aesthetic opportunities, I thought Boal’s work was going to be a great match for these drama students. There was so much interesting about it intellectually that it would also be great for the students in the graduate performance studies program, and it was. … So one of the first communities where I was aware of the usefulness of the Boal work was an academic community. It was at NYU because of the way it allowed people to tap into other things they wanted. Certainly, many people responded to Boal’s work. They could be very ambitious in their other theatre work and thrilled to also be doing work that so obviously benefitted other communities. They could do both. It expanded their sense of what it means to be an artist … I offered a community-based theatre class a few years after bringing Boal to NYU, so that the students could think about the groups of people that they relate to, are drawn to, feel that they have a lot to gain by being in their midst and vice versa, and that through making theatre together, things could be explored to everyone’s benefit.

In terms of the notion of community, I remember Boal telling a story about a group of women who had suffered domestic abuse doing a Forum Theatre play about it for an audience that was not only people who have had that struggle. A lot of the interventions were, “just leave your abuser,” and it was terrible because in that case people who hadn’t gone through abuse didn’t really understand why leaving was not always an available option. It was the opposite of empowering. In such cases, Forum is only useful amongst participants who share circumstances. Other times it’s the opposite; it’s this great way that people get together and walk in each other’s shoes, and it’s brought together by some larger way that community is being defined.

And although this is not an example of using TO for that purpose, I was very moved by the Highlander Center in Tennessee and founder Myles Horton. Back in the 1940s, in a very segregated time and place, black and white farmers were brought together at Highlander as *farmers* to solve particular problems to do with farming, and that allowed their shared identities as farmers to be larger than their different identities around race. So it seems to me that the notion of community is a strategy, a fluid strategy. Depending on the situation, what you do with it could be very different.

An organization with a very interesting relationship to community is Alternate Roots, in the southeast United States. It’s been around for 40 years. They talk about community in three senses: place, because they recognize as southern artists how much it means to come from the south; tradition, because their cultures are wellsprings they draw from; and spirit, that you sometimes feel so aligned with someone so deeply that you can’t even exactly explain why, but you feel in community with them. These several ways of thinking about community are important. It’s sometimes a way of celebrating things about yourself that other people have put down. Some of my friends from Alternate Roots, as much as they respect Boal’s work, have a problem with how much is framed in terms of oppression. They feel that often groups that are struggling especially need to draw on their strengths as communities, people with a cultural tradition in common or a geographic tradition and various practices in
common. The notions of oppression and community constitute an interesting point of intersection.

**Chen Alon**: I’m just coming from a TO session with some refuseniks. Sixty-three high school students published today, this morning, a letter in the newspaper; they are refusing to join the army because of the occupation. In the last year, my daughter was in the process of refusing and she was jailed for 130 days—she’s now 19, but she was 18 a year ago—and she was supposed to be drafted into the army because there is mandatory service in Israel. She refused and she spent almost half a year in jail. A few women in the last year and a half—they all went for approximately a half year to jail. Today there was like the next generation of these courageous women. Something has developed in this community of people who refuse the occupation, which is actually how I got to know TO: through my refusal to serve in the army. I was an Israeli officer in the army in my mandatory service, and then I served for an additional year in the army. Then I was released from the army after four years. I served between 1988 to 1992, the years of the First Intifada, the first Palestinian uprising.

After I quit the army, I became a professional actor, so for 11 months I’m a citizen of a democratic state, an artist, an actor. I’m doing all the things that you know that artists are doing 11 months a year, and one month a year, between 1992–2000, I’m in reserve duty. One month a year I’m serving as an officer in the occupation … Almost five or six years I was in the repertory theatre … and then came the Second Intifada. I won’t go into all the details, but I decided to refuse to serve in the army. I was a major already. It was a huge scandal. We were all in the media and treated like traitors. I was in jail for a month. All this was in 2001. Then I quit everything. I quit my life, in a way. I quit the repertory theatre. I stopped working. I was in a crisis. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to do theatre, and I went to the university. In the first semester, I heard about Augusto Boal …

Community is one of the main goals of Combatants for Peace: to develop a binational community. I think that goal reflects the reality because we understand the boundaries and the barriers between the communities … We know that we cannot create now any other social structure except from a community, a binational community, because there is not even a thought that it might ever happen in the future that these two people, these two states, these two countries, these two societies will ever be able to live together. It’s a performative goal as well. We’re going to perform ourselves, or model for the two societies a binational community. How can we, in the imbalanced reality, create a kind of a utopian space, or a utopian political fragment, a community? … We are neither Israelis nor Palestinians. We are a new political fragment. We are a binational community. That’s what we are. This is our self-identification.

Then we have to say, what is the content of this goal? How do you create such a community, when on the ground I can go anywhere I want in the West Bank and the Palestinian needs a permit to get into Israel? What does it mean to call it a binational community if geographically our freedom of movement is not equal? … We get a lot of criticism from the Palestinian community that this type of creating or developing or engaging with binational community is a normalization of our relations: that we are normalizing the oppressed/oppressor relationship by saying, “Yeah, nevertheless, even with the reality that we are oppressors and that Palestinians are oppressed, we create our own utopian reality.”
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So in a way we struggle with resistance on both sides … You can find more Palestinians who are supporting the end goal of a binational state than Israelis. Jewish Israelis are much more obsessed with the Jewish state, that it won’t be binational. For me, it is a paradox: On one hand, a binational community allows both nationalities to exist in this community, but we want to found a new political or social or cultural community, and that’s why we use theatre for that. We always emphasize that theatre—as a language which is not Arabic or Hebrew—is helping us shape, define, and understand the nuances of what it means to create this community… This ethnography is not a Hebrew/Israeli one or a Palestinian/Arab one. It’s an ethnography of the space between these two cultures. In a way, binational community is kind of a liminal community. We create a utopian liminal community of the conflict itself, not of either nationality. 

In Hebrew and in Israel, the word community … I think the word in Hebrew has this notion of co-optation, that everything which is community is less dangerous to the administration, to the government, because it’s local, it’s soft, and it’s cultural. It’s not militant. The word is softened, and I think it is related to the internal politics of Israel and how, when the community-based theatre started in Israel, it was co-opted by the government. It mainly happened in the early 1970s, and then in 1977, after 29 years of the labor party and Ben Gurion and all the Left socialists governing in Israel, there was the turning point, and since then the Right wing is actually governing Israel. And they developed the community-based theatre in communities, in neighborhoods … So when I talk to radical people in Israel or to more militant people or radical Left and so on, community theatre is: “Eh, you’re collaborating with the municipality or the government. This is not really radical. This is not really subversive.” This is the genealogy of the word in Hebrew, in the genealogy of activist theatre: Community theatre is softer than other activist theatre. I get to understand that through the work in the university with students, etc. They relate community-based theatre to theatre and education, theatre in schools, theatre in community centers, and I think it has a deeper sense in the Israeli Jewish culture of segregation, of boundaries … In Hebrew I think it resonates that community is also a ghetto, and that relates to boundaries, to walls, to demonization of the other, to all these things that we are facing in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. You know … The wall. They are there, we are here. They are demons, we are human beings. All these mechanisms of dehumanization and humanization. When we say communities, all this cultural load comes with this word, also.

Kuftinec: I’m thinking about the terminology of community and community-based in the US and the way that it’s being deployed politically now, and the kinds of people who practice Theatre of the Oppressed as jokers. TO has often been shared in an academic context, so practitioners are often (but certainly not always) part of the cosmopolitan class. For example, I was born in a particular place, but with a feeling that I can travel anywhere. I’m rootless. Philosopher Zygmunt Baumann talks about this as a “cosmopolitan” class of people who don’t feel a sense of connection to any particular geographic community. I think that’s also linked to polarization in the US. The imagined binary between cosmopolitan coastal “elite” and a more rural, community-based class. Of course that’s reductive, but I think that polarized imaginary operates in terms of how groups of people cohere politically and come to see each other. So, some TO practitioners in the US are less community-based (in a geographic sense) and more nomadic. I think I heard this class referred to at some point as “flying jokers.”
In terms of genealogy: Community-based in the US comes out of a Left-progressive framing, but one that is also government-based. In the progressive Left in the US, I would say that there’s more of a faith in the possibility of the state to shift the dynamics of oppression juridically. It’s possible to think of social change coming from the top down and that the state can be a partner in this. At the same time, there’s a suspicion of top-down, state-sponsored juridical change. Right now, I think the terminology of community is being claimed more from the Right to align with the idea of the rural, the real, the rooted, and the quote “authentic America.”

**Alon:** Who voted for Trump.

**Kuftinec:** Often. Yes.

**Cohen-Cruz:** One of the dynamics, one of the binaries in the US is between arts and activism … I’m thinking about what you said, Sonja, about the nomadic university-based TO practitioners and the more rural, place-based, community-based practitioners. I recognize what you’re saying. And then I think of some examples where that’s not the case and what does that tell me? I think of Katy Rubin, a TO practitioner in New York, who grew up with very activist parents. And they were also in theatre, but the activism, I get the sense, was very crucial. She so adamantly has brought TO to organizations that most need it. She trains jokers who are coming from the kinds of oppressions that TO is trying to fight, which is one of the principles I just love in TO: that it’s got to be the person in the situation who’s fighting the oppression. You can have allies, but you’ve got to be there, too. I think Katy’s a great example of someone who gets that and who has made that choice, and I think that it’s partly because activism has been such a constant in her life and part of her inheritance.

Then I think of Dudley Cocke, working out of Appalachia and Roadside Theatre, who was an activist first, and got into the arts as a strategy for activism. He’s also something of a nomad. He is Appalachian-based, but he’s not from there. But he’s certainly made a commitment to that region. He’s said that it’s important for people to fight their own fights and to make their own choices and activate themselves together, but keep the door open. It doesn’t mean leaving other people out. You can have other allies. You need the fresh air, so it’s about finding the balance in any given moment.

Chen, going back to what you said, which was so poignant about the co-option of community-based theatre and this sense of serving the government: It also reminded me of Theatre for Development, in various African countries, back in the 1970s: The government—and sometimes what the government wanted wasn’t bad, like they wanted to stop the spread of various diseases, so they’d get a theatre company to do puppet shows, about what practices will keep you from spreading such and such disease, but it’s certainly not community-based. It’s top down. It is yet another interesting dynamic, an ambivalence, in this case, between artist-activists and institutions, with government being a strong example, and when can you really partner with government—like Boal did in Legislative Theatre—because it was a moment.

We have a moment right now in New York because de Blasio is the mayor. We have a terrific commissioner of cultural affairs, Tom Finkelpearl. He’s initiated a program that embeds exciting artists in agencies that aren’t the arts because of what their creative thinking can do. Tania Bruguera, the Cuban artist, worked with immigrant affairs, and the Lost Ensemble with LGBTQ youth in foster care through Children’s Services. It is a moment when you can collaborate with government because there is a progressive
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energy, even though it’s still challenging. I believe we should not be too monolithic about government and assume it’s necessarily a negative, co-opting force.

**Alon**: What you are talking about, Jan, is taking us back to the keyword, context. Community is first and foremost a context, a contextual term, like oppressed. Community is always versus another community and always versus the government or the administration or the authorities or something that is above the community. Community always has another power above it or beside it, and that creates community as a relational term … When I related to co-optation, I meant not that not any collaboration with power is Theatre for Development and that the government gives money for a cause that it wants. But the community-based theatre in Israel was founded by subversive, very militant forces that were co-opted by economical powers, by municipalities, ministry of education, ministry of development, etc. It’s very easy to co-opt subversive artistic powers in Israel …

Also, I wanted to say something regarding tactical work. In the West Bank sometimes we [Combatants for Peace] are in a gray area. We don’t know if it’s the military regime of the occupation or it’s too close to a Jewish settlement. We create ourselves as a gray community, an in-between community. We stand in between, and we are allowed and not allowed to be there because even the army doesn’t know if it’s Area A or B. Then we create a problem for the system.

**Kuftinec**: One of the most interesting things about TO is the idea of jokering—not the joker as a person, as an occupation, but jokering as a tactical mode, a tool of the in-between. The joker is always asking questions about the system and destabilizing the system. If you read Lewis Hyde, the joker is aligned with—not exactly overlapping with—the idea of the trickster. The work of the joker is to enable the group to both see the system and ask questions about the system. It doesn’t mean to blow everything up. But it does mean that you have to be conscious about your choices to serve whatever systems you’re serving … The work of the joker is to illuminate the contradictions that are always present in the system and in the community, and I feel like in some ways the work of TO is not necessarily about the structure of Forum Theatre or of Image Theatre but about the training of the joker, about the capacity to be a joker. The work of Combatants for Peace is effective because it’s jokering the militarization of the society, the narrative that these two groups will always be in conflict with each other and that the other is the enemy.

**Alon**: [To Kuftinec] You remember the moment in *Disturbing the Peace*, the film, when we are demonstrating on both sides of the wall, and I’m kind of jokering? It’s a direct action. It’s not a theatre piece, but I’m kind of jokering the situation. I’m pointing out that the army is locked between the two fences and that they are trapped in their own prison of violence … It’s kind of jokering in the reality, in direct action, not in a performance.

**Kuftinec**: And I think that’s one of the principles of TO. It’s not about the facilitation of exercises, and it’s not just how any one person can be trained up into becoming a joker, but about the idea of jokering as the capacity to tactically illuminate and disturb systems of oppression that seem fixed. It’s a way of opening up these possibilities of living otherwise, of being otherwise. The work of Combatants for Peace is, in some ways, to be this model; there’s another way of being together that doesn’t dilute your identity as Israeli or Palestinian …

**Cohen-Cruz**: Yes, and one problem with the word community is that it’s often understood as a context where one must conform, a context where it’s very hard to disturb
the peace and raise contradictions. There are risks in making waves in a community. A lot of artists whose work I really appreciate these days in the US call their work social practice. They’re comfortable with the word social in a way they’re not with the word community, which sounds too much like pablum, maybe … Whereas a social context means it’s still very much embedded in the world and trying to engage with the world and disrupt the world, but it doesn’t have some of those other connotations, like forced conformity, that community has.

**Howe:** How can TO question and open up contradictions within communities? What are some ways communities address contradictions from within? How do you address contradictions in a community when there are two or more communities within that community that are polarized—or imagined as polarized?

**Alon:** Something from social psychology and intergroup relations that we can apply to intercommunity relations: When each community is empowered, it’s easier for them to dialogue with the other community or group. When a community views themselves as underprivileged, less successful, less sophisticated, etc., they will be more hostile and devalue the others, so a very simple thing to do is separate work and make both communities feel more empowered. I feel it a lot in the Israeli/Palestinian work that we do related to the anti-normalization movement in Palestine and Palestinian society—and the fact that they get more criticism for working with Israelis, working with the bosses, with the oppressors. Souli, one of the Palestinian actors, always says that self-criticism is a manifestation of power. When he starts to criticize Palestinian society, others always say, “How can you do this in front of the Israelis? We are feeling so not equal and so not empowered in front of them.” Souli says, “But we feel that because we are so afraid to expose our weakness, our faults.” Always in the Palestinian scene, he brings in the self-criticism, like the internal debate about BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions], the internal debate about moral reasons to refuse violence, not only practical reasons to refuse violence. He says these internal debates are empowering us, not weakening us.

**Kuftinec:** That’s a powerful frame: the social psychology work. I was inspired a lot by the theories of the School for Peace. I was struck by this idea that, in a situation in which you have a group in power and a group that’s the oppressed, the group in power will tend to want to talk about individual things, to imagine themselves as individuals: “Yes, there’s a conflict, and we can be friends …”

**Alon:** “And we’re all human beings …”

**Kuftinec:** “And we’re all human beings and that comes first.” And the group that’s not in power will tend to think more as a group, as you said, Chen, and that means that you deny yourself more of the possibility, sometimes in that frame, of wrestling with contradictions.

Image Theatre is a way of clarifying those kinds of differences narratively. I was doing some Image Theatre with Seeds of Peace, an organization I used to work for … Seeds of Peace has some problems, mostly because it’s a US organization that frames itself as neutral, and the US is of course not neutral in the conflict. But we’re doing Image Theatre, and within Seeds of Peace there was some work to expand the binary of Palestinians and Israelis and, because we’re working nationally, to grapple with the role of Palestinian citizens of Israel. Where do they fit in this oppositional model? We were doing some Image Theatre around this—divided into groups of Jewish Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel,
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and Palestinians—and the images of their communities as they saw them. What are the strengths? What are the problems?

The Israelis, their strength was: “We’re a society of multiplicity. And there are many different kinds of Jews. But the problem is a social problem, it’s a class problem; that’s the problem with our community.” The Palestinian Israelis, their problem was, “Who are we?” Their problem was one of identity. Then the Palestinians, their problem, the image—we read the image without them narrating it first—and it was a circle with one person threatening the circle, threatening the stability of the circle, and the Israelis—the Jewish Israelis especially—were reading it as: “It’s the person who won’t agree in this kind of dialogue work.” And actually it was: “No, the person who is threatening the circle is the collaborator, the person who works with the Israelis.” It was really clarifying of the frames through which the different youth were seeing the conflict. You can’t start having an encounter until you’re able to understand the frames through which you’re having the encounter, the context—to bring it back to that, Chen. One of the challenges of Seeds of Peace as opposed to Combatants for Peace is that it’s … set up to transform the conflict from violence, but not necessarily looking at the occupation as the thing that we have to undo.

Alon: This is a beautiful moment of polarized conscientization, actually.

Kuftinec: Yes. They were also doing some direct action that connected with their images. The Jewish Israelis were going to do some work focused on social problems. The Palestinian citizens of Israel were going to do story gathering from their ancestors. The Palestinians were going to do some really direct action work that was about the occupation. The Image Theatre was useful in that moment to understand the dynamics of what wasn’t going to be possible within the framework of that organization.

Cohen-Cruz: Two other thoughts about contradictions and TO: I can hear Augusto saying, “It’s Theatre of the Oppressed, not Theatre of the Oppressive!” You know, the playfulness, that it’s not so hard to have a good atmosphere in a TO workshop. The techniques lend themselves to it, the playfulness is part of what allows people to expose things, to allow the contradictions to come out. Then, through the whole embodied methodology, when you step into the scene you play out the contradictions, and then someone plays out something else, and then someone plays out something else. It’s so beautifully set up that no one thing that gets enacted has to be the whole story. You know there will be many interventions after yours. You’re helping brainstorm; the format is about multiplicity and there not being one right answer. People tend to enjoy doing the games and the techniques. That makes it possible to bring up your own faults and your own contradictions.

Alon: I want to say something about what Jan was referring to right now … That it is not only playful and fun, and you know, this spirit that we all know that is happening in most of the TO workshops, right? I read very carefully all of Augusto Boal’s writings, and he’s not preaching for non-violence in the political sphere. He’s supporting some violent struggles, and he never said that political struggles should be non-violent … When he described direct action as a potential for legitimate violent struggle, I could not accept that, and we couldn’t accept that in Combatants for Peace. Mainly because of our fundamental experience, both sides, nevertheless oppressed or oppressor. I mean violence is always a matter of justification for the oppressed and for the oppressors …
A second goal, along with developing a binational community, is developing a non-violent community, a non-violent binational culture. It means that we do not define violence in the same way. 99% of the Palestinians think that to throw stones on a tank is not a violent action. 99% of the Israelis think that throwing stones—it doesn’t matter on what you throw the stones—the action itself is violent. So how can we create this polarized conscientization in which people will agree what is violence? And how can we preach non-violence in the theatre sphere and in workshops and so on, and then say, this is only for us, the theatre people? …

Howe: Jan talked about the notion of community as strategy as opposed to community as necessarily a discrete group of people. Chen and Sonja’s comments touched on that, too. Any thoughts about that? Or other thoughts to add?

Cohen-Cruz: I want to add how important the women’s movement was to me in the early 1970s. There was a period of time when I had no contact with men besides passing men in the street. I mean, if there was a shopkeeper who was a man, I wouldn’t leave the store [laughing] … But I had bad habits around men. I needed to spend my time of choice around women who were consciously trying to figure out what those bad habits were. For over a year, the theatre I went to was all-women audiences and performers and that sort of thing. That was a critical stage of my development. I wasn’t doing Theatre of the Oppressed back then, but I was in a community that struggled with similar power dynamics.

We can all work to free ourselves from ways we’ve been taught to be constrained by some aspect of our identity. It’s important to spend some time in one’s life in such a group, and TO is one of the ways to do it. I don’t advocate spending all of one’s life there. I love what you’ve said, Chen, about this binational community and always looking to make the community larger and expand it. But I do think it’s worth thinking about. Is that what you meant by groups?

Howe: I was thinking about earlier when you were saying specifically about community being a strategy …

Cohen-Cruz: Instead of a group.

Howe: Yes. You were getting at it just now. So was Chen when he talked about community being a goal. I was thinking of community as a strategy of action toward X, Y, or Z.

Kuftinec: I think it’s really useful to be conscientiously community-focused, as in: You understand that there are times when you need to have a space apart in order to be a more liberated human being. I always go back to Paulo Freire in thinking: what is the reason for this work? It is to humanize the human being. To be living as a full human being and to be engaged in a liberatory process with others. That means oppressed and oppressors, that the effort is towards full humanization of everyone, not just the oppressed. Tactically, that means sometimes that you need a space of commonality, if that space is engaged in some way toward this goal of liberatory, full humanization.

I also think that there can be tactical moments of temporary community formation across difference, in the way that Chen was talking about this model of binational community. When I was working in the Balkans, there were moments when we would bring youth together at a very dangerous time. They chose to be together because they felt like it was important to who they were going to be in the world. They didn’t want to be defined by a state that was telling them, “We need to keep you separated. Croatian is now going to be a different language from Bosnian or Serbian, and we’re going to
rename all the streets.’ Chen was talking about the authorities dictating the terms of the community to the community … And [the youth] are saying, as young people with not a lot of power,

We do have the power to say, ‘We can be together. That even if it’s temporary, we can come together. We can do it in the face of danger because it’s more important to us, for our full humanity, that we can make these choices about when to be in temporary community with a group of people that we are being told are our enemies.

Alon: People always say that in doing TO we are preaching to the choir, right? “Yeah, but these people are from your community. They are convinced already.” That’s something that we hear a lot in Palestine and Israel and in other fields like working with asylum-seekers. People say, “Yeah, but you are preaching to the choir because you are performing for the people that are pro-asylum seekers.” … I really feel that in conflict zones people are afraid and the first thing that they do is just hide in their houses, falling into passiveness, so instead of answering, “No, we’re not, we’re expanding the community. We’re not only preaching to the choir,” I think it’s good to mark the goal of activating the choir, not only preaching but activating them. It is something that is really useful for minorities, for communities that are oppressed or marginalized. Preaching to the marginalized is not enough, but activating is sometimes very comforting, and we tend to forget that because of this criticism.

Howe: Anything else you want to say for now?

Kuftinec: I’m really grateful for hearing from both Jan and Chen because my impulse when I hear “community” is to be suspicious. I’m an Eeyore. I’m wondering: What is this for? What are you hiding? But I feel like I’m reminded of how both Jan and Chen have reclaimed this idea of community as something that can be really powerful and comes from a sense of conscientiousness about the work of that community towards something else. It’s not a gated community. But it’s also not an assimilated community. It’s this idea of community as a kind of living out “as if.”

Alon: Just as an addition to what Jan said [about tactical communities—of women, for example]: It took us almost ten years to realize … Only in the last year or a little bit more, we have a women’s group in Combatants for Peace, and it’s an idea that was raised by women, of course, in the first year of the movement, in 2006. There was a resistance in the movement … We have regional groups, we have a theatre group, and the women kept on saying all the time—and struggling, not only saying—“We need a women’s group in Combatants for Peace, Palestinian and Israeli women, as a group.” There was a lot of resistance, of course, mostly from men and some women who internalized the oppression, but it happened, mostly because of this binational community process. I don’t say that everything is equal now; we still have a lot of problems and challenges. But this topic is on the table … And it’s all part of this internal development of this binational, non-violent culture, democratizing the process all the time.

Cohen-Cruz: The last thing I want to say has to do with dialogue. Although TO is not something I practice in a regular way now, I love connecting with the two of you, the three of you. It really meant a lot to me to be asked to be part of this conversation, since I’m not current in it, but I carry TO with me so strongly. Now a lot of my work is what used to be called evaluation, but the people I work with happily don’t call it that. We talk more about field research. We’re working with people who are very committed to socially-engaged art, who have been at it a long time. I’m an outside eye,
watching and writing, but because of this whole trajectory of work, I can be in this position dialogically. I don’t have to be someone who watches work and isn’t allowed to say anything, and then write my report, which would be awful. Why wouldn’t you say something when it could actually help? I understand why; that wasn’t how the role was defined, but that’s shifted, and for me, it’s partly because of TO. Whatever it was that attracted me to TO has continued to be this growing seed within me that expresses itself in ways that don’t look like TO, but it’s just so there.