



# The Promise of Cultural Diplomacy: Reflections on the Work of a Counsellor of Cultural Affairs

By Hedda Krausz Sjögren and Kristina Hagström-Ståhl

## Abstract

This article offers a reflection on the potentials of cultural diplomacy and cooperation, situating itself in the long-term relationship between South Africa and Sweden as well as the specific context of the professional practice of Sweden's first counsellor for cultural affairs in South Africa, Hedda Krausz Sjögren. Providing a first-hand account of cultural diplomacy, it adopts a self-reflexive position and, largely, a first-person perspective. Co-authored by Krausz Sjögren and one of her collaborators during this period, a theatre director and researcher, Kristina Hagström-Ståhl, it also attempts to reflect the shared

experience of collaborative work in this sphere. As such, the text is written from within a combination of diplomatic, cultural, and professional practices, as well as from within a diverse set of skills informing the practices that shaped the body of work to which the article refers. We use a combination of personal and collective pronouns throughout this article to place emphasis on our reflections; the use of personal pronouns denotes Krausz Sjögren's reflections. We aim to share a sense of the possible impact of work dedicated to democracy, freedom of expression, and gender inclusion.

*I am trying to recall the feeling I had when it was confirmed that South Africa would be the guest of honour at Scandinavia's biggest literary fair? As an organization, it sounded like an opportunity to showcase some of the best stories from the tip of the continent. It sounded like someone believed in our stories and was willing to listen. Albeit through technical difficulties, being in Sweden with South Africa's hardest working young writers is exactly what the poetry community needs. It is as though we need to leave home in order to reach deep within ourselves. Sweden serves as a mirror into our artistry. From an administrative lens, it is intriguing to watch poets and writers learn from like-minded individuals. How conversations form and how new work unfolds. With every visit, a community of literary role players and enthusiasts becomes bigger and stronger. What of these relationships? The trips birth connections and opportunities for cultural sustainability, but the experiences themselves are always life changing. Being in a room with Hedda and Ntate Lefifi Tladi was a special moment in many ways. The moment itself was exemplary of Sweden South Africa relations. It was even more momentous for young poets who had travelled all the way from South Africa to meet and fellowship with a literary giant in Sweden.*

— Phomolo Sekamotho, poet, co-founder of Hear My Voice

## Introduction

Sweden and South Africa have a long history of diverse bilateral connections involving trade, development cooperation, research and educational exchange, as well as traditional diplomacy (concerning security, foreign policy, etc.) to name a few major areas. Formal relations between Sweden and South Africa date back to the 1930s when a South African legation was opened in Stockholm. Sweden strongly supported the struggle for democracy in South Africa during the apartheid period, keeping its own legation in Pretoria but upgrading relations to the ambassadorial level only in 1994. More recently, in 1999, the South African-Swedish Bi-National Commission was inaugurated by then-President Thabo Mbeki and then-Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009: 4).

For decades, culture, arts, and civil society contacts have also been part of the many primarily unofficial connections that have impacted both countries. With the Swedish government's 2016 decision to appoint its first Counsellor for Cultural Affairs to South Africa (indeed the first ever to the African continent), a new channel of bilateral connections that had not been in place previously was established, in what can be labelled a *cultural diplomacy connection*. Hedda Krausz Sjögren, a cultural producer with a background as an actor

and playwright, was appointed in 2017 and served as Counsellor for Cultural Affairs until 2021. Prior to her appointment, in 2016, she had written a report on cultural relations between South Africa and Sweden in her role as Expert Advisor to the Swedish Ministry of Culture.

This article offers a reflection on the potentials of cultural diplomacy and cooperation, situating itself in the long-term relationship between South Africa and Sweden as well as the specific context of Krausz Sjögren's professional practice. Providing a first-hand account of cultural diplomacy, it adopts a self-reflexive position and, largely, a first-person perspective. Co-authored by Krausz Sjögren and one of her collaborators during this period, a theatre director and researcher, Kristina Hagström-Ståhl, it also attempts to reflect the shared experience of collaborative work in this sphere. As such, the text is written from within a combination of diplomatic, cultural, and professional practices, as well as from within a diverse set of skills informing the practices that shaped the body of work to which the article refers. We use a combination of personal and collective pronouns throughout this article to place emphasis on our reflections; the use of personal pronouns denotes Krausz Sjögren's reflections. We aim to share a sense of the possible impact of work dedicated to democracy, freedom of expression, and gender inclusion.

## Methodological considerations

As authors, we are cognisant of our position within this complex and will attempt a self-reflexive approach to analysing and describing the work. We are conscious of our role in the co-construction of knowledge (Finlay, 2002) and seek to steer clear of the (remnants of) colonial perspectives often informing encounters between actors of the Global North and Global South. As such we are wary of assuming our own position as somehow privileged in terms of assessing and understanding impact. The central argument that we want to advance is that the arts, and with it, creative practitioners as 'voicebearers of democracy'<sup>1</sup> who contribute to and deserve inclusion into foundational principles of democracy such as freedom of expression, equality and transparency, as well as sustainable peace and security, are of vital importance for long-term effects toward democratisation and peacekeeping. From this follows that cultural diplomacy has the potential to create sustainable impact within but also beyond the cultural sphere.

## Reflections from a counsellor of cultural affairs

When I was appointed as Counsellor of Cultural Affairs in March 2017, I had been following the South African cultural scene for some time. Having limited time (a three-year contract, with the possibility of a one-year extension) and additionally limited resources (my budget on arrival was in the realm of SEK 100,000/€10,000), I was particularly interested in how we could have the biggest impact with what I had at my disposal. The analysis I had conducted in my role as Expert Advisor at Sweden's Ministry of Culture had shown that while South Africa was no longer a recipient of international development funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the country was not yet a 'market' for Swedish arts and culture, nor were South African organisations or institutions resourced enough to invest in Swedish guest performances or culture. The need to develop new forms of collaborations and financing was urgent and dependent on collaborations being reciprocal and partnership oriented with equal vested interest, with big outcomes from small budgets.

I could see that there was a need for new platforms for interaction between young creatives from both countries. Interviews I conducted<sup>2</sup> with young South Africans revealed that in spite of the numerous and long-standing contacts between Sweden and South Africa pre-1994, and in spite of there being a priority for Swedish public diplomacy in South Africa, the generation born after 1994 had scant or no relationship to, nor knowledge of, Sweden. (Moreover, the same seemed to be true of young Swedes' knowledge of South Africa, although that impression is anecdotal.) I could also see that several priorities of the cultural and foreign policies of the then-Swedish government, such as the Agenda 2030 priorities for the foreign policy, the feminist foreign policy, the focus on artistic freedom within the Ministry of Culture, and the 2019 Drive for Democracy campaign, could be used as a lever in establishing stronger cultural ties between the countries. My intention was therefore to identify areas where these perspectives could intersect.

I had for some time been following the South African spoken word scene. I noticed that young artists (born around or after 1994) self-organised (often collectively and inclusively beyond language, gender, and cultural background); started to get bigger followings; worked in several platforms and media (some of which were international); and experimented with multiple forms, including mixing languages and art forms, to express life experiences. In other words, the poetry and spoken word scene in South Africa seemed to promote democracy, equality, access, by virtue of its own developing form. This was not poetry about democracy or promoting democracy, but rather a practice of writing, performing, developing, distributing, spoken word poetry in a manner that embraced all these qualities.

Another important area identified was how witness accounts of women during Apartheid started to emerge in 2017 through two ground-breaking publications: An interview by journalist Carl Collison in October 2017 in the *Mail & Guardian* with Sibongile 'Promise' Khumalo, who stepped forward to talk about the abuse she experienced from male counterparts as a freedom fighter in exile and the publication in September 2017 of the book titled *Khwezi: The Remarkable Story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo* by

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lauded journalist Redi Tlhabi. The biography details, through interviews, the life of the woman called Khwezi, who suffered serial rapes as a child by former president Jacob Zuma who was acquitted in 2006 while Khwezi proceeded to be vilified by Zuma’s supporters and got nation-wide attention.

With this analysis, I set out to test and examine possible artistic collaborations, with a primary focus on building trust and gaining a deeper understanding of the premise of practitioners in the arts and culture sector.

### Policy context

If Sweden’s relations with South Africa in the cultural field until 2016 had been primarily characterised by formal and informal cultural relations, a decisive step toward government-led practice was taken by the addition to the diplomatic corps in Pretoria of a counsellor for cultural affairs. The mandates of this inaugural counsellor, beyond promoting Swedish cultural expression or advancing national interests, were to strengthen bilateral cooperation and exchange through specific artistic and cultural practices. Drawing on her experiences in the cultural sector, Krausz Sjögren sought to extend and reinvigorate cultural cooperation and collaboration by paying attention to, as well as learning about and from, existing and emerging cultural actors in South Africa.

Meanwhile, this work was grounded in, and sought to implement, values and positions on international cooperation as articulated in Sweden’s government policies, including the priorities of Agenda 2030, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Drive for Democracy campaign centring artists and cultural workers as voice bearers of democracy (Government of Sweden, 2019), and the feminist foreign policy adopted by Sweden in 2014.

The ‘Drive for Democracy’ campaign initiated by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs aimed to ensure that support for, defending and promoting democracy continued to be a priority for the Swedish Government. The ‘Drive for Democracy’ aimed to create conditions for dialogue and greater knowledge about democracy throughout the world. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs had identified ten focus areas for the drive that were to provide the point of departure and inspiration for continued efforts. These included protecting human rights and strengthening free media as well as women’s political participation. Trade union rights and the rights of LGBTQI+ people were other examples of priority areas. Efforts to protect these issues were to be integrated into all activities, and there was to be a special focus on highlighting young people and their voices.

Key among established policies was also the feminist foreign policy adopted by Sweden in 2014. Seeking to ‘systematically integrate a gender perspective into our foreign policy agenda’ (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019: 6), this policy posited gender equality as ‘an objective in itself’ but also as ‘essential for achieving the Government’s other overall objectives, such as peace, security and sustainable development’ (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019: 9). The Swedish government’s *Handbook on Feminist Foreign Policy* additionally mentions ‘cultural cooperation actions’ as a ‘method for norm changes and gender equal values’ (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019: 56), drawing attention in particular to its support of staged readings of the documentary play *Seven*, which had been organised since 2009 in cooperation between local Swedish embassies and cultural actors around the world, under the direction of Krausz Sjögren, who initiated the project in collaboration with Sweden’s National Touring Theatre (Riksteatern) and the Swedish Institute.

With the intention of promoting democracy and human rights, the staged readings of the documentary play *Seven*<sup>3</sup> – which depicts seven women’s rights activists from Afghanistan, Cambodia, Guatemala, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, and Russia – were undertaken with local stakeholders, ranging from government agencies to civil society actors taking on the play’s different parts. By naming this project as a part of an official government strategy, supported by Swedish embassies across the world, the Swedish government thus drew on initiatives that would perhaps not be characterised as traditional cultural diplomacy to exemplify and operationalise its foreign agenda promoting sustainability and democracy through gender equality and gender equal values. It could be argued that what is at hand is cultural cooperation as democratisation process as an already established working method, via the comprehensive production model developed by Krausz Sjögren (see end note 3), based on local ownership and agenda setting while all the time using the Swedish Embassy in Pretoria as a lever for local stakeholders. In keeping with this government strategy and the methods developed through, for example *Seven*, as Counsellor of Cultural Affairs Krausz Sjögren concentrated on locating actors working to integrate cultural work and democratisation, including questions of gender equality, the rights of women and children, and LGBTQ+ rights, and offering support and collaboration by Embassy means.

### **Reflections from a counsellor of cultural affairs (continued)**

In early 2017, the performance poet Koleka Putuma (b. 1993) had published her first collection of poetry, titled *Collective Amnesia*, with uHlanga, a small press started by writer Nick Mulgrew (b. 1990). I had been following her trajectory, moving between theatre and performance poetry, and had noted the attention her poem ‘Water’ was receiving, not in the least in the digital sphere. It seemed to embody a particular moment, a decision to move from stage to page and explore a new means of reaching audience/readers. When Putuma was scheduled to come to Pretoria to launch her book at the main library downtown, I sought out the organisation that was to host her, Hear My Voice. I asked them if the Embassy, with its limited resources, could support the event in any way.

Hear My Voice is a non-profit organisation based in the City of Tshwane, South Africa. They describe themselves in the following way: ‘Our focus is developing spoken word artists as well as creating open and uncensored platforms for self-expression through spoken word poetry. We achieve this through organising local and international exchange programs, workshops, live spoken word shows, open mics and other literature programs for schools, private companies, government, libraries, festivals and other cultural institutions.’ Importantly, the organisation was doing this in 2017 without much external support, and had developed a model that worked, but could be expanded, deepened, and harnessed.

I took a chance – or a risk – with the launch of *Collective Amnesia*, given that Embassy resources can only be used in service of Swedish interests or activities with a Swedish connection. I proposed to support the event with 1,000 rand, about 600 Swedish krona. The question did indeed come up at the Embassy – the Ambassador, signing off on the decision, asked what the Swedish connection was. I replied that uHlanga Press was due to travel to Sweden to attend the Gothenburg Bookfair, in order to scout for Swedish books to translate. At the time this was merely a suggestion I had made to uHlanga, that they apply for the Gothenburg Book Fair fellowship. However, as it turned out, uHlanga received the fellowship and did travel to Sweden in September of that year. That trip in itself resulted in something rather unusual, possibly unique, namely the direct publishing of a Swedish author via a South African publisher, without going through the major English language publishing houses based in Great Britain and the US. The book in question was the translation into English of *White Blight (Vitsvit)* by acclaimed poet Athena Farrokhzad. This in turn led to Athena travelling to South Africa in 2018 to take part in a program curated by Hear My Voice, spanning several cities, workshops, single readings, and festivals.

Hear My Voice accepted my contribution toward the launch of *Collective Amnesia* in Pretoria in May 2017, and I went to the highly anticipated and ultimately packed launch, attended by over 200 fans roughly between the ages of 18–30. I was the only white person in the audience, and I was probably the only one over 45 years old. Many copies of the book were

sold at the event, in spite of most young people very rarely having the means to buy books, and the event was well organised and communicated to the media (Pretoria Rekord, May 25, 2017 Book tour to open a can of worms). I had been asked to speak at the event as a sponsor, but I deemed it was inappropriate to speak about Sweden and Swedish interests in such a setting, and limited my remarks to about three sentences, saying we were excited to support great writing. This was the starting point of a work that would eventually branch out into a number of Swedish and South African contacts, and long-term activities, some of which will be detailed below. The next step in this work was to deepen the collaboration with Hear My Voice.

In November 2017, we signed our first collaboration contract, where Hear My Voice (HMV) would host and curate programs for early-mid career Swedish poets and writers over the coming year with HMV self-organising a tour in Sweden, with me as a liaison. For this I used parts of my Sweden promotion budget and part of the support I had applied for from Swedish Arts Council, earmarked for cultural attachés ('Projektbidrag för utsända kulturråd', project funding for sent out counsellors for cultural affairs). HMV invested their time and began themselves to apply for funding and to seek partnerships in Sweden and South Africa to harness their long- and short term-plans, using the embassy connection as a lever.

An important step in the process was also to invite HMV to arrange poetry readings at the Ambassador's residence, both as 'entertainment' during receptions for stakeholders other than in arts and culture, and eventually to host evenings at the residence wholly curated by HMV. This was a break away from more traditional ways of organising events in the diplomatic corps, especially the mandate HMV had from me to curate, plan and also invite their followers to the residence. We used this as a way to signal mutual respect and trust, and it elevated the status of HMV in other contexts. It also provided them with a rapidly expanding network, a fact that they could use both in contact with Swedish and South African stakeholders and funders. I believe this was, in all its simplicity, a crucial move. It was made possible by the strategic work to create trust with the Ambassador and the embassy staff and vouch for the quality of the work of HMV and the purpose of the work of

HMV being in line with Swedish priorities, and create trust with HMV and their community of young, often radical born-free followers, who would have a natural hesitancy to engage with western European states, not differentiating between those with a colonial past and those who supported freedom. The mantra on my part was: 'The Swedish Embassy supports and collaborates with great writers/poets/performers in Sweden and in South Africa whether early career or established.'

### **Incorporating a Swedish context**

Meanwhile, at the University of Gothenburg, the interdisciplinary arts platform 'Platform for Artistic Research Sweden' (PARSE) was initiating a series of thematic research 'arcs' with the intention of establishing and strengthening relations in the international arts research community, as well as with artists and civil society sectors. One of these research arcs was to be headed by Kristina Hagström-Ståhl, then a professor at the university's Faculty of Fine, Applied, and Performing Arts. Entitled 'Intersectional Engagements in Politics and Art', the research theme aimed to explore, in diverse ways, the nexus of gender, race, sexuality, and

(de-)coloniality in contemporary artmaking, scholarship, and artistic research. Focusing on socially engaged practices related to memory, history, and embodiment, the project sought to initiate collaborations and invite speakers from diverse disciplinary and geographic areas, exploring practices at the intersection of the artistic and the political and addressing questions of intersectionality in artistic practice.

Over the course of roughly two and a half years, between 2018 and 2020, 'Intersectional Engagements' collaborated with local as well as international academic and cultural institutions to host dialogues, talks, and conference strands with speakers from various locations and artistic disciplines, and additionally resulted in a peer-reviewed issue of *PARSE Journal*<sup>4</sup>.

With existing research interests in post-apartheid art and theatre, and aware of the appointment of Krausz Sjögren as counsellor for cultural affairs, Hagström-Ståhl saw in the attempts to form new collaborations

and explore relationship-building a potential for the kinds of co-thinking and exchange that lay at the heart of the research theme. A research trip to Johannesburg in early 2018 was combined with conversations with the Embassy and other stakeholders on ideas to take forward. What resulted was a multi-faceted form of interaction and collaboration taking place through research output, creative expression, and public events in both countries.

### Reflections from a counsellor of cultural affairs (continued)

Prior to Kristina's first visit to Johannesburg, I had been in conversation with the Market Theatre – one of South Africa's landmark arts institutions, the first theatre to mix black and white audiences and casts, with a number of offshoot departments like the Market Theatre Photo Lab and Windybrow Arts Centre. While a long-time collaborator with several Swedish institutions, as well as a recipient of Swedish development funding, the Market Theatre's relationships with – and memories of – Swedish stakeholders were dormant and played no real role in our re-kindling of contacts. As Kristina arrived, Market Theatre was planning a public, fairly controversial conversation, titled: 'Pro-Black is Not Anti-White' on questions of race in contemporary South African society. Again, I asked if the embassy could contribute in some small way, and if they would be open to including Kristina on the panel, as a scholar/artist active in this complex matter, but from the northern hemisphere. The organisers agreed to include Kristina as one of six speakers, and what resulted was a broad-ranging conversation engaging many of the attendees and drawing a large number of viewers through the event's livestream on Facebook. This collaboration with The Market Theatre marks a 'moment' with parameters similar to that of the *Collective Amnesia* book launch. It included risk-taking on our part, as well as an attempt to build mutual trust; it contained investments from all stakeholders, and the Embassy functioned as a lever.

### Outcomes

Both of these 'moments' became catalysts for a string of collaborations and exchanges that were eventually shooting off in many directions. For example, Hear My Voice went on to create numerous

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exchanges involving poets and writers from South Africa and Sweden, forging relationships with individual artists as well as with agencies like the Swedish Institute and the Swedish Arts Council, in addition to organisations like Göteborgs Litteraturhus, Olof Palme International Centre, The Global Square, the Swedish Church, the theatre company Unga Klara, the cultural journal Glänta, and notably, Gothenburg International Book Fair.<sup>5</sup> The Book Fair is Sweden's largest cultural event, visited by roughly 100,000 persons, with several thousand events over four days.

While Koleka Putuma had visited Sweden already in 2017 to participate in the 20-tal International Poetry Festival, and featured on Swedish television and radio on that occasion, an invitation to Gothenburg through the 'Intersectional Engagements' research arc in 2018 resulted in several readings, performances, and dialogues, widespread public interest and media attention, as well as, eventually, a translation into Swedish of *Collective Amnesia*. This visit was undertaken in the context of PARSE's collaboration with the Embassy in Pretoria as well as through 'local' cooperation with the International Book Fair and the literary festival *Scener och Samtal* (approx. 'Stages and Conversations', arranged by Göteborgs Litteraturhus and the Museum of World Culture).

The connections to Gothenburg International Book Fair were further cultivated in 2019 through an exchange with the Swedish Embassy in Pretoria that included a study visit to the Bookfair of that year

and culminated in the curated program for the Fair in 2022. In South Africa, Hear My Voice came on the radar of several institutions through the Swedish collaborations, and their curation of programs for visiting Swedish writers and performers came to include Nirox Foundation, the Department of Sports Arts and Culture, South Africa's National Library, the Open Book Festival, the European Union Commission, Centre for the Creative Arts in Durban, as well as the Market Theatre. In most, if not all, of these contacts, the aim was to develop relationships between Swedish and South African writers, to jointly deepen their artistic skills, to perform and teach workshops together, instigate dialogue about relevant topics for the poets and writers, such as multilingualism, minority languages, and questions of translation. A key aspect of the work was to introduce audiences in both countries to new writers/performers and trends in poetry and spoken word poetry.

### **Reflections from a counsellor of cultural affairs (continued)**

An important outcome of the relationship with Hear My Voice became apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. With the advent of Covid-19 in Europe and South Africa, the South African government decided on a strict lockdown, virtually closing down the country.<sup>6</sup> In short, the country closed, and people were not allowed out at all. In a crisis, communication, hope, and ability to adapt quickly is crucial. While the Embassy quickly moved into working to safe-guard Swedish citizens stuck in South Africa, there was no real strategy for communication or for maintaining contacts within South Africa. As the Cultural Affairs Office at the Embassy of Sweden in Pretoria was not included in the crisis management, I decided to see how we could contribute from our end.

The result was the co-creation between Hear My Voice, my communication consultant Sara Chitambo, and myself of a public diplomacy channel, entitled Digitally Yours, initially brought about to create some modest income for artists who had seen their incomes vanish overnight, both in Sweden and South Africa. The idea was to broadcast digital programs over Facebook, with live conversations and performances by artists in both countries, as well as with welcoming remarks by the Ambassador. The program was launched mere weeks after the South African lockdown, quickly drew

(mostly South African) digital audiences of more than 30,000, and was later named best practice by the Swedish Institute. The traffic to the Embassy's social media channels went up enormously, and a strong line of live communication was established.

The success of this initiative can be attributed to several factors; among these were arguably the long-standing relationship developed to a young, local, digitally savvy organisation with deep ties to Swedish counterparts, the capacity to delegate mandate to a local organisation (indicative of mutual trust), and risk-taking in the form of trying new formats while learning on the job. Additionally, the possibility of using the Embassy as a lever for this new format, in addition to my own ability to re-allocate funds, quickly, from activities planned for 2020 to the digital platform, including funding for the performers on the program. From this initiative emerged yet another collaboration between Sweden and South Africa, as stakeholders at Gothenburg International Book Fair engaged Hear My Voice online programming for the 2020 digital bookfair, several of which are still available for streaming through the digital channel Bokmässan Play.

### **Outcomes (continued)**

From the first visit and public conversation in 2018 at the Market Theatre flowed ideas and discussions between the authors of this article, The Market Theatre, and South African/Swedish/Ethiopian, Johannesburg-based curator Katarina Hedrén on taking another step in the work around women and experiences of war/struggle and narration. An important backdrop for this discussion was the publication in 2017 of Carl Collison's and Redi Tlhabi's journalistic work mentioned earlier. The first instalment, in October 2018, of our joint initiative became a conversation and reading at the Market Theatre Lab under the heading of 'Women, War, Struggle, Stories'.<sup>7</sup>

In this public conversation, the participants together with the audience explored definitions of war, struggle, and heroism, as well as the impact of the exclusion of women's contributions, experiences, and voices. A vital part of the instalment was the exploration of the narratives of women who have shared their experiences of armed conflict and struggle in different parts of the world. Introductions were made by the

ambassador of Sweden Cecilia Julin. The event, mixing personal, written testimonies with those of established writers, artists and academics on the panel, was fully booked. It was broadcast live and recorded, it reached record numbers of viewers, and audience responses reflected how the conversation was breaking taboos and bringing new voices into public discourse. This event confirmed the impact and fruitfulness of choosing a catalyst role for the cultural affairs office, over a merely promotional or producing one.

Outcomes from this project dovetailed with the activities including Hear My Voice and Koleka Putuma mentioned earlier, and also resulted in the publication of several essays across South African and Swedish languages (Sami, Khoisan, English, Swedish and more), performances, seminar series and knowledge exchange. The Embassy of Sweden added cultural activities to its political reporting; Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* was published in Swedish by Rámus Förlag; a second installment in the public dialogue series, entitled *Skin + Bones (with-nessing whitenesses)*, took place at the Market Theatre as well as at Drama for Life/Wits University in February 2019, featuring a performance by Stacey Sacks with audience discussions to follow.

Other activities and outcomes, which followed and were linked to these initial contacts and collaborations, included a Memorandum of Understanding on arts and culture between Sweden and South Africa, which stipulated special attention to literary exchanges and encouraging a culture of reading; South Africa becoming the Guest of Honor at the 2020 Gothenburg International Book Fair (postponed to 2022 due to the pandemic); Hear My Voice being included by the National Library South Africa in the reference expert group on curating and proposing participants and topics for the 2022 Book Fair; South Africa's Guest of Honor presence in Gothenburg in 2022, including more than forty South African writers visiting Sweden and taking part in seminars, readings, and performances; and spoken word performances by Swedish and South African poets taking place at venues in Gothenburg and Stockholm during this visit.

## Conclusions

In this article, we focus primarily on two threads of activities enabled by efforts of cultural diplomacy as catalyst: spoken word and what we can call the women's voices thread. This is because they represent our collaboration. Activities undertaken under Krausz Sjögren's tenure in the areas of design, fashion, and fine arts can also be said to fall within the same method of approach. What we hope to demonstrate with the above examples, which are tokens of the web of interlinked activities and contacts created, re-ignited and nurtured by the cultural affairs office in Pretoria between 2017–2021, is a certain promise of cultural diplomacy. Envoys with specific expert knowledge may function as a catalyst for relationships and artistic endeavours, as well as for strengthening local networks of independent artists to the benefit of the democratic infrastructure of that country – by developing stronger international ties. The expertise includes, but is not limited to, a capability to analyse and identify emerging cultural expressions and actors, trends, artistic quality, and deploying the diplomatic skill of creating trust between emerging cultural players, state actors, and non-government actors in local as well as international actors including cultural institutions.

The analysis made by envoys of local cultural organisations and practitioners must include aspects of relevance to foreign policy such as in the cases demonstrated; inclusion, gender parity, and democratic structures within the organisation. In addition, this catalyst and trust building approach can be crucial in crises when the need for trustworthy communication channels as well as senders are a vital part of keeping functioning societies. This was demonstrated during the severe lockdown policy of the South African government and the restrictive travel policy of European countries during the pandemic, and the response of Swedish and South African cultural actors to create a virtual, public platform for continued dialogue and expression ('Digitally Yours').

As the cases show, the embassy was involved not as producer, nor as determiner of communication messages, but simply as lever and catalyst allowing emerging actors the trust and endowment of the embassy to forge deep contacts nationally and

bilaterally. Their artistic work was inherently shaping democratic and stabilising networks of artists and civilians exercising their freedoms. There was never a message or other greater goal underpinning or set for the interactions. This is a concrete work to strengthen civil society and thereby democracy, and indeed the voice bearers of democracy.

A policy that wants to avoid a propaganda stance (and here the difference between ways to achieve successful 'nation branding' and propaganda can be quite difficult to define), to promote the idea of arm length to artists and cultural workers while being resource conservative, the Promise of Cultural Diplomacy can deliver on multiple goals of both foreign policy (equality, freedom of expression) as well as on UN sustainability goals – now including cultural aspects, since the 2022 Mondiacult congress in Mexico<sup>8</sup>. By being a catalyst for emerging (and established) cultural exchanges and collaborations, the foreign missions contribute to the sustainable existence of cultural practitioners who exercise their right to artistic expression and freedom and thereby also form a durable part of a democratic societal fabric necessary for stable peaceful and democratic societies.

We would like to add, finally, that in a world riddled with complex conflicts, instability, and a radically shrinking space for civil society, it might be well worth for state actors to reconsider and expand the notion of cultural diplomacy, less as a tool to promote nation branding, or market separate cultural goods, but rather as a necessary ingredient and catalyst for peace and prosperity. In light of our documentation and our arguments, we are concerned that the cultural affairs office at the Embassy of Sweden in Pretoria has been closed down and the position annulled, and that the Swedish government is considering letting several other cultural affairs positions, including the one in Moscow, remain vacant after current counsellors' mandates are at an end. This points to ineffective policy in the short-term and to the detriment of the potential for flourishing cultural cooperation (as mandated by MOUs, recent and promising networking and projects). It will also, in our estimate, counteract reaching the long-term

goals of Swedish and European policies for peace, security, and democracy.

## Notes

1. The notion of 'voicebearers of democracy', in Swedish *demokratins röstbärare*, was coined by then-state secretary for international development cooperation Per Olsson Fridh. The term refers to those actors who by their actions (painting, writing, organising civic engagement, i.e., exercising their freedom of expression) create the democratic fabric outside of the state actors.
2. The interviews were conducted as part of an internal analysis for the Ministry of Culture in my previous position as expert advisor (2016–2017) and are not referenced in this paper.
3. *Seven* is a documentary play by Paula Cizmar, Catherine Filloux, Gail Kriegel, Carol K. Mack, Ruth Margraff, Anna Deavere Smith and Susan Yankowitz for which Hedda Krausz Sjögren developed a production model employed in 30+ countries. For more information, see: [voicesprojects.com/portfolio/seven-on-tour/](http://voicesprojects.com/portfolio/seven-on-tour/)
4. For more information about the research theme, and to access this issue of *PARSE Journal*, please visit: [parsejournal.com/themes-archived/#intersectional-engagements-in-politics-and-art](http://parsejournal.com/themes-archived/#intersectional-engagements-in-politics-and-art)
5. This work is partially documented in the reports from first, second and third project in democracy and literature exchange Gothenburg Literature House and Hear My Voice 2019–2022 for co-funder Swedish Institute, diarised with the Swedish Institute, available from Gothenburg Literature House and Hear My Voice.
6. See: [www.tralac.org/news/article/14617-south-africa-s-policy-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic.html](http://www.tralac.org/news/article/14617-south-africa-s-policy-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic.html)
7. Participants in the seminar were Beverly Ditsie (Director and Producer for Film and TV/Activist), Kristina Hagström-Ståhl, Mmabatho Montsho

(Actress/Filmmaker/Visual artist), Gail Smith (Writer/Journalist/Spokesperson) and Redi Tlhabi (Author/Broadcaster/Talkshow host). The forum was moderated by Katarina Hedrén (Film curator/Writer) and featured Phemelo Motene (Actress/Radio host) and me in an old role – as actor.

8. For more information on this 2022 UNESCO conference, please see: [www.unesco.org/en/articles/mondiacult-2022-states-adopt-historic-declaration-culture](http://www.unesco.org/en/articles/mondiacult-2022-states-adopt-historic-declaration-culture)

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