

Conference Track: From Activist Art to Cultural Organizing

*In collaboration with the Center for Civic Participation's Arts & Democracy Project, this series of artist-activist dialogues provided an opportunity to connect to an on-going national conversation on Cultural Organizing – what it is, how it works, who's doing it, and how to get involved. This track also featured **Voices from the Battlefield of Cultural Equity**, case studies on **Creating with Refugee Communities** (with TeAda Productions' Refugee Nation, NWT's Walaalo! Somali Women's Project, and dance-theater artist Aparna Sindhoor), as well as artist report-backs from **Artists at the Social Forums**, local, national and global (moderated by JLove Calderon of *We Got Issues!*, and Maya Winfrey of the Western Massachusetts American Friends Service Committee).*

The Work We Do: A Poem for Cultural Organizing

By Graciela Sanchez

*Yo soy vicentito
Y vengo a cantar
A los niños que lloran
Y hacerles callar
Ni, ni, ni, ni, ni, ni,
Ni, so, so, so, so, so
No llores mas bien mio
No llores mas ya no.*

Our stories shape our lives.
Los de poder nos hacen invisible
Those who can, make us the enemy
Make us the ugly,
 the stupid,
 the lazy,
 the ones who take from them,
 the ones who are out to hurt
them.
Their story, not mine. Not ours.
Their story says our stories don't matter.
We're not important.
We are nobody.
We are only good as we provide for them
 as we scrub their toilets,
 mop their floors,
 wash their clothes,
 prepare their food,
 cut their lawns,
 pick up their garbage
 sing to their children
 bathe their parents

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pedicure their feet
as we affirm for them that racism doesn't exist anymore

Duerme, duerme negrita
Que tu mamá está en el campo, negrita

And we go to sleep exhausted
Pained
Angry
Useless
Powerless
Invisible
Erased
Crazy
Alone
Demonized
Stupid
Pendeja

And we wake up exhausted
Reflecting
Regretting
Pained
Useless
Powerless
Invisible
Crazy

Still we move forward

At home there is violence too
Generations of violence
When he gets beat up at work
He comes home to beat up on su mujer y los niños
And las niñas better watch out at night because that
father, brother or tio might find themselves on top
humping and raping their girl children

We're told to be afraid of the violence on the streets.
They don't want us to tell them about the violence in our
homes.
They would have to hear about incest and rape
And it would be too close to what happens in their own
homes
So we just keep it a secret again and again
Generation tras generacion

And so we just try to survive
To wake up in the mornings

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With the strength to go on again and again and again

Ay de mi Llorana
Llorana de ayer y hoy (repeat)
Ayer, maravilla fui llorana
Y ahora, ni sombra soy (repeat)

So, after thousands of years of conquest and thousands of years of patriarchy, we behave in the ways that the master expects us to behave.

We teach our daughters, granddaughters how to behave
How to be good
How to survive

We lose self respect
We lose our sense of self
We lose our dignity

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is a 21 year old, multi-issue, social justice cultural center that works to change the culture of violence that threatens our homes, our cultures, our environment and our world. As survivors of cultural genocide we work to build strong, healthy communities that can survive this racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic world. We do this through programming that speaks to our communities, that creates and builds a community of justice, compassion, cariño, respeto, convivencia, paz.

We push ourselves to be whole, to live our lives honestly and truthfully, to be fearless and strong, to be nurturing and fuertes,

Be queer and Latina
Be Latina and feminista,
Be feminista and anti-racist,
Be anti-racist and anti-war,
Be anti-war and anti-imperialism,
Be anti-imperialist and sin verguenza
Sin verguenza y sin pelos en la lengua

Honest, truthful and con respeto.

As we were taught to be by our antepasadas

Our grannies, our abuelitas

Yet to do work of social justice, of reproductive rights, of human rights, of anti-imperialism and anti-genocide requires that our gente, our people be culturally grounded.

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We have to know who we are.
Have respect for ourselves, for our families, for our community,
for our culture, for our gente, and for your gente.

But how do we get that self respect?
How do we learn to love and care for ourselves as women,
as people of color,
as queer people
as colonized gente?
How do we survive cultural genocide?

We must recover and pass on our stories.

So we asked our people to tell their stories.
And since most of our elders are women
They were afraid
They couldn't believe that anyone would be interested in their
stories
So they told the story of their husbands
Of their children
Of their male children
Of their brothers and fathers who fought in wars

And we said, those are interesting and important
But what about your story?
And your mom's story?
And your sister's and daughter's stories?

But still if there was one man and 20 women in a room,
The man spoke and spoke and spoke

So we said,
Bring a picture of yourself and talk about the picture

And slowly, but steadily, they spoke

Not all of them brought a photo of themselves
Lucy and Doña Paula said they didn't have any pictures of
themselves
So they brought pictures of their sons and husbands

But at least they started to tell a story.

And a group of community members selected 50 photos to be
blown up and placed on fences, on graffiti walls, on empty lots

10 feet high and 10 feet wide

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Pictures of themselves as little girls
Pictures of themselves as teenagers goofing around
Dressing up
Dancing
Being sexual

As the people in the neighborhood saw the pictures of these
strangers
But not really strangers
Actually pictures of themselves
Of their family
Of their neighbors
Of their gente

Big
Proud
Happy

Then Lucy and Doña Paula suddenly found pictures of
themselves.
We want our pictures up too.

And then hundreds of people came to us
People who had been told to fear the Esperanza because some of
us are gay
 Because we support women's rights
 Because we challenge the 17 white men who run the city
 Because we stand with the Palestinians and against any
wall that divides people
 Because being around and hanging with or at the
Esperanza, you might damage your reputation

People saw themselves
People saw themselves positively portrayed
People saw themselves big and pretty and sassy and charming
and dignified and happy y con orgullo.

With pride.

And they said, we want more
And how can get copies of those pictures?
And how can we create a museum?
And can we share more pictures?

And did you know that it snowed here all the time when we were
kids in the 20s and 30s and 40s and 50s? See the pictures.

And now it never snows. Global warming. Of course.

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And can we tell you about the curanderas. The healers and the
plantas medicinales. And if we walk the streets and look at the
gardens of the elders, they still have the herbs in their gardens,
estafiate, manzanilla, ruda,

And fruit trees-- orange, tangerine, grapefruit, fig trees still grow
in these neighborhoods.

And see this car.
It took us a whole day to drive to the border,
We used to sing in Alice and Brownsville
Change our costumes underneath the bridge
Came out looking like movie stars, but we were poor

But about the border-
We didn't have borders then.
Why do they want to build a wall now
We used to go back and forth all the time
Get jobs here and when times were bad here
We'd go illegally to Mexico and get jobs there
Did you know there were only two border patrols between Texas
and California?

But so much has changed

And so much has been destroyed in our barrio

In the 70s, urban removal pushed out the Mexican people
Tore down the homes
Bulldozed our casitas and the tienditas
Tore down most of the fruit trees
Dislocated families and neighbors
Created homes that would only last 30 years
Built five and six foot fences between their homes
Got rid of the roosters and hens
Got rid of the street vendors
Got rid of the curanderas, the sobadores, the hueseros, the
healers of the community.

The photos revive self respect in a community that has been
convinced that we are the lowest, ugliest, laziest, dirtiest, fattest
people in the city.

The photos allow us to give our gente, especially the women, a
chance to tell their stories

The photos show us a way back to community, back to each
other
Away from the tv, computer games,

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Away from materialism and individualism
Away from war and violence and hate and destruction

With their stories, nuestra gente build self-confidence, they honor their lives and their communities. They reclaim the history of Mexicanas/os / Chicanas/os who make up over 60% of the population in San Antonio and yet have been erased from our history books, from the local newspapers, TV and radio.

And they are teaching us the ways to be buena gente,
Good people who put people/community before profits or products.
Who share their world of pain, of violence and offer their survival techniques—

And so the process has begun.
The work has to be a lifetime commitment
The work has to be of service to and for community
The work we do must be with a habit of self-examination and a commitment to justice
The work we do must include a process which nurtures lasting friendship within a community of shared values – una comunidad de alma (community of soul/heart)
The work we do, cultural organizing, must enable the formation of community, bound together by values of human dignity and shared understanding of our commonalities
And the work has to include the stories and the complexity of our gente's lives
Out that uncle in those WWII photos with all his male friends
The tio who won all these medals, but never got married

The work is not about the artist and what book or poem we will write
What video we will create
What performance will be developed
But about attending Doña Paola's funeral
Helping Rita and Doña Inez get Amy to do their bankruptcy case for free
Check in with Tina after her surgery
Or pick up the medicine at Walgreens and deliver it to Berta and hang out with her for an hour,
even though you have a grant due later that day.

And then, when the powerful are attacking us for presenting a year-long series on Palestine
Uprooted: Tierra, Gente y Cultura
Our gente will remember the stories
the exhibit that once hung on our walls
or the article they read in La Voz.

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When we host the *Que Queer San Antonio* exhibit
When we challenge the city against their destruction of the
environment or
When we file a lawsuit against the city for their oppressive
marching ordinance
We will have the community's support

They will be speaking on our behalf
They will be speaking on their behalf
They will be speaking on behalf of all oppressed
They will be speaking on behalf of all humanity and our
environment

And so the stories and the photos continue to flood in.
And the people have begun to take on the work of rebuilding
their community by telling the true stories, their stories.
And our young people are going home and talking and asking
their parents and grandparents to talk about their lives for the
first time.

Complicated and hard stories.
Stories of love and hate
Of incest and rape
Of poverty and pride
Of happiness and death
Of pain and humiliation
Of wisdom and joy.

And the youth
Those in their teens, 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s
Are listening and asking questions, and learning their history and
bringing their children and visiting the photos and returning to
their homes again, but this time without shame.
This time con orgullo.
With love and pride and self-respect.

Graciela I. Sánchez follows in the footsteps of her mother and abuelitas, strong neighborhood women-of-color cultural workers and activists of San Antonio. She is a buena gente of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, a community-based cultural arts/social-justice organization that culturally grounds working-class and poor people of color, queer people and women, and survivors of cultural genocide. Facilitating conversations on issues of colonization, genocide, power, violence, racism, sexism and homophobia, among others, Graciela works with community members to develop programs such as CineMujer and Uprooted: Tierra, Gente, y Cultura, Palestinians and Other Occupied Peoples, as well as organizing gente to challenge oppressive laws in San Antonio, the United States and the world.

Voices from the Cultural Battlefield: Organizing for Equity

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Saturday, April 5, 2008
9:30 AM—11:30 AM

Intersection V continued this ongoing 20-year international conversation about the role of art and culture in the struggle for human rights, including social justice, cultural equity, and a healthy natural environment. The latest of these forums was co-facilitated by Carlton Turner (Alternate ROOTS, M.U.G.A.B.E.E.) and Graciela Sanchez, (Executive & Artistic Director of the Esperanza Center for Peace & Justice).

Roundtable discussion led by Carlton Turner and Graciela Sanchez
7 attendees total; 5 women, 2 men; 6 adults, 1 youth

This was a discussion about the struggle for cultural equity, hyper-capitalism, and how the global economy affects both culture and community.

Main points:

- No localized economy, it's all a global economy
- Stock Market: the value of American dollar is declining.
- The housing market has declined and has trickled down globally; how does a market in Japan tie in to a prime lender in Detroit? What's the connection? This market is about gaining and making a profit, but unfortunately, people cannot afford their homes. It's harder to get a home loan, etc. Free markets deceive buyers.
- Food – steroids in meats, pesticides, water, etc.
- Group examples of hyper-capitalism:
 - Destroying of venues/places for artists
 - Voices of artists not respected by media and powerful sources
 - Black vs. Brown complex fueled; being placed in opposition to each other by other voices often leads to violence
 - Community gardens auctioned off
 - People bought out of homes for the building of a new stadium
 - Displacement of truth in people's stories—who are the storytellers?
 - The truth is not told (ex: it takes 6 liters of water to make 1 liter of bottled water)
 - University accepts students based on class; accepts out-of-state students instead of assisting lower income in-state students
 - In a small town in the Mississippi Delta, only 18% of population over the age of 18 have a high school diploma

- A family farm has to buy new seeds every year, new seeds that can only produce once; the productivity of the seed is stunted. Plants that don't regenerate could possibly one day effect our reproduction as humans.
- Government will pay farmers to store crops and let them rot.
- Public transportation
- Hurricane Katrina
- The ideas of change exist, but there are policies in place that hinder those changes to manifest
- No one to hold these systems accountable
- Policies are put in place that will evolve over decades
- An ideology develops over a period of time. It's a long term effort
- Who can afford the "Green" life?
- The need for progressive to citizens to act in the interest of long-term thought processes; not always acting out in an reactionary mode
- City planning and developing

From Activist Art to Cultural Organizing

Saturday, April 5

3:45 PM—5:45 PM

Co-organized with the Arts & Democracy Project of the Center for Civic Participation, this interdisciplinary dialogue between artists and organizers, provided frameworks and went deeper into dialogue on key examples and issues of cultural organizing. What's the difference between issue-based art and cultural organizing? What are some of the successes and challenges artists and organizers have experienced in working together? Where does your work fit in the spectrum?

Moderators: Claudine Brown (Nathan Cummings Foundation) and Caron Atlas (Arts & Democracy Project)

Panelists: Amalia Anderson (Main Street Project, Raíces Project), Mark Tilsen (Thunder Valley CDC), Caroline Murray (Alliance to Develop Power), Jeremy Liu (Asian CDC) and Hiroko Kikuchi, Carlton Turner (Alternate ROOTS, M.U.G.A.B.E.E.).

18 attendees total; 11 women, 7 men; 3 elders; no youth.

Amalia: The Raíces Project serves people of many backgrounds in four states (Idaho, Oregon, Iowa and Minnesota). Numerous projects, e.g. publishing a **songbook**, to remember and celebrate culture and identity; **cookbook**, to remember the cultural power of food, plus a spinoff **calendar** with recipes. Also a **community newspaper**. In the

aftermath of the recent immigration raids, they brought in Latino psychologists – comadres – to deal with PTSD. Youth did a **digital storytelling** project around this, produced a DVD with Third World Majority. Raíces intentionally has a Latino/Anglo co-leadership, with a parallel track for Anglos: “It’s not time yet to bring the communities together.” They are not specifically working on “issues”—e.g. antiracism, classism—because “all people are needed to bring the community together.”

Mark: Works with two organizations, a non-profit and a for-profit. Volunteers for Thunder Valley CDC. “The rez is as low as you can go:” 70-90% unemployment, lowest infant survival rate outside Haiti, violence, high incidence of cancer. There were no resources for traditional religious practice, so they built a community house – only the best materials so the people could take pride in it. The for-profit company, Native American Natural Foods LLC, makes Tanka Bite, a food bar made from buffalo and cranberries. “It’s not just a candy bar, it’s the food of our ancestors. We are creating a brand that says what it is to be Lakota. We have all the resources we need to save ourselves, we just need the vision to make it happen.”

Jeremy: Works with the Asian and immigrant community in Chinatown and greater Boston. Part of Asian CDC’s work is “using culture as a mechanism, finding out how culture helps us do better organizing – so the work is its own subject in a way.” For example, in response to a planned high-rise luxury building with a 300-car garage in Chinatown, they planned a “large situationist performance piece,” with dozens of cars repeatedly circling the block where the building was to go up, during lunch hour, to illustrate the impact on the neighborhood of the building and the parking garage. Another example: Asian gardeners (mostly elderly) being forced out of their allotments; traditional organizing strategy didn’t work, it wasn’t appropriate to their lives; so they opened up the leadership structure to include them and their voices.

Hiroko: Comes from a more academic setting, a background in performance art that engages the audience and leads to organizing opportunities. Explores “how can art

intervene in social situations.” They passed around samples of bitter melon, a fruit that is an acquired taste but has many healthful attributes. They’ve established the semi-satirical “National Bitter Melon Council” (complete with logos and bumper stickers).

From www.bittermelon.org: *The National Bitter Melon Council (NBMC) is devoted to the cultivation of a vibrant, diverse community through the promotion and distribution of Bitter Melon. Our projects, events, and festivals celebrate the health, social, culinary, and creative possibilities of this underappreciated vegetable. Advocating the acceptance of Bitter Melon across cultures and cuisines, we believe that Bitter Melon creates an alternative basis for community – that of bitterness! Humans, unlike other mammals, are the only creatures to have developed a palate (or taste) for bitterness. Bitterness defines our humanity!*

Sharing bitter melon creates a shared experience, including thinking about bitterness in communities. They did an event with “Bitter Bombs,” in which people were invited to write something they felt bitter about on a piece of paper, mix that with dirt and some bitter melon, and then throw it onto a place that has bitter associations. “Everyone has an opinion about food, but not everyone has an opinion about art.”

Caroline: Works with two models – organizational development and cooperative development. Seeks to create new member-controlled organizations, e.g. housing cooperatives in 5 Valley towns. They use celebrations – holiday parties, birthdays, etc. – to bring people together. Run campaigns on worker rights, voter registrations, organizing construction workers, teachers, etc. Waging a “Battle of Big Ideas with the bad guys” who represent free market ideals, military power, etc. “We’re not going to win soon.” Members speak four different languages, many different ethnicities. Organized a story project to bring the communities together. This led to current project, a big mural, commissioned from a famous muralist who is a labor historian (but also notoriously “difficult”), as “a visual representation of who we are.” A 12-month popular education and community development project, beginning with community discussion, leading to civic dialogue with the broader public, including public officials, culminating in creation of the mural.

Ngugi wa Mirii: An important element is the training of organizers.

Caroline: Yes, but at the grass-roots level, one-on-one peer training; many organizers have to unlearn their formal academic training.

Claudine: We fund both formal and informal training programs, for example, at universities and with Urban Bush Women and Cornerstone Theater Company. Imagining America is evaluating programs, and if they're not working, figuring out how to help them improve. "Being a self-evaluator is important to being effective."

Caron: Who's training whom, which methodologies are being applied; "who's the expert?" There is a lack of crossover, e.g. power analysis is not common in academic settings.

Carlton: Is Regional Development Director of Alternate ROOTS, and works with his brother in the musical/spoken-word group M.U.G.A.B.E.E. (Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction). Quote from John O'Neal: "People learn more from what they do than from what is done to them." They teach critical thinking for youth, as a way to "think their way out of situations. We create situations that force you to think." The aim is to create a single youth political agenda in Mississippi, for instance, educating the public about boards of education. It is hard to sustain, financially. "Art is a way to sustain the work." They do media education, e.g. deconstructing music lyrics. Doing a project in Glendorra, MS (with Millicent Johnnie), the town where Emmett Till was murdered. 298 people in the town, all black.

Claudine: What's most important is to begin with the community you're working with – their voices, leadership, perceived needs. Training is important – don't be culturally insensitive or "missionary." "If you're doing this work, you're probably learning more than you're teaching, getting more out of it than you're giving." Coalition building is

important – artists don't have all the skills, others have those skills needed to enhance and complement the work. "The learning process never ends."

Cultural Organizing & Voices from the Battlefield, Part 2: Dialogue continued...

Sunday April 6, 2008

8:30 AM—9:30 AM

Discussion of story circles, leading to material for plays, films, etc. – there's an ethical risk: appropriation and distortion.

Caron Atlas: What about when we disagree with an ally? (i.e. Caroline Murray's story)

Claudine Brown: You need respect and loving criticism. (She was appalled at the idea of the "difficult artist" and the rigid program structure.) But you have to create strong relationships before asking the hard questions. In an ideal world, we would give "dual grants" for community and professional work. (Tells the story of the friend who loves doing community work but also needs to create with professionals.) Community art can be transformative, as well as working with the best artists who have trained all their lives. Story of the original play created with steelworkers, the audience member who said it was the best thing he'd ever seen. A community play "about us" is ipso facto "better" than something by, for example August Wilson, if it speaks more strongly to your actual experience.

Discussion of the relation of the artist to the community – how to feed back to the artist: from the community, peer to peer, etc.

Carlton Turner: We use Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process for giving group feedback on creative process and artistic work.

Claudine: Example: the traveling art exhibit that received feedback from educators during each stage of development, and at each stop on the tour.

Carlton: It comes down to trust.