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CARPAS, CUENTOS AND CORRIDOS:
CHICANO ARTS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Dean and Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Tanya Marina Mote

August 2009

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Title: CARPAS, CUENTOS AND CORRIDOS: CHICANO ARTS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING
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Degree Date: August 2009

ABSTRACT

This study suggests that effective forms of participation are grounded in histories of opposition and resistance. The intermediate relationship provided by voluntary associations, unions, clubs and even bowling leagues might teach citizens to act democratically; that is, to participate in activities related to electing leaders, but their usefulness extends beyond conventional politics to efforts to expand public life and to promote democracy through a broader set of activities that combine intensely social and personal public engagement, resistance, protest, and opposition, with conventional efforts to influence leaders. The experiences of community-based arts organizations provide a lens to examine both the barriers and opportunities that many organizations and their supporters face in their attempts to expand civil society. Community-based arts organizations speak to issues that other institutions aren't addressing, preserve and perpetuate culture that is threatened, and meet the needs of citizens who aren't being served well by dominant culture institutions. The position of these organizations within their own communities and within the public sphere, places them in a unique position to raise issues and to enforce accountability among institutions and the larger public who often lack cultural competency.

Political actors respond to political fragmentation by creating autonomous enclaves that cannot be easily classified and/or generalized. Although voluntary associations are seemingly conventional components of a conformist civic culture, they

are versatile and multidimensional spaces that serve many needs for members, who experience meaningful face-to-face relationships, as well as an opportunity for dialogue and debate. In small spaces, individuals have the opportunity to intentionally build community through practices of dialogue, mentoring, reciprocity, friendship and accountability. In an environment where accountability is enforced it is easier to recognize and confront the contradictions that arise in every community.

Ownership is derived from a shared investment and effort that is channeled into an enterprise and it is an important component in participation. Movement building begins with simple efforts to engage individuals in a common struggle: it requires significant investment from individuals, and support from a community that reinforces the effort. New interpretations of movement building make it clear that autonomous enclaves have significant value to communities and provide important lessons in creating sustainability.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Active Citizens, Resistance and Participation

In 2008, political observers marveled at the interest of citizens in the electoral process and at the success of Barack Obama's grassroots fundraising campaign. It became apparent that in 2009, it is still possible to engage citizens.¹

Grassroots organizations in many countries and contexts long have known what the Obama campaign demonstrated in 2008. Ordinary people can be activated; they care about the issues that affect them, the environment and other people.

In conventional, institutionally sanctioned settings or in revolutionary contexts, people come together through informal networks and/or highly structured organizations, to utilize what Robert Putnam calls social capital:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.²

¹Robert Putnam asserts that an ebb and flow in civic engagement occurs over time: “It is emphatically not my view that community bonds in America have weakened steadily throughout our history—or even throughout the last hundred years. On the contrary, American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, *not just downs*—a story of collapse *and* renewal. As I have already hinted in the opening pages of this book, within living memory the bonds of community in America were becoming stronger, not weaker, and as I shall argue in the concluding pages, it is within our power to reverse the decline of the last few decades.”

Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 25.

²*Ibid.*, 19.

Studies of voting behavior support Putnam's claim that an ebb and flow in engagement occurs over time.³ In the U.S., the public sphere⁴ is characterized by multidimensional relationships and overlapping layers of engagement and disengagement, mediated by social, economic, and political factors.⁵ According to Evans and Boyte, engagement occurs in free spaces:

³Dr. Michael McDonald, Department of Public and International Affairs, George Mason University, and director of the United States Election Project observes: "Since reaching a modern low in 1996, turnout rates have been increasing for three consecutive presidential elections. This increase comes despite many theories offered by political scientists to explain declining turnout rates: the decline in civic society, lowered trust in government and the tuning out of the electorate by television, among others. Of course, I argue that while turnout rates were at a lower level for the past thirty years, turnout rates never experienced an on-going decline. The "decline" is entirely explained by the increasing ineligible population that used to be included in turnout rates calculations. Perhaps these three elections will finally lay these theories to rest since it is now true that turnout rates are increasing from 1972, the year that lower-turnout 18-20 year olds were granted voting rights. Indeed, turnout rates are now in the low sixty percent range, the same level as the "high" turnout rates in the 1950s and 1960s. This despite the inclusion of lower participatory 18-20 year olds in the electorate and what I preliminarily estimate to be a half to three quarters of a million rejected mail-in ballots." See United States Election project website: Dr. Michael McDonald, "Voter Turnout," United States Elections Project, http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm (accessed April 16, 2009).

⁴There are multiple ways to conceptually characterize the places where people gather for social and/or political purposes. Jonathan Barker uses the concept of political settings to provide a more concrete understanding of the actual, physical places where collective action occurs: "As a metaphor political space draws a parallel between a new found freedom to address new issues and a physical pace-time in which to think new political thoughts and to express them in speech and writing is a real and important one. The metaphor reminds us, however, that political participation requires a space in which people can meet; it requires a time when people can be present together and hear one another. It is worth thinking further about political space in this physical and concrete way."

Jonathan Barker, *Street-Level Democracy—Political Settings at the Margins of Global Power*, West Hartford, CT: Kumarin Press, 1999, 27.

⁵This study examines the broad possibilities of citizen engagement and the potential to expand democracy from below, with a focus on communities. Although race, class, gender, sexual orientation and gender expression affect how each individual interacts with systems of power and privilege, and the contradictions within their own communities, this study examines the broad contributions of communities, while also acknowledging their internal contradictions. Barker observes that class analysis "...yields no automatic insight into how people organize to protect or to promote their livelihoods. Scattered agglomerations of exploited industrial workers, masses of informal sector workers and self employed, many kinds of rural tenancy and credit claims, and wide-spread gender based exploitation within family production units make forming a common front of the exploited a difficult task. Adding to the difficulty is the division of subordinate classes by old and new identity movements and generational differences. Class analysis helps us mightily to understand local contexts, but it offers strong evidence of great obstacles to class-defined united action by subordinate classes."

Ibid., 17.

...particular sorts of public spaces in the community, what we call free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. Put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision. These are, in the main, voluntary forms of association with a relatively open and participatory character—many religious organizations, clubs, self-help and mutual aid societies, reform groups, neighborhood, civic and ethnic groups and a host of other associations grounded in the fabric of community life. The sustained public vitality and egalitarianism of free spaces are strikingly unlike the “public” face of reactionary or backward looking protests. Democratic action depends upon these free spaces, where people experience a schooling in citizenship and learn a vision of the common good in the course of struggling for change.⁶

Gauging voting behavior is only one way to measure citizen involvement: conventional politics⁷ emphasize election activities at the expense of encouraging the daily involvement of citizens in the lives of their communities. Vincent Harding observes:

...while the record of voter participation is an important indicator, those of us who spend many hours in the formal and informal classrooms of our nation are often pressed toward other, deeper levels of concern.

For we have seen rising levels of cynicism among all age groups in the face of manipulative attacks on democracy and its institutional safeguards that have repeatedly emanated from the highest levels of our government.⁸ We have also learned how limited our students’ knowledge concerning the roots, the costs and the responsibilities involved in the continuing development of so fragile a system of government, a way of life. Undoubtedly part of what we are witnessing is also the sense of alienation experienced by everyone who realizes that a political order, whatever its name, has not recognized them as worthy, authentic participants in its constant re-creation...Of course, another explanation for the lack of engagement in the democratic process is the general tendency in our

⁶Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 17.

⁷That is, narrowly constructed interpretations.

⁸Harding provides the following footnote: For example, two sharply focused expressions of concern about failures of the American press to serve its essential, unmanipulated, “watchdog” role in our nation’s most recent history appeared almost simultaneously in disparate settings: the *Wall Street Journal* (Hodding Carter III, “A Confederacy of Liars, Guarded by a Yawning Watchdog,” January 25, 1990, A15) and *The Nation* (Alexander Cockburn, “Beneath a Peak in Darien: The Conquest of Panama,” vol. 250, no. 4 [January 29, 1990], 114. Harding, *Hope and History*, 236.

society to encourage passivity and spectator status, to value consumers and audiences more than actively engaged citizens.⁹

The intermediate relationship provided by voluntary associations, unions, clubs and even bowling leagues might teach citizens to act democratically; that is, to participate in activities related to electing leaders, but their usefulness extends beyond conventional politics to efforts to expand public life and to promote democracy through a broader set of activities that combine intensely social and personal public engagement, resistance, protest, and opposition, with conventional efforts to influence leaders.

At its core, this study is about civil society, the public sphere defined by the London School of Economics as:

... the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group.¹⁰

Examining participation through the lens of civil society is a conventional approach. Jonathan Barker observes:

Recent invocations of civil society, drawing on the thought of Alexis de Tocqueville, argue that vibrant and numerous non-state voluntary associations and social customs of interpersonal trust are necessary preconditions of healthy representative democracy. A central claim is that people's relations to government are mediated by associational relationships that do not belong to family, business or governmental spheres. Social clubs, voluntary associations and service

⁹Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 31.

¹⁰London School of Economics, Centre for Civil Society, "What is Civil Society," Centre for Civil Society, http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm (accessed March 29, 2009).

organizations are the stuff of civil society, the ground of citizen politics. Critically understood, civil society stands in an ambiguous relationship to representative democracy, because associations can use their freedom to act in ways that undermine democratic institutions as well as in ways that support democracy.¹¹ Although a focus on civil society is a conventional approach, this study takes a

broad view of participation and suggests that the most effective forms of participation are grounded in histories of opposition and resistance. The central concerns of this study is how to make civil society healthier: that is, more inclusive, participatory and democratic and how to understand the improvements to civil society, initiated from below, by ordinary people, and often, by communities in resistance. The state legitimizes ways of seeing and practices that reinforce established norms and institutionalized power, but non-state actors place demands, force openings, and act on their own in communities to produce change in societies. This study is about the impact of ordinary people in active communities and communities in resistance on the existing infrastructure and relationships that inform civil society. As Dr. Vincent Harding says, it is about the hope of creating a democracy that has never yet been.¹²

¹¹Barker, *Street-Level Democracy*, 15.

Civil society, however, is not Barker's preferred lens for examining movement. In the following paragraph, Barker continues to observe: "Those who celebrate civil society believe it provides a social ground that reunites political space. It quietly draws attention away both from the disempowerment of the national institutions that globalization has wrought and from the fragmentation of identities and interests that economic and cultural forces have brought. Even if we ignore the fragmentation of political space and the contradictory ways in which it can be used, the best research shows that the unifying ground of civil society is slow growing and not easily achieved through purposive action, although it is a wonderful gift when you have it, and where it exists efforts should be made to prevent its erosion," 15.

¹²As Vincent Harding puts it, (in relating the quest for progressive social change to the African American freedom struggle), the question is, "Is America Possible?": "Some years ago, I came across one of the most intriguing book titles that I have ever seen. It was set forth in the form of a question: *Is America Possible?* Even without delving into its contents, I was struck by the playful seriousness of the inquiry, the invitation to imagine and explore the shape and meaning of a "possible" America, an America still coming into existence. The idea itself, of course, was not new, simply its formulation. . . . For it is a question that has always been at the heart of the African American quest for democracy in this land. And wherever we have seen these freedom seekers, community organizers, and artisans of democracy, standing their ground,

The currents that bring together resistance, organizing, and conventional participation are rich and varied. Layers of organizing, active and open, and surreptitious and veiled, work in tandem to challenge, and critique, as well as to support and expand, civil society. The collective action that moves civil society almost always originates in communities. Communities provide the foundation, impetus and nourishment for every form of collective action. Evans and Boyte state:

Thinkers on both sides overlook the dynamic character of communal spaces. Under certain conditions, communal associations become free spaces, breeding grounds for democratic change. Indeed the historical evidence now suggests that popular movements with enduring power and depth always find their strength in community-based associations.¹³

But communities, repressed or otherwise, are often made invisible in public discourse, and conceptually are nonexistent in the liberal concept of individuality. The result is a lack of understanding among many people of the multidimensional histories that ground civil society, and a lack of understanding of their own potential for meaningful engagement. Neither histories of resistance and struggle, nor of engagement and participation (nor of how the two occur simultaneously) are widely understood by the public at large.¹⁴ An understanding of history and community, though, is an important component of all political participation, from the most conventional activities, to the most veiled and surreptitious protest.

calling others to struggle, advancing into danger, and creating new realities, it is clear that they are taking the question seriously; shaping their own answers, and testing the possibilities of their dreams.”
Harding, *Hope and History*, 16.

¹³Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 187.

¹⁴For a discussion about nurturing better historical understandings, consult Harding, *Hope and History*, 60-72.

Conventional political participation and protest are each important components of public engagement. Judith Hellman observes that while social movements are often seen as a response to the government repression of authoritarian regimes, they flourish in multiple contexts.¹⁵ Social movements do not occur necessarily in response to repression: they are one of a multitude of efforts to expand political space. Movements occur in opposition to a closed environment, but also in expansive environments.

New movements are thought to appear in order to fill a vacuum created by the repression of other legitimate forms of popular organization and representation.

Although this assertion may hold for most Latin American cases, a quick look at the development of new social movements in Western Europe indicates that movements there (in Italy, France and Germany) expanded most rapidly during a period when the formal organized parties and unions of the Left were growing in strength, electoral support, and political influence. The new movements represented a development that paralleled but did not substitute for traditional political participation. What the movements did was *extend* the “political space” available to citizens, bringing into the public realm the concerns of “everyday life” and of the “personal.”¹⁶

Hellman’s observations indicate that participation and opposition are fluid and may occur in multiple, overlapping contexts. Conventional participation and broader efforts to bring about change may occur simultaneously.

Case Study

This study uses the experiences of community-based arts organizations as a lens to examine both the barriers and opportunities that many organizations and their supporters face in their attempts expand civil society. Community-based arts organizations are the

¹⁵Judith Adler Hellman, “The Study of New Social Movements in Latin America and the Question of Autonomy,” in *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*, ed. Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 52-61.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 53.

product of histories that are often submerged: histories involving local cultures and ways of life, as well as resistance and struggle. Many of today's community-based arts organizations are direct relatives of the early protection societies,¹⁷ dance halls, churches, clubs and traveling variety shows that allowed communities to teach cultural traditions to their youth, celebrate identity and to enjoy one another's company. In Boyte's terms, because these spaces cannot exist without the voluntary involvement of engaged individuals, these spaces were and are essential to building civil society. Free space combines the need of the individual for self-realization with the desire to be involved in a larger endeavor. Arts organizations sometimes facilitate activism, but even when their projects are not specifically political, they provide access to meaningful artistic experience to many members of society, examine relevant issues and provide opportunities for dialogue. The work of artists that arts organizations present often challenge society to be more inclusive and defend ways of seeing and thinking that are not sanctioned by many institutions and individuals.

The organizational development of community-based arts organizations is as important as the artistic work that they produce. Organizations encounter challenges as well as opportunities in their quest to engage the public. The barriers that organizations face are caused sometimes by internal weaknesses and often by external factors. However, the ways that organizations respond to problems and build on strengths affects

¹⁷Many immigrant populations established voluntary associations known as protection societies that served as all-in-one source of lending, legal advice and social hall. Legion Arts, an arts organization in Cedar Rapids, IA is housed at CSPS: the Czech and Slovak Protection Society. In the Chicano context, such societies are known as *Ligas Protectoras*. See Arturo F. Rosales, *Chicano!*, (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1997), 90. The southwest also possessed a tradition of *sociedades mutualistas* (sometimes the terms *liga protectora* and *sociedad mutualista* are used interchangeably) community-based credit unions and kinship networks that allowed families to help one another make ends meet. For a discussion of mutual aid societies, see Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 158.

their autonomy and long-term sustainability, which ultimately, affects their ability to do their work. The experiences of arts organizations provide important lessons in building community and stimulating democratic engagement that transfers to other movement building contexts.

El Centro Su Teatro

We must once again rededicate ourselves as artists, as citizens, as cultural workers and as social architects.¹⁸

The primary case for this study is provided by El Centro Su Teatro, a Chicano theater company and Latino multidisciplinary arts organization in Denver, Colorado, whose success and sustainability hinges on its ability to provide meaningful cultural experiences to an engaged community. El Centro Su Teatro builds dialogue and support among community members. Su Teatro supporters are not passive consumers of entertainment; they are, in their own right, cultural activists dedicated to nurturing public space that will allow the Chicano arts and the cultural commons that sustains it, to thrive.

Su Teatro was founded in 1971 during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement: one of hundreds of teatros across the country that took its inspiration from El Teatro Campesino, an activist/artist brigade helmed by Luis Valdez. El Teatro Campesino's original purpose was to illustrate issues, to build morale and to revel in the humanity of farmworkers on the picket lines, and in the camps, during the California Grape Strikes of the late 1960s. El Teatro Campesino used agit-prop theater (agitation—propaganda) made famous by Bertolt Brecht, Italian *comedia del'arte*, and the popular performance traditions of the Mexican working class: the *carpa*, a vaudeville style traveling tent show;

¹⁸Amalia Mesa Bains “Cultural Survival,” in *Proceedings from the 1992 NALAC Conference* (San Antonio: National Association of Latino Art and Culture, 1992), 140.

the *corrido*, a ballad form popularized during the Mexican Revolution that was equal parts newswire, critique and entertainment; and the *cuento*, an original source of oral history and folk traditions. Humor and irreverence is a vital component of popular performance traditions. But popular performance is not merely a source of respite and enjoyment to hard working people. Art and culture have provided a source of identity, history and culture that has sustained Mexicans on both sides of the U.S.—Mexico border for over 500 years.

The Chicano Civil Rights Movement inspired a profound interest in Mexican culture, language (both Spanish and *nahuatl*), and history among youth, many who needed a greater sense of their own heritage or history. Chicanismo—an evolving aesthetic and ideology—allowed youth to name, articulate and celebrate their unique experience and culture in a space where Mexican and American identities converged. Teatro portrayed important issues of the times: the question of identity, racism in public schools, the war in Viet Nam, poverty and social policy. Dancers explored ballet folklorico as well as traditional Aztec dance; visual artists created stunning images that depicted politics, history and identity; musicians explored both traditional and contemporary forms; and poets wrote in both English and Spanish, often combining the two.

Today, Su Teatro is evolving, but it is unquestionably a product of the Chicano Movement and the traditions and history that informed it. The mission of Su Teatro to produce, promote, preserve and perpetuate Chicano and Latino culture resonates for an audience that faithfully supports the continued development of the company. Audiences understand and relate to Su Teatro's Chicano aesthetic that alternately undermines

authority, offers scathing political criticism, and exaggerated compliance as well as celebrates family, community and heritage. El Centro Su Teatro asks audiences to prioritize Su Teatro programs over commercial culture, to donate money in order to promote community ownership, and hence, to safeguard the themes, sources of dialogue and critique that supporters think are important. Volunteers work with staff members to introduce Su Teatro to new audiences and to help the organization raise money and build meaningful relationships with a broad base of supporters. El Centro Su Teatro provides space for people to come together: a resource for volunteerism, philanthropy, communal experience, and camaraderie. The relationship between El Centro Su Teatro and the community it serves also shows that people are willing to invest in public life: an indicator of the potential and possibility of growing a healthy civil society. As individuals become more isolated and distanced from meaningful connections, new opportunities emerge to reintroduce them to spaces where face-to-face relationships, meaningful dialogue, and a desire for satisfying food can all be nurtured at once.

Although the relationship between El Centro Su Teatro and its audiences is not unique among community-based arts organizations, it is significant in a public sphere defined by individualism, competition and isolation: a sphere in which many individuals have trouble connecting with sources of identity, history, or local cultures. Goldbard observes:

. . . considering contemporary Western culture as a whole exposes two overarching and countervailing truths addressed by community cultural development. The more complex and commercial the society, the more people experience a loss of agency, a decline in spontaneous connection, a tendency for consumer activities to supplant other social relationships and a strong pull toward isolated pursuits. Yet as these tendencies have come to light, the will to resist them has grown stronger, expressed in countless ways, such as the locally based "slow food" movement, remarkable growth in the popularity of do-it-yourself

approaches, burgeoning interest in craft and other traditional practices and a great awakening of the impulse to seek spiritual meaning. The feelings that animate this growing refusal to succumb to corporate values also enspirited those who work for community cultural development.¹⁹

The success of community-based spaces such as El Centro Su Teatro illustrates that although the public sphere is characterized on one level by apathy and isolation, there exist in civil society places where people come together to share a common concern for meaningful issues. The relationships between communities, artists and organizations are a resource for building meaningful dialogue and dynamic, vital enclaves of culture and participation. Individuals who come together around common interests and causes show solidarity and reciprocity in supporting the work of each other. Most of Su Teatro's constituents are culturally competent in multiple contexts, or at least want to be. The historical role of art and culture in marginalized communities, and the organizations dedicated to perpetuating it, is engrained in audiences who understand the significance of their continued involvement. Perpetuating cultural survival is an act of resistance: it is a powerful resource to communities and has had a lasting impact on members, which speaks to the nurturing and sustenance that culture has provided to them. Referring to the experience of African Americans, bell hooks writes:

Since many displaced African slaves brought to this country an aesthetic based on the belief that beauty, especially that created in a collective context, should be an integrated aspect of everyday life, enhancing the survival and development of community, these ideas formed the basis of African American aesthetics. Cultural production and artistic expressiveness were also ways for displaced African people to maintain connections with the past. Artistic African cultural retentions survived long after other expressions had been lost or forgotten. Though not remembered or cherished for political reasons, they would ultimately be evoked to counter assertions by white supremacists and colonized black minds that there remained no vital living bond between the cultures of African Americans and the

¹⁹Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (Oakland: New Village Press, 2006), 23.

cultures of Africa. The historical aesthetic legacy has proved so powerful that consumer capitalism has not been able to completely destroy artistic production in underclass communities.²⁰

Chicanos have tapped into the same cultural root to ensure survival and hence, ongoing resistance to cultural fragmentation. There is a continuity and cultural legacy in Chicano art that audiences understand. Cultural spaces have historical significance as safe spaces where respite and enjoyment was provided, sometimes behind the scenes or under cover. In contemporary times, Chicano art organizations and the artists that work with them provide audiences with the culture, experiences and history of Chicanos, who remain underrepresented and underserved in the commercial media (which is still more likely to portray people of color as maids, drug dealers or gang members) and in mainstream arts organizations.

Study Structure

This study provides broad theoretical perspectives, specific micro contexts, and a melding of perspectives from different fields.

Chapter Two provides a discussion of the important concepts and contexts that will guide the reader through the study as a whole. Although conventional participation studies and the movement building literature draw on diverse and competing resources, at the core of each is a concern with how citizens engage. Chapter Two suggests that a distinction can be drawn between those studies that are implicitly elitist and those which favor the popular. The purpose of this discussion is to illustrate how histories and traditions of resistance support efforts to build engagement in the public sphere and to observe that this activity is not always acknowledged or apparent. Essential to the

²⁰bell hooks, *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 105.

discussion in Chapter Two is the concept of community, which provides the foundation for all types of movement building.

Many times, arts organizations that successfully serve marginalized communities are deeply embedded in them and in fact, are direct legacies of movements. Chapter Two attempts to show how this evolution occurs and to orient the reader to the current state of community-based arts organizations. Finally, Chapter Two suggests that intentional community building aided by a process of dialogue and accountability are effective tools for movement building: for arts organizations who seek a broad base of active, engaged supporters and for other movement builders as well. Practices of mentoring, reciprocity, resource sharing, networking, collaboration, friendship and camaraderie are common in survival and kinship networks and communities in resistance. These practices of serving, protecting and nurturing one another are essential to successful movement building, but only through intentional effort are they integrated into the daily practices of individuals and organizations. Community building is defined by organizations and individuals who make time for others, mentor and teach youth, collaborate with organizations and individuals and support local businesses. Although some observers believe we are witnessing a broad global movement with no center,²¹ there is still a place in the modern world for organized movement building.

Chapter Three provides the historical context to allow the reader to appreciate an in depth discussion of El Centro Su Teatro in Chapter Four. Chapter Three begins with a discussion of Chicano aesthetics before moving to a discussion of the Chicano Movement. The chapter ends with an account of the rise of Chicano art.

²¹Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest* (London: Penguin Group, 2007).

Chapter Four provides a discussion of El Centro Su Teatro that covers the organization's history, evolution and current challenges. The chapter ends with a broader look at the arts field as a whole. Arts organizations are important components of civil society. They are hubs for participation, where people who seek face-to-face relationships and meaningful exchange come together. Organizations fulfill many different roles for participants: they transmit culture, stories and ideas that are not immediately available in the broader culture, represent constituents to many different publics and negotiate relationships in the broader public sphere that serve members. It is important to understand the inner workings of arts organizations and their issues, because their ability to serve the needs of members, to activate participants, provide critique, opposition and sources of dialogue that would not occur otherwise, cannot reach their full potential unless organizations are stable, sustainable and autonomous.

Chapters Five and Six continue an in depth examination of Su Teatro and its work. Chapter Five examines two of Su Teatro's projects, the play *La Carpa Aztlán presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* and the Chicano Music Festival. The chapter combines a broad critique of the arts field with an examination of how Su Teatro connects with patrons. The chapter suggests that participation of any kind hinges on ownership, engagement, deep connections, face-to-face relationships, meaning and resonance. Many large arts institutions would like to cultivate diverse audiences, but in order to do so, they will have to completely transform the way they do business. In any context, top down reform doesn't seem likely. Wherever participation is desired, be it in arts organizations or the larger public sphere, broad participation requires empowerment and activation from below: a complete shift in the locus of power and privilege.

If top down reform is unlikely, Chapter Six suggests that when dialogue is initiated from below, an opportunity arises to reframe conversations, build education and awareness, and to hold the powerful and privileged accountable for wrongs. Chapter Six is about stories and communities. While stories transcend space and time, the work that occurs in the physical space of communities is a process; it is multidimensional, incremental and sometimes slow moving. Both Chapters Five and Six indicate that dialogue is important, but dialogue is not easy, and even when it is intentional it can be compromised by many factors, including the internal contradictions of the parties at the table, the experience of facilitators and community members, or even the connotations of the physical space where dialogue occurs. Nevertheless, it is impossible to expand democratic relationships without dialogue, and in communities that are intentionally constructed, it is important to build the skills and resources among members that make dialogue fruitful. Meanwhile, resistance is fluid and is carried to new contexts by individuals who transport stories, sense of place and experience with them through many chapters of life and intentionally transmit them to youth, communities and audiences throughout those chapters.

In conclusion, the study returns to its initial premises and attempts to tie together major themes for the reader.

From Resistance to Engagement

The World Commission on Culture and Development asserts: "people turn to culture as a means of self-definition and mobilization and assert their local cultural values. For the poorest among them, their own values are often the only thing they can

assert."²² Maintaining culture in a world that demands assimilation is an important form of resistance.

The road to a vigorous public life detailed in this study might end with conventional political participation, but it doesn't begin there. This study argues that at least one form of important public engagement is hewn from resistance, resilience and survival, and an understanding of history that clearly acknowledges systems of domination that limit democracy, as well as the many forms of activism, community building and engagement that occur in free spaces, all over the world. That is, networks that historically ensured survival for marginalized communities are also vehicles for social change. Moving to civic engagement with resistance as a reference point is productive, and in many ways, a fruitful and optimistic path toward a healthier civil society. Strategies for social change that begin with resistance examine what are sometimes brutal, unscrupulous and repressive histories: histories that illustrate that ordinary people as well as the state are capable of undemocratic behavior. Communities seeking social change believe that an expanded democracy is possible, and that ultimately, human beings have the potential to do good. Resistance is a rich resource for creativity and a source of knowledge and innovation in communities. Resistance provides a source of self-knowledge, culture, history and place: it produces intimacy, camaraderie, mutual support and encouragement that are ongoing. Resistance culture often stimulates positive, mutually supportive relationships between members. The resourcefulness, creativity, and drive that allowed members of communities in resistance to survive, protect and provide for their families historically, continues to inform progeny who know

²²Goldbard, *New Creative Community*, 31.

how to get things done, to maneuver between cracks or around roadblocks and to openly confront individuals and systems that limit participation.

In a world where privatization and the hegemony of mass media and culture are constant, merely to shop locally is an act of resistance. The opportunities for bold and challenging civic life exist, driven by the majority of ordinary people who are willing to get involved, engage, volunteer and give money to causes they think are important. The weight of consumerism permeates most of public life, but submerged beneath, are vital networks that make the pockets of cultural commons and local community thrive. The challenge is to bring this intelligence, creativity and innovation out into the open and to make it known as a resource, and to openly discuss and challenge the systems of domination, privilege and power that underlie all relationships, including personal, community, civil society, and state-civil society arrangements. When undemocratic histories and practices are named and acknowledged, they can be integrated into everyday understandings of the society at large. Dialogue that acknowledges historical wrongs and the ongoing challenges of racism, classism, sexism and homophobia provides an opportunity to raise awareness and also to enforce accountability. Dialogue is most effective, though, when it is initiated and controlled by communities that have been marginalized. When top down conversations occur, ways of seeing and acting in the world that continue to sustain marginalized communities can intentionally, or unintentionally be appropriated, and thus lose their meaning and impact for their intended audience.

Growing successful community organizations, and the work of movement building in general, is a challenge for communities and individuals struggling with their

own contradictions, and internal efforts to confront sexism, homophobia, or the class differences that influence the way individuals interpret issues. Movement building requires individuals to be intentional, organized and disciplined, and to utilize tools to expose and confront their internal contradictions. A variety of factors slow the effectiveness and efficiency of community-based organizations, and external factors impede their work as well. The conversation about building democracy starts on the ground. It is important to use tools and opportunities to nurture public life in spaces where participation and resistance reinforce each other. Without small spaces for people to come together, there won't be an opportunity to address larger systemic issues. Meaning, satisfaction and understanding starts in small spaces. El Centro Su Teatro is a small space, in a single community, but it is a part of a much larger picture.

CHAPTER TWO: COMMUNITY, CULTURE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a building block for the work as a whole by providing a discussion of key concepts and relating them to the case study. This chapter examines ideas about participation, community and resistance and relates them to community-based arts organizations and the larger civil society that they inhabit.

By articulating how participation can be both narrowly and broadly constructed, the interaction between resistance and participation becomes more apparent. A narrow construction of political participation is restricted to voting behavior, and the activities associated with electing leaders. Some conventional scholars such as Robert Dahl and Carole Pateman go broader to consider larger roles for citizens in imperfect polyarchies.¹ When even more broadly constructed, the meaning of participation encompasses the everyday lives of people and their social and political actions in their own communities. Thus, a faceted understanding of participation incorporates an understanding of activities both sanctioned and unsanctioned that work in tandem or independently to expand civil society. A quick look at U.S. civil rights history, for example, reveals that the survival strategies and resistance networks established by African Americans under slavery,

¹Dahl presents a conventional concern that conforms the limited role of participation within a representative democracy. Dahl is specifically concerned with the process of government, but is also concerned with broadening democracy. Pateman provides an indictment of the elite-centered literature. See

Robert Dahl, "Further Reflections on the Elitist Theory of Democracy," in *Political Elites in a Democracy*, ed. Peter Bachrach (New York: Atherton Press, 1971), 93-116.

Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

translated into efficient information networks that crossed from south to north. African Americans utilized the black church, religious organizations (i.e., the Fellowship of Reconciliation), labor unions (i.e., the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), advocacy groups (i.e., the Committee on Racial Equality and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and myriad local voluntary associations (i.e., the Montgomery Neighborhood Improvement Association) to provide services, sustenance and organizing tools to their communities, beginning more than seventy-five years before the Civil Rights Movement.² Black organizations and institutions acted within civil society and simultaneously challenged civil society (as well as the state), but also gave black people opportunities to build community and to learn skills. Voluntary organizations provided protected space to members, who were able to discuss problems and political issues away from the scrutiny of public officials and other citizens. At times, voluntary associations provided resources or protection against repression.³ Rosa Parks⁴ was one individual, but a nation-wide community strengthened by a broad web of voluntary association and individuals who were already acting in different contexts (i.e., sit-ins, freedom rides) to promote desegregation, stood behind her.⁵

²See Juan Williams. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin Group, 1987).

³Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 26.

⁴The legendary Civil Rights icon who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955.

⁵Grace Boggs observes: "The Montgomery Bus Boycott in December 1955, was the first struggle by an oppressed people in Western society from this new perspective of revolution as two-sided transformation not only of our institutions but of ourselves. Led by the 26 year old Martin, a people who had been treated as less than human struggled against their dehumanization not as angry victims but as new men and women, representative of a more human society. Using methods, including their own system of transportation, that transformed themselves and increased the good rather than the evil in the world, exercising their spiritual power and always bearing in mind that their goal was not only desegregating buses but building the beloved community, they inspired the human identity, anti-war and ecological

Participation, from the most conventional activities, to the most veiled forms of resistance often interacts, ultimately, with the goal of expanding democratic practices. Arts organizations like El Centro Su Teatro and many other social justice organizations illustrate how voluntary associations function in civil society, bridging multiple and often contradictory roles. Organizations like El Centro Su Teatro work to strengthen public engagement and to expand public space, but they face many barriers, both internally and externally. The problems that many small social justice nonprofits⁶ experience keep them from maximizing their potential to serve the public and many nonprofits negotiate multiple roles: meeting the needs of individuals, providing social space, organizing and engaging individuals, and attempting to influence policy making.

Many social justice organizations in general, and community-based arts organizations in particular, although distinct from one another, are grounded in histories that parallel that of African American voluntary associations. It is important to examine these histories, in order to understand how historical experiences and traditions of organizing act as precursors to modern organizations, as well as to understand how members of organizations draw on multiple resources to initiate dynamic relationships with community members. Even within the sanctioned sphere of civil society, unsanctioned activities occur behind the scenes, in order to open public space. The

movements that during the last decades of the 20th century have been creating a new civil society in the United States.”

Grace Boggs, “Let’s Talk About Malcolm and Martin,” (transcribed speech given at the Brecht Forum, New York, May 4, 2007), March 15, 2009.

⁶Throughout the study, El Centro Su Teatro is referred to as a community-based arts organization, but it can also be seen as a grassroots social justice arts organization, with roots in the Civil Rights Movement. In the current discussion, it is helpful to view Su Teatro and other likeminded organizations through the frame of social justice, because many organizations working on different issues, share overlapping concerns, and barriers, particularly related to organizational development and fundraising.

ultimate goal, however, is to expand civil society and the public sphere as a whole, to become more inclusive and democratic. Organizations draw on multiple resources and histories to challenge individuals and the state to be more inclusive. First, this chapter examines the concepts that are important to the study as a whole. Participation, community and the role of resistance in the interpretation of each are important conceptual issues, and some of the ways they have been defined by scholars and how they might interact is taken into consideration. Second, the chapter offers concrete illustrations of the historical role of resistance in marginalized communities, and the associated role of art. Third, the chapter describes how many community-based arts organizations, particularly those founded by people of color evolved from the communities they serve. Fourth, the chapter moves to a broader overview of community-based arts organizations in the United States. Finally, the chapter returns to the concepts of community and participation and concludes by reflecting on the practices that are most relevant to arts organizations and their supporters and other movement builders who are concerned with the expansion of civil society.

Political Participation: The Elite vs. The Popular

Political science scholars who study political participation and more broadly, state-civil society relationships, generally, support either an implicitly elite-centered or a popular perspective. From an elite-centered perspective, leaders should be trusted to make decisions.⁷ Promoting too much participation might also promote instability. Verba

⁷Political elite analysis implicitly affects the work of comparativist scholars such as Lipset, Berelson and Sartori (pluralist/elite); Samuel Huntington (political development); and Almond, Easton, Verba and Nie (systems theory), who employ top-down views of state-civil society relationships, emphasizing power, authority and stability. The analysis of these scholars is influenced by the rise of totalitarianism, creating a heightened concern with the problematic potential of mass mobilization and an emphasis on stability;

Nie and Kim narrowly define participation as:

. . . the means by which the interests, desires and demands of the ordinary citizen are communicated. By political participation we refer to all those activities by private citizens that are more or less aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the decisions that they make.⁸

According to Bill and Hardgrave, elite analysis focuses on “the behavior of a relatively small number of political decision makers, rather than stressing the formal and institutional apparatus of government.”⁹ However, comparativists emphasize the role of strong institutions as well as leaders. Because of the legitimacy of authority—that “modicum of control”¹⁰—voting citizens leave problems to leaders and to the bureaucracy.

Elites may attempt to prevent issues that threaten their interests from being widely considered and discussed, with the effect of narrowing the scope of public dialogue.¹¹ Bill and Hardgrave observe: “An elite has relatively more control than any group in society because of its authority and its relation to the instruments of coercion and persuasion in society.”¹²

The interaction between power, authority and stability are of primary concern to elitist perspectives, with an emphasis on trade-offs. By voting, citizens trade autonomy

trends in governance that emphasized bureaucracies (Weber) and the intellectual legacy of elite scholars such as Mosca, Michels and Pareto.

⁸Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie and Jae-on Kim, *The Modes of Political Participation: A Cross National Comparison* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1971), 9.

⁹J. A. Bill and R. L. Hardgrave, *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory* (Princeton: Merrill Publishing Company, 1973), 147.

¹⁰Harold Lasswell et al., “The Elite Concept,” in *Political Elites in a Democracy*, by Peter Bacharach (Palo Alto: Atherton Press, 1971), 17.

¹¹Peter Bachrach, ed., *Political Elites in a Democracy*, (New York: Atherton Press, 1971), 1-13.

¹²Bill and Hardgrave, *Comparative Politics*, 171.

and control over policy decisions for the state's guarantee of authoritative leadership, protection and the production of goods. The participation of citizens beyond their responsibility as voters is not necessary from the perspective of some elite-oriented scholars, nor is voter apathy a concern. According to Bernard Berelson, "certain requirements commonly assumed for the successful operation of democracy are not met by the behavior of the 'average' citizen."¹³ Berelson marks the attributes of the involved citizen as one who demonstrates interest, discussion and motivation. However, "many vote without real involvement in the election and even the party workers are not typically motivated by ideological concerns, or plain civic duty."¹⁴

If the democratic system depended solely on the qualifications of the individual voter, then it seems remarkable that democracies have survived through the centuries. After examining the detailed data on how individuals misperceive political reality or respond to irrelevant social influences, one wonders how a democracy ever solves its political problems.¹⁵

According to Berelson, citizens function mainly as potential voters. Although citizens do not live up to the ideal of a democratic society, the democratic system that is in place is an efficient and reasonable form of political organization. Individuals don't live up to the requirements of democracy, but the system grows and survives; Berelson attributes this to the heterogeneity of societal behavior and attitudes. The diversity of the citizenry enables the system to be stable and flexible because the apathy of some citizens neutralizes the partisanship of others, thus keeping the entire system in balance. High levels of participation are only required from a minority of citizens, and the apathy and disinterest

¹³Bernard Berelson et al., *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 307.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 311.

of others is actually helpful in maintaining stability.

In short, when we turn from requirements for “average” citizens to the requirements for the survival of the entire democratic system, we find it unnecessary for the individual voter to be an “average” citizen cast in the classic or any other single mold. With our increasingly complex and differentiated citizenry has grown up an equally complex political system, and it is perhaps not simply a fortunate accident that they have grown and prospered together.¹⁶

Berelson’s study emphasizes the almost complete lack of interest in politics by citizens, but his focus on process leads him to conclude that the system functions well in spite of limited participation.

Elite oriented theorists look to the state to provide order, but scholars who support popular movement question the wisdom of placing too much authority in the hands of leaders. Scholars oriented toward the popular look to ordinary people (and often, poor people) as the individuals most likely to bring about positive change by working together, rather than relying on the state to meet their needs.

Citizens reclaim authority from “experts”:

‘When we started out, they told us we couldn’t do nothing because we were poor folks and not experts,’ said Bertha Gilkey, leader of a remarkable effort to revitalize once decimated public housing in St. Louis. ‘I thought about that and then said, ‘experts got us in trouble in the first place.’ In the information age, when knowledge is power and technocratic professionalism can veil underlying value questions, it seems obvious to many that experts must be put ‘on tap, not on top.’¹⁷

Seligson and Booth write:

. . . citizens, independently of formal governmental institutions, collectively create resources which satisfy their own needs, and informally allocate scarce resources for collective benefit.¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid., 322.

¹⁷Harry Boyte and Frank Reissman, *The New Populism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 420.

¹⁸Mitchell Seligson and John Booth, eds., *Political Participation in Latin America* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 4.

Calhoun indicates that within any historical period “we can identify a whole field of social movements shaped by their relationship to each other and appealing to different, though overlapping, potential participants.”¹⁹ Examples include the Chartist movement of nineteenth century England, the Oneida community of the antebellum U.S. and the West German peace movements of post World War II.²⁰

Reissman indicates that “the essence of populism is ordinary people getting involved with other to collectively control their lives.”²¹ Populists take a “critical stance toward professionalism, which is often seen a pretentious, purist, distant and mystifying; a preference for simplicity, informality and cooperation is emphasized.”²²

Underlying all this is the basic self-help ethos that emphasizes the indigenous strengths of the people involved in contrast to a dependence on external, elite experts. These attitudes are unlike a lobbyist form of advocacy, in which representatives speak for the constituents who remain passive and inactive.²³

In spite of activities of a popular sector that Paul Hawken estimates includes over two million organizations, globally, working toward environmental, economic and social justice,²⁴ the elite perspective prevails as a dominant frame of reference that allows many citizens to assume that there is no point in “getting involved.” The problem is further complicated by globalization. According to Francis Moore Lappe, “the dominant

¹⁹Craig Calhoun, “New Social Movements of the Nineteenth Century,” *Social Science History* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 385-427.

²⁰Paul D’Anieri, Claire Ernst and Elizabeth Kier, “New Social Movements in Historical Perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 2 (July 1990): 445-458.

²¹Boyte and Reissman, *The New Populism*, 54.

²²Ibid., 54.

²³Ibid., 60.

²⁴Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*.

conception of reality in which our nation's culture, especially our view of democracy²⁵ is grounded is in assumptions of scarcity of resources and the selfishness of citizens.²⁶

"The magic of the market" is the key to our well being and depends on privatization and commodification. From these assumptions, it is easy to see why most Americans grow up absorbing the notion that democracy boils down to just two things - elected government and a market economy. Since in the United States we have both, there isn't much for us to do except show up at the polls and shop. I like to call this stripped down duo Thin Democracy because it is feeble.²⁷

As a result of the predominance of an implicitly elite centered perspective (which both the state and citizens perpetuate), the movements that are occurring at the grassroots are submerged and not easily accessible through dominant culture institutions. When the activities of citizens at the grassroots are brought into view, they are often reinterpreted or watered down.²⁸ It is impossible to conceptualize the ways that citizens integrate participation into their everyday lives, or the rich and varied cultures grounded in local histories, without a broad understanding of participation, history and movement. Without a broad understanding of participation, it is difficult to imagine how activities related to

²⁵Frances Moore Lappe, *Getting a Grip: Clarity Creativity and Courage in a World Gone Mad* (Cambridge, MA: Small Planet Media, 2007), 8.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 9.

²⁸In *The Necessary Embrace of Conspiracy*, Robert Shetterly notes that Martin Luther King Jr. was unapologetically confrontational about addressing the interwoven problems of racism, imperialism, capitalism, materialism and militarism. Shetterly states, "It has always confounded me every year when we celebrate Dr. King's life that no mention is made of that Riverside Church speech (on April 4, 1967, when King urged the public to confront the problems and abuses that drove the war as well as segregation) in the major media. We are always treated to sound bites of the 1963 I Have a Dream Speech. That speech's oratory is as powerful as it is non-confrontational. Which is why it is replayed for modern audiences. Dr. King was about confrontation. Non-violence and confrontation, each ennobling and making the other effective. In 1967 he said...my country is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." And he explained how our economic system thrived on exploitation and violence, or, as Emma Goldman put it, "The greatest bulwark of capitalism is militarism." This was the most important speech King ever gave and not playing it when we ostensibly honor him, is tantamount to castrating him, morally and intellectually."

CommonDreams.org. Robert Shetterly, *The Necessary Embrace of Conspiracy*.
<http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/08/31/3521>, accessed June 12, 2009.

lobbying and electing leaders occur in tandem with broader opposition.

However, civil society is informed by a web of local histories, cultures, traditions of engagement and everyday activities that are available as resources to every individual: these resources are rooted in community. In order for movement building to succeed, it is imperative to bring the possibilities of democratic movement to the attention of citizens, to uncover and articulate the nature of dominating relationships, and to nurture the meaningful relationships between citizens that allow them to utilize their energy, talent and material resources to engage around the issues that are important to them.

Community

Community is fundamental to who we are and also to our ability to organize and to express our politics. Language doesn't exist outside of community, and no human endeavor matters outside of the context of a community. According to Boyte, community implies "density and texture of a relationship. Communal ties depend on a complex set of social relationships that overlap and reinforce each other."²⁹ Craig Calhoun characterizes community as "greater 'closeness' of relations" than is true for society as a whole. "This closeness seems to imply, though not rigidly, face-to-face contact, commonality of purpose, familiarity and dependability."³⁰ Daly and Cobb state, "Our basic conviction is that persons are internally related to one another (i.e., their relationships define their identities as persons) so that any view of people that treats them as self-contained individuals falsifies the real situation."³¹ Liberals provide the least discussion of

²⁹Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 187.

³⁰Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 111.

³¹Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the Common Good* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 169.

community. The emphasis in liberalism is on detailing the rational capacity of the individual. With reason comes free choice. According to Daly and Cobb:

The world that economic theory normally pictures is one in which individuals all seek their own good and are indifferent to the success or failure of other individuals engaged in the same activity. There is no way to conceive of a collective good—only of the possibility that there can be improvement for some without cost to others.³²

But, this view of human beings is not realistic:

This picture of human beings is profoundly erroneous. People are constituted by their relationships. We come into being in and through relationships and have no identity apart from them. Our dependence on others is not simply for goods and services. How we think and feel, what we want and dislike, our aspirations and fears—in short, who we are—all come into being socially.³³

Among classical conservatives, community is seen as a thread in an organic social fabric that utilizes values and traditions as sources of restraint. Community in this sense, then, is a source of conformity.³⁴ Progressives and leftists recognize community as a site for collective action but few cohesive portraits are available that provide a theory of community that outlines both its productive and dysfunctional aspects.

Community and the Public Sphere

³²Ibid., 160.

³³Ibid., 161.

³⁴The father of classical conservatism, Edmund Burke, valued the relationship between the individual and society, describing the interwoven threads of individuals and institutions as a social fabric. Consider the following quote: “Burke’s notion of a good government is one that will enlist enlightened representatives, drawn from the natural aristocracy, in defense of private property and the common good. To do its job properly, the government must be strong. Yet its strength should not be concentrated in one person or one place, lest this tempt those in power to abuse it. This is why Burke stressed the importance of the “little platoons,” those secondary associations that make up a society. Burke agreed that power should be spread throughout society. Local concerns should be dealt with at the local level, not the national; and instead of placing all power in the government itself, the traditional authority of churches, families and other groups should be respected. In this way government will be strong enough to protect society, but not so strong as to smother the “little platoons” that make ordered liberty possible.”

Terrence Ball and Richard Dagger, *Political Ideology and the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Longman, 1999), 102.

Carol Pateman suggests that citizens do not participate in conventional politics because they lack practice. Democracy is more than just electing leaders. Democratic society requires democratic relationships at all levels of public life. Pateman suggests that if citizens learn political efficacy; that is, if they learn to be effective citizens by participating in democracy in other areas of their lives (i.e., the PTA, joining and becoming active in a union, coaching a youth baseball team), they will be more likely to care about public life and politics at all levels. Unlike elite theorists who fear mass participation might trigger instability, Pateman asserts that instability can only be averted through mass participation. Pateman uses the influences of Rousseau, Mill, and Cole to construct a theory of participatory democracy built around “the central assertion that individuals and their institutions cannot be considered in isolation from one another.”³⁵ Representative institutions at the national level do not constitute democracy. Rather, democratic skill and procedure must be incorporated into aspects of everyday social life.

There is no special problem about the stability of a participatory system; it is self-sustaining through the educative impact of the participatory process. Participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so.³⁶

Pateman asserts that participation in “non-governmental authority structures” is necessary to develop the “political efficacy” which is necessary for participation in national level politics. According to Pateman, the political attitudes of workers are affected by the authority structures of their work environments. Increased participation is found to increase worker efficiency.³⁷ Pateman quotes Blumberg: “there is hardly a study in the

³⁵Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*. 102.

³⁶Ibid., 43.

entire literature which fails to demonstrate that satisfaction in work is enhanced or that other generally acknowledged beneficial consequences accrue from a genuine increase in workers' decision making power."³⁸ Pateman notes:

The claim of the participatory theory of democracy that the necessary condition for the establishment of a democratic polity is a participatory society is not a completely unrealistic one; whether or not the ideal of the earlier 'classical' theorists of participatory democracy can be realized remains very much an open and live question.³⁹

The views of Evans and Boyte are consistent with Pateman's. They are concerned with how ordinary people participate in politics. They seek to uncover how citizens are active catalysts rather than passive victims. They ask, "What are the roots of not simply movements *against* oppression but also, more positively, of those democratic social movements which both enlarge opportunities for participation and enhance people's ability to participate in the public world?"⁴⁰ Key to Boyte's argument is the idea of free space: space that allows individuals to express themselves openly, but also to get training in the tools of democracy through involvement in public life.

Free space is found in settings which combine strong communal ties with larger public relationships and aspects. This public dimension involves a mix of people and perspectives beyond one's immediate personal ties, and also involves norms of egalitarian exchange, debate, dissent, and openness. Moreover, the relationships of free space draw on localized and particular interests but also connect participants to larger patterns of decision making, social life and institutional practice. . . . This mix of community and public, particular history and larger connection, is key to a political education that allows people simultaneously to draw upon and transform in democratic fashion their inherited identities and the ties of daily life.⁴¹

³⁷Ibid., 102.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, viii.

. . . we argue that the experience provided by free space makes it possible for people to appropriate democratic aspects of cultures which are necessarily complex and, in the process, to transform traditions in democratic fashion.⁴²

Evans and Boyte observe that liberalism focuses on “large scale institutions” and competition, creating a “sharp divide between ‘public’ (understood as the arena of official politics) and private (understood as a world of personal meanings, values and commitments).”⁴³

This kind of politics is incapable of generating the passions, allegiances, and values essential to serious engagement of the citizenry in public life.⁴⁴

Communities and voluntary associations allow individuals to communicate and support each other, which results in “dignity, independence and vision.”⁴⁵ Meaningful participation originates in communities. Craig Calhoun states, “communities give people the ‘interests’ for which they will risk their lives—family, friends, customary crafts, and ways of life.”⁴⁶

. . . free spaces offers a way beyond a polarized argument between the uprooted individual of liberal political thought and the communitarian categories of classical republicanism. Free space shows both linkages and also the distinctions between community and a public arena in which citizens act. The idea changes the classic equation between “community” and “public life” because free spaces play a crucial bridging role. They exist on the borders, connecting as well as differentiating community and the public arena. Their democratic character grows out of the fact that they are both located in community and look out toward the larger world.⁴⁷

⁴¹Ibid., ix.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., xi.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 17.

⁴⁶Ibid., 187.

Community, Resistance and the Public Sphere

Evans and Boyte offer an anti-elitist perspective, criticizing the “cultured condescension” of power-holders that render the strivings of ordinary citizens “invisible.”⁴⁸ Boyte and Evans provide additional dimension to conventional participation by focusing on ordinary people as capable actors.

State-civil society relationships are defined by how actors utilize space and how power, authority and legitimacy is expressed. Participation cannot be understood in terms of a state that merely produces goods and extracts resources. Rather, any state, democratic or authoritarian has the capacity to be repressive and responsive. Additionally, there are degrees of domination that can exist in relationships between two people, or between citizens and those operating a state and its institutions. McCamant states:

Domination, of course, does not just appear; it results from the struggle between individuals and groups in which the outcome depends in large part on the *means of domination*. Very broadly, the means of domination can be divided into three general groups: persuasion, purchase and coercion. One type of means can be used to acquire other types. Priests can motivate generals through persuasion; landowners can purchase priests; generals can conquer land and the ability to purchase that comes with the land. The three types of means are seldom used separately; rather, they are used in combination by both those seeking to dominate and those resisting domination. The combination of the gun and the bible—overwhelming force and arrogant self righteous arguments—brought about the domination by Europeans of most of the rest of the world. It is not clear which is more powerful, the pen or the sword (or the dollar); though it is fairly clear within categories which of the many instruments of communication or of violence are more effective.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Ibid., xii.

⁴⁸Ibid., 154.

⁴⁹John F. McCamant, “Domination, State Power, and Political Repression,” in *State Organized Terror: the Case of Violent Internal Repression*, ed. P.T. Bushnell, V. Shlapentokh and C. K. Vanderpool (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 4.

Revealing the complexity of the state allows us to examine its impact on space, relationships and action. In a conventional analysis of democracy, authority and legitimacy are wielded by the state, but the source of legitimacy lies in the hands of the people. If power and authority are misused, a crisis of legitimacy occurs. In practice, though, repression is at times sanctioned by the state, along with citizens who comply with undemocratic practices. Hence, the relationships and their implications are complex.

In cases where the state legitimizes actions that put the safety as well as the physical and psychological well being of individuals and communities at risk, what happens? One outcome is subjugation. Examples of such state-society relationships are evident under slavery or in internment camps. Another possible outcome is transformation.

Paolo Freire reinforces the idea that every person, no matter how “ignorant” or submerged in a “culture of silence” is capable of looking critically at the world.⁵⁰ People learn through conscientization to reinterpret the world as actors, who can transform themselves and their oppressor. Liberation happens through a mutual process in which the oppressed and the oppressor both become more fully human.⁵¹

The daily experience of people negotiating public space and a better quality of life with the state and other individuals often lie somewhere in between. People are seldom wholly subjugated: they resist and struggle to make their lives better in spite of a dominating state (and other individuals who encroach on their freedoms) and use the tools at their disposal to impede the progress of the machine. At times, people openly call

⁵⁰Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 76.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 27.

for change, organize, pressure and fight to effect change. Citizens participate in acknowledged conventional systems and use opposition and protest. Citizens act in spaces populated by public institutions and in common space that is owned and controlled by members of a community.

To understand the inner life of democratic movements, one must rethink such traditional categories as “politics,” “private life,” “public activity,” “reaction,” and “progress.” Only then can we hope to fathom how people draw upon their past for strength, create out of traditions—which may seem on their face simply to reinforce the status quo—new visions of the future, gain out of the experiences of their daily lives new public skills and a broader sense of hope and possibility.⁵²

Communities are networks of people, bound together by geography, interests, identity, ethnicity or kinship, but where members of communities are marginalized within the larger public, they use their allegiance to protect and meet the needs of fellow community members. That is, while the physical space of a community may not change, the information, resources and even people who are allowed access does change. Additionally, communities can be bound together over time and space, which allows participation and resistance to occur in many contexts.

Community allows individuals to understand who they are, how their experience relates to others and where their common interests lie. Communities legitimize experiences that the state dismisses, denies or outlaws. An examination of coming of age stories of 1950s housewives, gay men, or people of color raised away from their ancestral communities yield stories of people who feel isolated, who question their sanity because they can't embrace the legitimized reality. When they meet people who understand or share their views and experiences the acknowledgement of their own experience is

⁵²Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 17.

empowering.

Boyte discusses the process in free spaces of taking democratic aspects of culture and binding them to a public practice of dialogue—but for marginalized peoples, there is also a need to utilize culture and community in ways that protects individuals from the scrutiny of outsiders. Language, ritual, and performance that cannot be penetrated by the dominant—whether it occurs in a remote indigenous village or in an underground blues club—provides individuals with the means to express themselves freely, to develop oppositional ways of seeing and to provide veiled critiques of the dominant culture.⁵³

By observing and documenting how people, specifically poor peasants, conduct themselves in public, especially in the presence of those perceived as more powerful, differs from how they conduct themselves in private, James C. Scott calls into question any study that accepts the profile of the subjugated, diminutive, overly compliant and apolitical peasant at face value. The public transcript often mirrors the “self portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen.”⁵⁴ Scott marks the power of the dominant elite to compel performances from others: thus, the discussion that occurs within the public transcript favors elites. “Offstage, where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power, a sharply dissonant political culture is possible.”⁵⁵ Even in situations where the poor cannot risk open confrontation, they engage in activities that affect the powerful, although the powerful might not realize it. Scott’s

⁵³And members of the dominant culture are often aware of the attempts to subvert authority embedded in seemingly innocent traditions, performances and the like – hence, the attempt to eradicate all forms of language and culture that don’t support the dominant ideology, in the most repressive of regimes.

⁵⁴James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 17.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 19.

observations are consistent with Boyte's discussion of relational power. Even when power relationships are unequal, everyone has power, and it can be channeled and directed. Power "is a dynamic relationship that changes all parties, not a one-way force. Power is a set of relationships between oneself and one's self-interests and other people and their concerns."⁵⁶

Relational power is dynamic. It opens possibilities. The categories of actor and acted upon are no longer mutually exclusive. Every interaction changes all parties. From this insight it follows that no one is ever completely powerless, unable to influence others. And it also follows that people can learn to identify, claim and build upon their individual and group strengths and sources of power.⁵⁷

Scott shows that even the least powerful have an impact, even if it is only to preserve their own sense of self. Scott's research reinforces the idea that ordinary people are capable of more than elites think. What is obvious on the surface is not always the whole story. People do not always reveal to the powerful what they really think, or their full capacities.

Political life might assume analogous forms. That is, their politics too might make use of disguise, deception and indirection while maintaining an outward impression, in power-laden situations of willing, even enthusiastic consent.⁵⁸

Usually, the views that the powerful perpetuate about the subjugated differ from the view that marginalized people have of themselves and the rest of the world—and often, the marginalized do not make their views available to outsiders. The fact that the powerful do not see (or if it is visible, fail to see) the degree of intelligence, complexity, and creativity of the dominated allows them to underestimate, miscategorize, and

⁵⁶Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 421.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 17.

sometimes justify unjust policies and practices.

A Broad View of Participation

Communities exist in different contexts. The U.S. possesses a deep and significant history of communities; communities that have nurtured traditional participation (i.e., the town hall meeting) and communities whose member survival has been dependent on their sharing of resources in response to a state that dominates and represses individuals, rather than respond to their needs. The Official Story⁵⁹ does not usually provide an integrated account of individuals and communities, and certainly not of state domination and repression. Significantly, though, regular people are largely responsible for constructing the quality of public life in the U.S., with the help of, or in spite of the hindrance of, the state (and/or the powerful and the privileged). Communities, or as Boyte might say, the skills and strengths that individuals transfer from their meaningful experience in communities into public life often provide space for civic engagement and for ordinary people to participate in politics. However, when the state fails to respond to the needs of citizens, dominates and represses, citizens must turn to other activities in order to organize politically and sometimes, merely to stay alive when the goal of the state seems to be to eliminate anyone perceived as a threat to its power. In this case, communities become space into which citizens must retreat. Within this space, they maintain language, exchange information from sources that they trust, and share sustenance: food, stories, music, and material goods. Space might include literal, physical space, where a door is closed on outsiders, but it might also be psychic space, space that outsiders can't enter

⁵⁹I used capitals to show that this is the version of reality sanctioned by the dominant culture, but also as shorthand for a version of reality that might be interpreted in another way.

unless they share the experience, vocabulary and history that makes access possible.

Sometimes citizens are not actively targeted, but they are still marginalized by the state and other actors. In this case, citizens often provide goods to each other that the state or individuals will not provide. This might include education, protection, and other types of resources and training. The networking, institutions, and training that happens in communities who are in resistance (or merely trying to survive) can provide the foundation for public protest and organizing that is able to take place when opportunities present themselves in the dominant culture. A community can serve multiple purposes to the member. It is both a source for public organizing and a shield of protection against domination. Community members navigate between public protest and veiled resistance. Members of communities are able to navigate between different contexts and political settings where language, culture, values and expectations may differ. The ability to move between different spaces allows them to survive, resist, and maintain important cultural norms while attempting to force an opening within the larger public space. Community members use experience and sources of resilience to expand public space. In spite of appropriation, resistance, and the critique of the public sphere that it stimulates, is regenerative, and the experiences and insights of the marginalized, renew its impact over and over. The community itself shifts to provide for the needs of members—sometimes its activities are hidden from view, other times they are made public. When members require protection, the community provides it.

Community-Based Art and Community-Building Traditions

Some community-based arts organizations, many who serve people of color, poor, or LGBTQ communities, for example, are bound to a history of resistance. That is, the

communities from which they emerged were formed to nurture, protect and sustain each other, in order to survive in spite of dangers and threats from the society at large. As a result of these histories, members of marginalized communities continue to be resourceful and resilient; to nurture, mentor and teach one another; to ensure well being of members; and to create better conditions in the society as a whole. In order to understand how community-based arts organizations serve members and contribute to civil society, it is important to explore some of the concrete aspects of their history:

Throughout the Southwest Chicanos were the butt of injustice after injustice, and their lands, though supposedly secured by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, were grabbed up by squatters, shyster lawyers, and con artists who shamelessly bilked them because of their disadvantage with the English language. In 1877, for example, an Anglo American purchased for fifteen dollars from the Sheriff of Hidalgo County in Texas 3,027 acres of land confiscated from a Chicano for back taxes.⁶⁰

In the late 1920s near Hamilton, Texas a group of Mexicans refused to pick cotton because Johnson grass overran the fields. The infuriated farmer summoned other ranchers, who charged on horseback into a frightened group of men, women and children, beating them. The farmers then prepared to lynch all the men but stopped after one of the farm workers claimed the local Catholic priest knew exactly where they had gone to work that day.⁶¹

Community among poor and marginalized peoples was built out of necessity in response to intolerable conditions of racism: both legislated and socially enforced inequality that affected the psychological well-being and physical security of individuals when they crossed (or when it was perceived that they crossed) social and political lines. Treatment from the dominant class might include teachers punishing school children for speaking Spanish, merchants refusing goods and services, segregation, lynching and harassment. In

⁶⁰Felipe de Ortego y Gasca, "The Quetzal and the Phoenix," *Denver Quarterly* 16 no. 3 (Fall 1981): 9.

⁶¹Rosales, *Chicano!*, 115.

an effort to protect one another from an unfriendly outside world and in order to survive and sustain each other in times of scarcity, members of poor communities have exhibited resourcefulness and resilience. They have historically invested in one another when no one else would, fostering responsibility to one another, commitment and a tradition of nurturing.⁶² Clifton Taubert writes:

They were my benefactors and I was their heir, but they had no stocks and bonds to give me. My parents, relatives and neighbors simply gave me the best of what they had. Although they lived behind a wall called “legal segregation,” they ignored its boundaries when it came to nurturing their children. Instead, gathering us together on their porches, which were their principle meeting places, they set out to shield us from segregation’s woes by building a good community for our dreams. They, “the porch people” of the Mississippi Delta knew how to build such community, because their parents had built community for them.⁶³

Members of oppressed communities report the great care that was taken to provide them with opportunities, safety and self-esteem. Gwendolyn Zoharrah Simmons writes:

Growing up in the Jim Crow South in Memphis, racist Memphis, the church was really the place, the church and the school where we black people exercised agency. Early on I remember learning all the things that later would deepen and become the tools for being able to serve my people in the movement. This was a place where everyone knew me and I knew everyone and so the harshness of being black in the deep South (was lessened). We were protected in these places by both the church and the black school.⁶⁴

And:

Certainly in the church, in the school, and in my home, I was taught to think that *you are somebody*. You are a person of worth. You are going places. I believed this.⁶⁵

⁶²Clifton Taubert writes extensively about the aforementioned traits and additional traits that made community building so effective in the community where he grew up in the desegregated in south in *Eight Habits of the Heart* (New York: Penguin Group, 1997).

⁶³Ibid., 3.

⁶⁴Gwendolyn Zoharrah Simmons, “Following the Call,” DVD Pamphlet Series 1, No. 4. The Veterans of Hope Project, [www. VeteransofHope.org](http://www.VeteransofHope.org). 5.

⁶⁵Ibid.

Luis Valdez, founder of El Teatro Campesino reports being burned as a child and turned away from a local hospital. He could not sleep on his burned back, and for the next six months, his mother slept with him lying on her stomach. Valdez says that she held him “heart-to-heart” and that she jumpstarted his creativity.⁶⁶ According to Luis Leal, in his writing Tomas Rivera uses the image of *la casa* “which symbolizes for Rivera the Chicano family: for whom it is a refuge, a place of intimacy, of privacy.”⁶⁷ “*La casa* is to me the most beautiful word in the Spanish language. It evokes the constant refuge, the constant father, the constant mother. It contains the father, the mother and the child.”⁶⁸ Taubert writes: “most of the adults I knew lived their lives in such a way that we as children sensed their unity, a necessity if they were to provide a caring and supportive environment for their children.”⁶⁹ Members of poor and oppressed communities created good lives for children, in spite of conditions of scarcity.

Clearly, people in marginalized communities are not served well by the government or public institutions, nor by political and economic elites. They have historically created their own community institutions including schools, churches, service organizations, unions, protection societies and cultural organizations as sources of nurturing, opportunity and political organizing. These institutions are tied to the need to

⁶⁶Story told in a small roundtable session at 2007 TCG Annual Conference, but Valdez often tells the story, and reference to it is readily found at <http://www.migratednews.org/2005/summer/pdf/summer2005.pdf>, accessed July 12, 2009.

⁶⁷Luis Leal, “Tomas Rivera: The Ritual of Remembering,” in *International Studies in Honor of Tomas Rivera*. *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, ed. Julian Olivares, vol. 13 no. 3-4 (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1985), 30.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Taubert, *Eight Habits of the Heart*, 20.

survive and resist, but also to thrive and succeed. Evans and Boyte write:

In the history of black America, like the history of other dispossessed and powerless peoples, the question of dignity and moral worth is at the heart of movements for freedom. And black history demonstrates with particular power the way in which oppressed and powerless people can discover and use subversive themes hidden in dominant ideas as resources for self affirmation, resistance and struggle. For such alternative cultures to emerge and survive, people need community places that they own themselves, voluntary associations where they can think and talk and socialize, removed from the scrutiny and control of those who hold power over their lives. The black church especially has played this crucial role as a free space in black history. Its function has changed in different times and settings—from an underground, semisecret meeting place under slavery, for instance, to a central reference point for cultural survival and renewal after emancipation, when pressures to assimilate into the dominant white world became more acute. Throughout black history, the insights and spirit of black religion have remained at the center of what might be called a culture of resistance that formed an alternative to the values and humiliations of dominant white culture.⁷⁰

The emphasis of poor and oppressed communities on simultaneously protecting, sheltering, nurturing and encouraging members and resisting the intrusions and attacks of repressive public officials and private individuals (supported and legitimized by institutionalized repression, racism and inequality of the state) catalyzed the formation of highly networked and unified communities, capable of delivering goods, reliable information, and skills to each other. These networks, anchored by their own institutions, provided resources for resistance and organized change within society, through many means, but most notably, the Civil Rights Movement.

Zoharah Simmons recounts her experience as a young organizer during the Civil Rights Movement. One of her first tasks was to organize support for the movement in Laurel, Mississippi, an area where organizations such as the NAACP, CORE and SNCC hadn't been active, and thus, where deep support had not been developed. She recounts

⁷⁰Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 28.

how communities that might have seemed passive or compliant on the surface were literally waiting for change. Simmons had a list of potential contacts to use when she arrived in Laurel, which included, Mrs. Euberta Sphinks.

When I got to Mrs. Sphinks's door, I knocked on her door. I introduced myself and told her that I was a COFO worker because that is how we identified ourselves. COFO was the Council of Federated Organizations, made up of several organizations like CORE, SNCC, NAACP, and SCLC that were underwriting or sponsoring this Mississippi Summer. She looked at me and said, 'Girl, I've been waiting for you all my life. Come on in.'

And:

What I learned is there is this organic leadership everywhere. There are people who have struggled in some ways, who have developed, who are often because of circumstances, waiting for some catalytic agents to come in at the right moment. The people of Laurel, they took this thing and they ran with it.⁷¹

Historically, a link exists between resistance to domination that often occurs "behind the scenes" and organizing that leads to public protest and participation that affects whole systems. Thus, resistance and public protest occur simultaneously. It is a survival technique practiced by communities that have been historically oppressed and who resist exclusion.

Artistic Forms

Throughout the history of oppressed and poor communities, art has been integrated into the daily lives of people, as a source of sustenance, identity, resistance, criticism and dialogue. There have been art and culture and aesthetic sensibilities designed to create beauty in ordinary life, and to sustain hard working and suffering people. bell hooks remembers the quiltmaking practice of her grandmother:

In the household of her mother, Baba learned the aesthetics of quiltmaking. She learned it as a meditative practice (not unlike the Japanese tea Ceremony),

⁷¹Simmons, "Following the Call," 13.

learning to hold her arms, the needles—just so—learning the proper body posture, then learning how to make her work beautiful, pleasing to the mind and heart. These aesthetic considerations were as crucial as the material necessity that required poor black women to make quilts.⁷²

Performance, spirituals and storytelling have been used to surreptitiously relay information and to provide veiled criticisms of systems of domination. Cultural activities provide a resource for dialogue and open criticism. In these communities art was not separate; rather, it was intertwined with everyday life. Art is present in the work songs sung by slaves, in the corridos of revolutionary Mexico and the coal mining songs of Appalachia. Oral traditions sustain and perpetuate cultures and communities but sometimes more importantly provide a trusted account of events that frequently differs from versions reported in mainstream newspapers, for example. Traveling tent shows such as the carpa and public performances offer political critique that is both open and veiled. In rural areas, community performances have as often been about preserving local history and involving community members in an active practice of storytelling by staging a community event.

In each case, the art is accessible, immediate and integrated. Ultimately, it is a reflection on the state of the community, sometimes offering history, prescriptions for action, sense of place, culture, language, history and a source of joy or solace.

Creating art and culture, both preserving and perpetuating it, then, is an ongoing process, carried forward in art by writing, for example, which makes it more available to people spread far and wide from the original sources of their history and culture. Tomas Rivera refers to the ritual of words as a ritual that immortalizes *la raza*. “ We have been alive since time began. We are not just living; we have been living for centuries. We must

⁷²hooks, *Yearning*, 117.

ritualize our existence through words.”⁷³ Rivera illustrates the need to give concrete form to meaningful existence of migrant workers through writing that honors and communicates their contribution. By writing articles, poems and stories about these workers, he, and other Chicano writers illustrate that their sacrifices and contributions matter. Although members of the community are heralded in songs and stories, documenting their contributions in concrete form gives added dimension to the weight of their presence and makes it undeniable to members of the community and outsiders alike.

When he was interviewed for *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview* (Austin, 1980), by Bruce-Novoa, Rivera emphasized the fact that in . . . *y no se lo trago la tierra* he set out to do more than to describe or narrate. He wanted a document, to leave in unforgettable form 'the suffering and the strength and the beauty of these people,' to give part of our history in Texas a “spiritual dimension” which he found in the people he had known (148-149). “I felt that I had to document the migrant worker para siempre,” he told Bruce Novoa, “para que no se olvidara ese espíritu tan fuerte de resistir y continuar under the worst of conditions” (150-151).⁷⁴

And:

The encounter of one’s self, the ‘other’ and the realization of form gives rise to the exaltation that Rivera calls “the fiesta of the living”. Rivera recounts how in his youth he used to listen to Bartolo the jongleur of South Texas recite his poetry in which young Tomas heard the names of people of his community and neighboring areas. He says he experienced “an exaltation brought on by the sudden sensation that my own life had relationships that my own family had relationships that the people I lived with had connections beyond those at the conscious level.”⁷⁵

Jimmy Santiago Baca describes a similar epiphany in a different context. When he was seventeen he worked the weekend graveyard shift as a janitor at a hospital:

⁷³Julian Olivares, “The Search for Being, Identity and Form in the Work of Tomas Rivera,” in *International Studies in Honor of Tomas Rivera. Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, ed. Julian Olivares, vol. 13 no. 3-4 (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1985), 72.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

On slow nights I would lock the door of the administration office, search the reference library for a book on female anatomy and, with my feet propped on the desk, leaf through the illustrations, smoking my cigarette. I was seventeen.

One night my eye was caught by a familiar-looking word on the spine of a book. The title was *450 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*. On the cover were black-and-white photos: Padre Hidalgo exhorting Mexican peasants to revolt against the Spanish dictators; Anglo vigilantes hanging two Mexicans from a tree; a young Mexican woman with rifle and ammunition belts crisscrossing her breast; Cesar Chavez and field workers marching for fair wages; Chicano railroad workers laying creosote ties; Chicanas laboring at machines in textile factories; Chicanas picketing and hoisting boycott signs.

From the time I was seven, teachers had been punishing me for not knowing my lessons by making me stick my nose in a circle chalked on the blackboard. Ashamed of not understanding and fearful of asking questions, I dropped out of school in the ninth grade. At seventeen, I still didn't know how to read, but those pictures confirmed my identity. I stole the book that night, stashing it for safety under the slopsink until I got off work. Back at my boardinghouse, I showed the book to friends. All of us were amazed; this book told us we were alive. We, too, had defended ourselves with our fists against hostile Anglos, gasping for breath in fights with the policemen who outnumbered us. The book reflected back to us our struggle in a way that made us proud.⁷⁶

Positive self-identity is tied to language and culture that is rife with creativity and innovation, and that hinges on community interaction. Individuals need to see positive portrayals of themselves, when daily they confront a mainstream that tells them they are not worthy. Individuals are validated through community interaction, and although recording oral history might sometimes make culture available to outsiders, when members of communities put their reflections in writing, they can be more widely dispersed throughout their own community as well. Through oral histories or written documents, community members must stimulate dialogue within a community to ensure cultural survival, to provide context for new generations, and to promote positive self-

⁷⁶Jimmy Santiago Baca, *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Barrio Poet* (Santa Fe: Red Crane Books, 1992), 4.

identity.

Community-Based Art and Arts Organizations

Amalia Mesa Bains states:

We formed the first *casas de cultura* in this nation because we understood that our cultural practice and our cultural expressions were our greatest treasures. We knew that it was our music, our dance our *carpa*, our murals, our posters, our paintings, our sculpture, our literature and our film that gave language to our identity.

Art does not simply reflect ideology, it can construct ideology. We have understood that as we have developed our *casas de cultura* across the nation. Our houses of culture and our artists are the mechanism of our cultural survival.⁷⁷

Just as a distinction between the elite and popular is found in how political participation is interpreted, a distinction between the elite and popular is found in how the arts are practiced and interpreted, and how arts participation is understood. Political elites are defined as the individuals with the education, training and expertise that make them suitable to govern. Almost without exception, these individuals are members of a privileged class. Elite arts too, refer to a privileged art that is only accessible to those with the education and opportunity to experience it. Berger observes:

The majority of the population does not visit art museums. ... The majority take it as axiomatic that the museums are full of holy relics which refer to a mystery which excludes them: the mystery of unaccountable wealth.⁷⁸

In contrast, community arts are about the face-to-face relationships between community members and artists that generate art that is meaningful and accessible to all parties involved. Community-based art, and the organizations that nurture it provides an opportunity for audiences to be involved: to agree or disagree, question and react to the

⁷⁷Amalia Mesa Bains, "On Cultural Survival," (San Antonio: NALAC Conference Proceedings, 1992), 14.

⁷⁸John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 24.

arts that is made. Ideally, when artistic products or organizational practices replicate sexist, racist, classist or homophobic attitudes, audiences have an immediate opportunity to react and to engage in dialogue with artists, other community members and cultural workers from the organization. The relationship between artists and audiences is significant, because the art being made is usually about the audience and their experiences, or people like them. If the art does not relate directly to the daily lives of audiences, a context for the work is provided that makes the work accessible. Matt Schwarzman observes:

Community-based art is by definition *active*. It seeks to catalyze and focus energy, spark new perspectives and restructure old relationships. The muralist involving young people in an outdoor painting project is doing much more than decorating the neighborhood. She is also training young activists how to express themselves, passing on cultural techniques and information, and developing citizens who will be invested in the health and well-being of their community. The multimedia artist who creates community-based digital histories is not just nostalgic for the past, he is provoking people to rethink their present. Community-based art is much more than the "form" and "content" of a produced art object. It is nurturing and maintaining relationships that stand the test of time and difficulty. It is developing techniques that fuse creativity with commitment and accountability with freedom.⁷⁹

Community-based arts organizations strive to produce art that preserves popular and working class values and traditions, history, culture, language, and sense of place.

Community-based arts organizations seek to establish and maintain sources of identity that are vital and dynamic but grounded in common understanding and history. Usually, the art that community-based arts organizations produce counters the privileged, western European artistic traditions of large institutions: it puts the needs of the community first, which often means performing for free in parks, or inviting community members on stage

⁷⁹Keith Knight and Mat Schwarzman, *Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts*. (Oakland: New Village Press 2005), xv.

to tell their own stories.

The emphasis on common history as a means to identity is significant, because often, marginalized communities do not see their stories told in public institutions. When members of marginalized communities see their stories portrayed publicly, by members of their own community, it provides a source of affirmation and empowerment.

Elite constructs of political participation prioritize leaders as the only qualified agents in society. Citizens fulfill their responsibility by choosing leaders. If leaders fail to fulfill their duties, citizens may remove them. The implicit elitist theory that informs mainstream politics distances political life from the daily lives of citizens and makes the political actions of ordinary people at the grassroots, and the local cultures and economies that make daily life for everyday citizens worthwhile, invisible. The construct of elite arts, and its perceived legitimacy as the only meaningful source of art, makes local cultures and diverse artistic traditions, oppositional narratives and resistance to cultural fragmentation and appropriation invisible as well.

As globalization makes the consumer culture the most ubiquitous, invasive and accessible cultural experience available to all communities, diverse cultural traditions retreat even further from view. Caron Atlas observes, “a diverse cultural ecology is threatened on one hand by the privatization of culture, and on the other by the hegemony of mass media and culture.”⁸⁰ Because community-based artistic traditions are largely made invisible in the public sphere, many citizens are unaware that they exist and as a result, have less ability to understand historical contexts, and less vocabulary to interpret

⁸⁰Caron Atlas, “Cultural Policy in the Board Rooms and on the Streets,” *Community Arts Network*, August 2002, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/08/cultural_policy.php, (accessed April 12, 2009).

the world and to understand others. Cross culturally, fewer people outside of the U.S. have an opportunity to understand the cultural diversity that exists within the U.S. Dudley Cocks, from Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Kentucky observes how the rest of the world's perception of the U.S. is shaped by exported corporate media:

It sounds like a joke, but when the Appalachian theater company that I direct performed in Sweden, audiences came expecting to see Jed and Ellie May Clampett from "The Beverly Hillbillies" in the rape scene from "Deliverance," all set in the Texas of JR Ewing's "Dallas." In fact, with one exception, our theater's European tours to Sweden, Denmark, England, Wales and the Czech Republic have been received by audiences who had trouble believing that something like the real Appalachian story exists in America.⁸¹

The exception to the experience Cocks describes occurred when the troupe performed for Welsh coal miners:

The one exception was the theater's tour of the Welsh coal-mining valleys. That 1989 tour was sponsored by the British Labour Party at the height of Thatcherism, and the Welsh working people had no trouble empathizing with our drama: Their mines were either being closed or privatized, and if privatized, the new owners were likely to be the same absentee corporations that owned our central Appalachian coal fields. As in Appalachia, dissenting oral narratives arising from suppressed histories are part of the Welsh culture—as they are for many cultures in the world.⁸²

Cocks indicates that contemporary U.S. cultural policy has shifted cultural emphasis to the corporate, and has damaged how cultural information is exchanged.

People outside of the U.S. have little or no chance to witness the cultural—and spiritual—diversity that energizes and propels the United States. And we at home now struggle to celebrate this diversity in the face of reduced support for the non-profit arts and a pervasive commercial monoculture. Too often now, the non-profit arts sector faces the choice of accepting its marginal status or collaborating with the commercial sector—each collaboration blurring a little bit more of the line that demarcates the two sectors' often contradictory values.⁸³

⁸¹Dudley Cocks, "End Cultural Isolation," *American Theater Magazine*, November 2002, <http://roadside.org/End%20Cultural%20Isolationism.html>, (accessed April 12, 2009).

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

Although community-based art is not well integrated into the public sphere and public institutions, it continues to thrive and is perpetuated in many contexts and communities, by individual artists and arts organizations. Community-based art is found in small spaces where like-minded people come together. Community-based organizations, artistic and otherwise, provide immediate experience to participants, unmediated by technology. Evans and Boyte observe:

For a well-developed consciousness of broader community and generalized, active citizenship to emerge requires ways for people to build direct, face-to-face and egalitarian relationships, beyond their immediate circles of friends and smaller communities. Thus, a prelude to democratic movement, visible in different times and settings, has been the emergence of avenues for wider sociability.⁸⁴

Small spaces that provide reasons for people to come together promote active participation. Goldbard observes: “Live, active social experience strengthens individuals’ ability to participate in democratic discourse and community life, whereas an excess of passive, isolated experience disempowers.”⁸⁵

Individuals in community settings have the potential to build civil society, by providing diverse voices that question, oppose, resist. Through intentional and consistent community building, members create a viable structure for meaningful participation. Tomas Ybarra Frausto states, " Community centered cultural spaces have functioned as zones of refuge, sites for safeguarding traditions, nurturing creativity and affirming the

⁸⁴Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 192.

⁸⁵Goldbard, *New Creative Community*, 143.

power of the bicultural imagination.⁸⁶ For marginalized communities, these spaces have historically provided safe space where individuals can speak freely without fear of reprisal. Community spaces are places where reliable information is exchanged; hot meals, shelter, and protection against the police or *la migra* is given without hesitation. Citizens come together in community spaces to learn to read, to sing and to dance from members of their own communities—people with whom they share cousins, geographical roots, or historical experience. People formulate and articulate responses to domination in community spaces; they are havens for spiritual sustenance, and a place to experience history, nurturing and self-discovery.

Community-based arts organizations continue to exist today because the art they make is still necessary for the communities they serve. Their ongoing artistic practices and community building skills are the legacy of other community histories.

Although the historical conditions that made community-based arts such an important source of healing, sustenance, dialogue and critique have changed over time, they still play a vital role in communities that seek sources of identity, places to explore issues and relevant cultural experiences.

In the late sixties and seventies, our communities duplicated what the *cimarones* (runaway enslaved people) did during colonization. We created safe spaces for nurturing our cultural spiritual traditions, recreating and empowering our communities while establishing the locations for resisting Eurocentric cultural oppression.⁸⁷

The art that community-based artists make and the practices they use to sustain their organizations provide an ongoing resonance and source of connection for constituencies.

⁸⁶Tomas Ybarra Frausto, “Arts and Cultural Organizations: Guardians of our Culture” (Keynote Address, NALAC National Conference, Corpus Christi, Texas, 18 January 2001).

⁸⁷Marta Moreno Vega, “Making Culture Count,” (San Antonio: NALAC Conference Proceedings, 1992), 13

Cultural traditions evoke memory and meaning for audiences, and help them to reflect on issues and to engage in dialogue.

Community-Based Arts Organizations, Organizational Development and Civil Society

Because community-based arts organizations are bound to historical practices of resistance, cultural workers in these organizations have a specific and unique relationship with their audiences. Cultural workers are able to cultivate meaningful engagement with constituencies that comes from within the community itself, as a holistic outgrowth of traditions and practices familiar to supporters because they were practiced in the home, during celebrations, and community rituals. Mutuality, friendship, and resilience are still ingrained in the communities that grassroots arts organizations serve and members of community-based arts organizations continue to utilize the sustaining practices that have been passed down in their communities. The reality of community-based art as an integrated part of daily life stands in contrast to art that has no relevance or meaning to participants outside of their theater or museum experience. Most community members claim participating artists and artistic leadership as their own.⁸⁸ Hence, the organization is

⁸⁸Dudley Cocke observes the relationship between artists and their communities:

“Thirty-odd years ago, a famous folksinger from California came to the coalfields of central Appalachia to perform in a high-school auditorium. A big crowd was on hand as a local string band opened the concert. The local band, rising to the occasion, had the audience’s rapt attention. I’m told that you could hear a pin drop. The famous folksinger followed with some success. Backstage, she made a point to congratulate the local band on their performance, noting that she, too, often sang from the same Appalachian song book. She went on to say how keenly the audience had been listening to their music and wondered what their secret was. “What is that little something extra you seem to have?” she asked repeatedly, each time more emphatically. The local band kindly looked at the floor as she pressed for an answer. Finally the fiddle player spoke up, “Well ma’am, the only difference that I could tell was that you were playing out front of them ol’ songs, and we were right behind ‘em.”

a direct product of the community and the organization's success is a product of the investment and nurturing of the community it serves. Success of community-based organizations represents success for the entire community and individual community members take pride in the accomplishments of these institutions. As an extension of the community, organizations provide a recognizable source of knowledge: that is, they provide a first voice understanding of the issues that affect their communities. These are stories that are not told and sometimes can't be told by outsiders. The impact of privileged insider status is a high level of engagement, buy in and investment from the community and accountability between the organization and the community served.

The "inside track" afforded to community-based organizations allows them to build critical mass, loyal and dedicated enclaves—and to harness the power of identity—which allows them to get participation from constituencies that it would be harder for others to reach. As a result of the relationships between community-based arts organizations and their constituents, these organizations have developed a body of artistic work that reflects the dialogue between community members and audiences. Conventional arts institutions have failed to build the intimate, hand on relationships with

Ralph Ellison deftly spins the fiddler's point:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a context in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity, and as link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.

Dudley Cocke, "Art in a Democracy," *Community Arts Network*, October 2002, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/10/art_in_a_democr.php, (accessed April 27, 2009).

grassroots audiences that create an amplified synergy between artistic work and important community issues.

As trusted members of the communities they serve, representatives of community-based arts organizations are often effective brokers, representatives and agents for social change. Veteran cultural workers (workers who have been in the field for twenty-five years or more) exhibit solidarity in their relationships with one another, regard one another with respect and friendship, and actively work to support one another, across well-maintained networks. In part, because of the history of scarcity within marginalized communities, *veteranos* are willing to take risks to improve conditions and exhibit a determination to succeed. *Veteranos* have often committed themselves fully to serving their communities without any concern for career advancement or status within mainstream institutions.

In Boyte's terms, community-based arts organizations bind community to a larger civil society by providing space and nurturing action. Community-based arts organizations serve their communities and provide opportunities to expand the mainstream culture to open more space for inclusion. By providing access to the public at large, community-based arts organizations have an opportunity to develop the public understanding of histories and cultures that they have not been exposed to. Community-based arts organizations provide space within civil society for constituencies to come together, to break down isolation and to provide opportunities for involvement and engagement.

However, community-based arts organizations do not just strive to educate outsider audiences, to meet the need of their own communities and to expand

understanding and dialogue. Often, community-based arts organizations stand on the front lines of a battle to produce, perpetuate, preserve and protect art and culture that is threatened. Community-based arts organizations reiterate that their communities deserve art, that their experiences are valid, and that their needs should not be subordinate to the priorities of a privileged political, social and economic class. At times, the perspectives of these organizations and the members they serve are threatened: for example SPARC in Oakland has fought routinely to preserve community murals, when an unsympathetic local government has sought to destroy them. Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, waged open protest when a local arts council attempted to limit its funding, because a local council representative didn't approve of the organization's glbt specific mission.⁸⁹ Sometimes the foe of community-based art is not a hostile public sector, but a public lack of awareness. Important community artwork can be lost when organizations and infrastructures are not in place to help preserve and perpetuate work. For example, when Robert Darden was researching his book *People Get Ready* on black gospel music, he discovered that much music was not being preserved, and was being lost for the next generation, spawning the Gospel Restoration Project at Baylor University.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Citizens have the potential to be essential actors in creating a meaningful civil society, but sometimes that potential is not evident to them. Part of the problem is that an elitist interpretation of participatory politics implicitly guides the public sphere. An elitist perspective suggests that citizens need not participate beyond electing leaders.

⁸⁹Goldbard, *New Creative Community*, 33, 166.

⁹⁰Robert Darden, *People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2005).

But meaningful engagement by citizens fosters a vital civil society: movement building empowers citizens to address the problems that affect them and it provides citizens with the means to challenge the state, civil society and the citizens that populate it, to become more democratic. The potential of citizens might not be apparent, but citizens at the grassroots are capable of bringing about change, sometimes using strategies that have historically allowed them to resist, deflect and thwart the powerful.

It is not only the state that represses and dominates. Communities—social, economic and political structure forged by human beings—leave gaps for powerful members to dominate and repress as well as for members to meet the needs of each other. Some communities are insulated, conservative, and inhospitable to outsiders. Communities often enforce a code of conformity that is narrow and stifling to members who otherwise might feel secure and protected in the fold. Homophobia and racism characterize some communities, and gangs use some of the structure and values of community to destroy themselves and other kids (members of rival gangs) with whom they ironically share culture, language and identical challenges. Every community struggles with internal contradictions: systems of domination, competing hierarchies and class differences that create inequalities and competing interests. Communities are not ideal. They are an example of one way that human beings organize their relationships, and at once provide a structure to nurture and protect, as well as to persuade, coerce and influence. Communities evolve as the result of circumstances that bring people together. Communities prosper, and as often they falter, blighted by internal breakdown, or external economic, political and social forces. The forces that plague communities often do their work slowly, and members wonder what happened to their once vibrant and

thriving towns.

But communities can also have a life cycle and vitality that is consciously constructed (although still susceptible to systems of domination and hierarchies of power that inform the relationships of human beings). Citizens consciously construct relationships in “intentional communities”—such as co-housing communities, kibbutzs, *ejidos* or ecclesiastical base communities—but every type of community can exercise intention. It is possible to consciously build healthy, effective, sustainable communities by nurturing dialogue and accountability.

In his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William J. Wilson identifies one of the causes of the blight of urban areas as the breakdown of community. One source of this breakdown is the “brain drain” that occurs when individuals whose talents and skills have been nurtured by a community transfer their allegiances to more upwardly mobile contexts, without contributing their talents and resources back to the communities that raised them.⁹¹ Thus, a community’s resources have been expelled, but they are not replaced, eventually compromising its infrastructure. When individuals that have been nurtured by communities do not reinvest their talents, skills and resources back into a community, it is depleted of resources, morale and intellectual capital. Enter factory shutdowns, and the blight of drug addiction and large-scale urban problems ensue. In other cases the state intervenes to disrupt communities, and dislocates important survival networks:

. . . during the 1960s and 1970s . . . urban renewal projects (known to those they displaced as “urban removal”) banked on ending poverty and urban blight by demolishing inner city neighborhoods, forcing the inhabitants to relocate, thus

⁹¹William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

eliminating both the material and immaterial networks that previously sustained local culture. These internal migrations have been further complicated by ongoing transformation of the American cultural landscape through immigration, leading to a resurgent backlash of anti-immigrant feeling.⁹²

In the decades preceding the Civil Rights Movement, many throngs of individuals made the decision to invest in community. Juan Williams examines the commitment of one individual, Charles Houston.

Charles Hamilton Houston was born on September 3, 1895, eight months before the Supreme Court decided the case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. This case essentially told the South that segregation was legal. Houston would spend most of his adult life fighting to overturn that decision.⁹³

“In 1929, at age 34, Houston was appointed vice dean of Howard’s (Howard University) law school,” Williams writes, “He was asked, in effect, to turn the school around.”⁹⁴

Houston’s efforts to build the school’s law program were tough and uncompromising.

Under his guidance, the school received accreditation from the American Bar

Association, and produced future Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall.⁹⁵ By 1954

when *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Houston

had trained countless lawyers and spent many years documenting the conditions of black schools in the south. Williams cites Thurgood Marshall:

A large number of people never heard of Charles Houston. . . . (but) when *Brown against the Board of Education* was being argued in the Supreme Court . . . there was some two dozen lawyers on the side of the Negroes fighting for their schools . . . Of those lawyers, only two hadn’t been touched by Charlie Houston . . . That man was the engineer of all of it.⁹⁶

⁹²Goldbard, *New Creative Community*, 28.

⁹³Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 2.

⁹⁴Ibid., 7.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid., 35.

Houston is one of hundreds of African Americans, including but not limited to Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King Jr. who made a conscious decision to invest in community. Movement building relies on the intentional commitment of individuals who invest in community. Boyte observes that there is a “expressive individualist” strain in American culture: “notions that the basic commitments and purposes of one’s life come through the search for *self-realization* and self expression.”⁹⁷

The focus on expressive individualism in American culture, especially as it has melded with consumerism and high rates of mobility and the like, may have contributed to what Bellah and his associates call “communities of memory and hope,” more stable continuous sets of relationships characteristic of working class (and interestingly in different terms, upper class) life.⁹⁸

One strain of American life emphasizes individuality, and with it, self interest and atomization. But individuality and community building are not mutually exclusive, and it useful and productive to nurture the two together. Movement building requires building relationships with like-minded individuals, investing in youth and local economies, making time for others and valuing reciprocity. Boyte observes that self-expression plays a role in community building:

But at times it (expressive individualism) is also the source of creative intellectual and artistic energy—much of the protean American spirit that is so attractive to other peoples in the world. And the fusion of expressive individualist and communal themes in free spaces give public life a remarkable dynamism and vitality. The effort to balance communal commitments and individual expression has informed some of the richest explorations of the meaning of democracy.⁹⁹

⁹⁷Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 183.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

One of the legacies of the New Social Movements emphasis of the 1990s is a focus in collective action research on new or previously unconsidered relationships.

Escobar and Alvarez write:

The “old” is characterized by analysis couched in terms of modernization and dependency; by definitions of politics anchored in traditional actors who struggled for control of the state, particularly the working class and the revolutionary vanguards; and by a view of society as an entity composed of more or less immutable structures and class relations that only great changes (large scale development schemes and revolutionary upheavals) could significantly alter. In contrast, the new theories see contemporary social movements as bringing about a fundamental transformation in the nature of political practice and theorizing itself. According to these theorists, an era that was characterized by the division of political space into two clearly demarcated camps (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) is being left behind. In the new situation, a multiplicity of social actors establish their presence and spheres of autonomy in a fragmented social and political space. Society itself is largely shaped by the plurality of these struggles and the vision of those involved in the new social movements.¹⁰⁰

Although, collective action theorizing has continued to evolve beyond the social movements emphasis of the 1990s, the trends identified by Escobar and Alvarez continue to redefine how theorists think about political space, and in the current context apply to what some observers define as a global movement without a center. Paul Hawken asserts:

Across the planet groups ranging from ad hoc neighborhood associations to well-funded international organizations are confronting issues like the destruction of the environment, the abuses of free market fundamentalism, social justice and the loss of indigenous cultures. They share no orthodoxy or unifying ideology; they follow no charismatic leader; they remain supple enough to coalesce easily into larger networks to achieve their goals. While they are mostly unrecognized by politicians and the media, they are bringing about what may one day be judged the single most profound transformation of human society.¹⁰¹

Alvarez and Escobar capture the multidimensional and diverse nature of movement that

¹⁰⁰Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, eds., *New Social Movements in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 2.

¹⁰¹Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*, 6.

can only be interpreted through a broad view of participation. Escobar and Alvarez observe that political actors respond to political fragmentation by creating autonomous enclaves that cannot be easily classified and/or generalized. An understanding of collective action has to consider that conventional participation and resistance can both be valid and productive responses to domination. One way that citizens act locally or exercise intention in their everyday lives is through voluntary associations. Although voluntary associations are seemingly conventional components of a conformist civic culture, they are versatile and multidimensional spaces that serve many needs for members, who experience meaningful face-to-face relationships, an opportunity for dialogue and debate. Movement is not spontaneous and it begins in small spaces where like-minded people come together. In small spaces, individuals have the opportunity to intentionally build community through practices of dialogue, mentoring, reciprocity, friendship and accountability. In intentionally organized spaces, individuals can reflect together on the contradictions in their relationships that arise. In an environment where accountability is enforced it is easier to recognize and confront the contradictions that arise in every community. Boyte observes:

The voluntary aspect of community environments is an important element. Unstructured by imperatives of large and bureaucratic organizations, communal groups that people own themselves allow them to rework ideas and themes from the dominant culture in ways which bring forth hidden and potentially subversive dimensions.¹⁰²

Ownership is derived from a shared investment and effort that is channeled into an enterprise, and it is an important component in participation. As complicated and disparate as the current context appears, movement building begins with simple efforts to

¹⁰²Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 187.

engage individuals in a common struggle. After that, it becomes more complicated.

Movement building requires significant investment from individuals, and support from a community that reinforces the effort. New interpretations of movement building make it clear that autonomous enclaves have significant value to communities and provide important lessons in creating sustainability.

Hawken makes clear the breadth and depth of the efforts of organizations and their supporters working globally to bring about progressive change. However, many of these organizations work in extremely local, isolated contexts, and do not know about other organizations doing similar work.¹⁰³ Of equal importance is the fact that many everyday citizens are unaware of the work of these organizations. Building the infrastructure of organizations to enable networking and outreach to citizens is important to their long-term effectiveness, and to the well being of civil society. Citizens are empowered to actively engage through an understanding of how their individual agency interacts with a web of collaboration that makes the change they want to see, possible. A conventional emphasis on creating broad based movement still has value, as a powerful force that is effective in pressuring for systemic change. Building broad base coalitions requires networking and an investment in people and resources that transcends small communities, but which cannot happen without a high level of awareness and engagement in small enclaves.

Community-based arts organizations and their supporters participate in civic engagement and movement organizing at a variety of levels that includes building knowledge and building activism. The efforts of cultural workers begin in small, local

¹⁰³Although initiatives such as the World Social Forum and the US Social Forum are partially designed to address this problem.

contexts, but often involve national networks which share a commitment to protecting myriad forms of cultural expression, making arts accessible and involving communities in making art. The work of artists is intrinsic to building a society that values free expression. In the following pages some examples are offered of how art functions in communities. Art is an important component of resistance and participation, but most importantly, it is in and of itself a component of the human experience that every individual and every community, deserve.

CHAPTER THREE: THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHICANO COMMUNITY AND AESTHETICS

Introduction

Chapter Three provides a transition from the broad overview of Chapter Two to a specific historical discussion that will prepare the reader for an in depth examination of El Centro Su Teatro in Chapter Four. Chapter Two provided some concrete examples of the histories of marginalized communities and the traditions of art and resistance that emanated from them. Chapter Three more specifically examines the Chicano Movement and its precursors. The art and organizational practices of El Centro Su Teatro are a product of the Chicano Movement, and it continues to be a major influence on the organization's aesthetics. Additionally, a glimpse at Mexican American history reveals multiple forms of participation, often used at once by groups and individuals in different economic and social classes, operating from different reference points. Post-1848 Tejanos, protecting their land and way of life along the U.S.-Mexico border, 1930s labor leaders, middle class Mexican Americans who actively promoted service organizations in the 1950s, among many others, set the stage for the Chicano Movement, even though the movement represented an unprecedented way of Mexican Americans practicing politics in the United States. The history of Chicanos is a history of conventional political participation, uncompromising resistance, and broader forms of participating in society

and everyday life, which are captured through artistic practice (such as mural making, and street performance). Utilizing many forms of participation simultaneously is an important part of the way Chicanos have approached art, politics and life, which often have been interwoven holistically. El Centro Su Teatro, its artists and community, carry on these practices.

Chicano Aesthetics

La casa, el barrio, and la lucha—the importance of each: the home, the community and the struggle is central to the work of Chicano artists. “The ritual of remembering, for Chicano writers, is based on three simple images, *la casa, el barrio,* and *la lucha,* which are the bricks out of which they reconstruct Chicano life and culture, and with which they offer us, in their writings, their own world.”¹

Everyday life is the basis of culture and community, and thus, the foundation of community-based art. Resistance, collective action, and the human need to create meaningful experience interact simultaneously; but the success of each hinges on a community base. In order for community-based cultural production to be sustainable, it must be holistic. It requires an integration of the economic, political, social, spiritual and creative. The way the work of community members sustains the community as a whole, the integrity of the relationships between members, the responsibility that each community member takes to nurture others, all lay the foundation for future stewardship and the success of future generations. Community building requires that members identify with each other; recognizing shared experience as a powerful source of understanding. Building free spaces, in Boyte’s terms, requires commitment and

¹Luis Leal, “Tomas Rivera,” 30.

intentional efforts to build community: it binds self-realization with an investment in others. A community will only remain healthy as long as members take an active role in carving out free space, consciously invest in each other and the health of community structures.

Community-based art bridges the economic, political and social. It is based in a holistic view of civil society. In a just society all needs are important and must be met in order for citizens to live good lives. Needs are not hierarchical: they must all be met simultaneously, and every individual should have the opportunity to fulfill her potential. Art, politics, family, school and work are not separate categories: they are intertwined. “Politics” are embedded in every aspect of the social. *Everyday life* is the basis of community; it is the place where movement begins, and to which all actors return. Chicano artistic work utilizes cultural affirmation as a metaphor for survival and resistance. Artists revel in sources of familiarity and warmth: culture that individuals are not willing to relinquish for Western European traditions that have no personal relevance or meaning and that are not grounded in a specific history and struggle. To relinquish identity is to absolve the dominant culture for a history and ongoing practice of subjugation, which has not yet been adequately addressed. Chicano artists unflinchingly depict struggle, paying homage to elders and other heroes who have sacrificed so that new generations could build a better life. Gaspar de Alba writes:

Rites of memory and recuperation, family unity and community solidarity in the framework of a colonized culture imply more than seasonal festivities, temporal togetherness, or the nostalgic celebration of belonging to that which has been left behind. For Chicana/os, these rituals mean conviviality and connection, certainly, but also continuance, perseverance, endurance and ultimately survival - all of

which are acts of resistance to cultural annihilation that reaffirm the existence of an Alter-native people.²

Chicano art and Chicano politics are a testament to historical struggle: marginalized peoples continue to perpetuate a living culture and an ongoing challenge to the status quo.

La Casa, El Barrio y La Lucha

For community-based artists, art is not reserved for the entertainment of elites. Art is a part of the everyday act of living; therefore, it belongs to, should be made accessible to, and practiced by everyone. The work of community-based artists, then, is about challenging elite notions of the purpose of art: questioning and challenging power relationships that only make art available to those who have the education, affluence and status to “understand” it; and challenging artistic models that do not draw from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic experiences. Community artists use art as a tool to facilitate and sustain communities struggling for social change. Cultural workers often live in the communities where they make their work, and share history, language and identity with other community members.³ Artists provide a cultural bridge, making

²Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art: Inside Outside the Master's House. Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 85.

³ Within the relationships between an artist and a community there are sometimes class differences and other differences that separate their experiences. However, part of the definition of community-based arts is that it is by and for the community served. In the case of Su Teatro, Executive Artistic Director Tony Garcia grew up in Denver and participated in the Chicano Movement. Many patrons have known him since he was a teenager. He has known many patrons all of his life and from many different contexts. The artists who perform on stage are also from the local community and have many overlapping relationships with community members, familial and otherwise, based on the fact that so many Denver Chicanos have remained rooted for several generations. Thus, the ties between families and friends remain strong, even though there is a certain amount of upward mobility between generations that creates differences. There also differences in political and religious affiliations, etc. The same phenomena holds true for groups like Teatro Pregones in the Bronx, Junebug Productions in New Orleans, and Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Kentucky (among many others). The fact that these organizations are living parts of the communities they

culture available to other groups and shift points of reference for all participants. Of community-based artists, Lespier writes:

We (artists) are defined by the way we relate to the work we do as much as by the cultures we come from. Our work stems from our individual and social experience as artists rooted in distinct cultures outside of the dominant Euro-American society. Our artistic choices reflect this experience.⁴

Community-based artists of color believe that art and culture produced by and for community members, offers a richer perspective than anything available to people of color through conventional institutions. Thus, the aesthetic foundations of community not only sustain members and reveal their resistance to dominating structures, they reflect demands for fundamental changes in the structure of society.

An important theme of Chicano art is the need to create an environment for future generations to survive, to learn and to grow, where they will be safe to create their own artistic vision and in which they will perpetuate a political consciousness that challenges racism, questions the status quo and fosters cultural affirmation. “And to all those who died, scrubbed floors, wept and fought for us,” scrawled Jose Antonio Burciaga across the bottom of his mural, *Last Supper of Chicano Heroes*.⁵ Burciaga commemorates not only Zapata, Chavez, and Carlos Santana, but all Chicano elders: parents, workers and artists, “who labored, scrubbed floors and sweated so that the younger generation had

serve – a part of a larger social fabric, distinguishes them from other arts organizations and other institutions that are not as deeply embedded in the communities they serve.

⁴Alvan Colon Lespier, “Critiques and Commentaries,” in *New Traditions: Forums and Commentaries*. Non Traditional Casting Project 1997, 26. <http://209.204.224.237/compendium/compendiumframe.html> (accessed July 12, 2009).

⁵Jose Antonio Burciaga, Mimi Gladstein and Daniel Chacon, eds., *The Last Supper of Chicano Heroes: Selected Works of Jose Antonio Burciaga* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005).

more opportunities.”⁶ “He urged us to Drink Cultura, to celebrate our culture, and to remember that *La Cultura Cura*.”⁷

The work of Chicano artists seeks to preserve and perpetuate a living culture; to express ideas, to express both veiled and open criticisms, to create opportunities for community members to act, to strengthen the relationships among family and friends, and to act to influence the larger public culture.

Speaking at the People of Color Caucus of the National Performance Network, Alvan Colon Lespier of Pregones Puerto Rican Theater, NYC, writes:

A central element to all our work is the relationship to community. Community is neither an abstraction nor a funding concept for us. It is the cornerstone upon which our work is built. Whether in the Chicano barrios of the Southwest, the black neighborhoods of the urban Southeast or inner city areas across the country, all of us are part of the communities in which we do our work. We live in them, we have daily contact with the people in these communities, people who are also part of our audiences. The problems of the community are problems we encounter in our own lives, the community’s triumphs are a part of our triumphs as well. These triumphs and problems are often inspiration for the theater we make.⁸

Chicano artists carve out specific ways of seeing relationships between people, but also between the self and society, oneself and the “other,” the natural world, the unconscious. It can be self-reflective and self-aware. But the relationships that Chicano art depicts are steeped in history and common experience—of tender family moments, the safe space, shelter and protection of the family and of the barrio, where people look out for one another and foster meaningful relationships. The family and the barrio provide members with nurturing space where sense of self and self-esteem flourish. The experience of

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 12.

⁸Lespier, “Critiques and Commentaries,” 24.

nurturing within communities gives members sustenance to combat an outside world that is not as friendly. The interpretation of each individual artist may be different, but each comes back to references that a community—of early settlers and continuing generations of migrants—understand: the constant demand for both autonomy and equal voice in a society that is not fundamentally structured to give people of color, women, or the lgbt community, meaningful or significant access to power, authority, or legitimacy.

Nicolas Kanellos writes: “One of the most important contributions of Chicano literature must be the examination from within of a living culture that has survived, evolved, and is now making its existence known with pride”⁹ Contemporary Chicano artists are fierce in their commitment to their own art and vision, but they are equally concerned with passing on a legacy to future generations: sharing sources of strength in stories, visual images, and music. The emphasis on the future is palpable.

Survival, Resistance and Participation

For Mexican-Americans, the richness of organic culture arose directly out of attempts to raise children, establish livelihoods, and guarantee stability for future generations under difficult conditions. Community, in this context, hinges on survival, resistance and conventional political participation. Historically, Chicano communities have provided goods to members in order to perpetuate meaningful existence. Communities provide an essential foundation—sometimes consisting of nothing more than material sustenance—that allows members to live. A multi-faceted relationship always takes place between community members, the state, and civil society that is

⁹Nicolas Kanellos. “Language and Dialog in...y no se lo trago’ la tierra,” in *International Studies in Honor of Tomas Rivera. Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, ed. Julian Olivares, vol. 13 no. 3-4 (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1985), 45-56

legitimized by the state. That is, resistance, community building and participation occur simultaneously, and at each historical juncture, these forms replicate themselves and reveal new forms of dynamism. Survival networks, that historically allowed members just to live, provide the basis for strong communities, voluntary associations, political organizations and entire movements. The focus on community is an opportunity for conscious reflection on the contribution and sacrifice of members. The contributions of past generations provide the incentive, context and sometimes a mandate for continued struggle. Past generations offer resilience, hope and belief in the future.

Native American, colonial settler, revolutionary bandit, farmer, merchant, ranchero, factory worker, migrant farmworker, politician—these are just a few of the identities that the Chicano has held historically. In each context, individuals have negotiated relationships for the good of their families. They have at times refused to negotiate. They have demanded acceptance and challenged the norms of a society with no place for Chicanos. For many generations, Chicanos have attempted to force openings in society and to bring about positive, progressive change. This multi-faceted relationship with the state, a relationship which includes narrowly constructed political participation, community engagement and organizing, protest, opposition and resistance, can be seen through the lens of many generations involved in struggle and in the many generations to come. The conversation and practical reality renews itself over and over. As new immigrants traverse the U.S.-Mexico border, a familiar, vehement and polarized discussion evolves. In many ways, this new discourse reflects the same political ideology, bias and fear of past encounters. But a true turning point will happen in the coming

demographic change that over several generations is likely to shift societal relationships once more.

Survival and Renewal: The Context for Community-Based Art

Community is often a means to survival. A long history of exclusion beginning in 1848 and extending to the present, compromises Mexican Americans simply for speaking Spanish. But Mexican presence in what are now the borderlands predated Anglo settlement by 400 years. Americo Paredes writes:

The Mexican saw himself and all that he stood for as continually challenging a foreign people who treated him for the most part with disdain. Being a Mexican meant remaining inviolable in the face of overwhelming attack on one's personality. Under these circumstances for a Mexican to accept North American values was to desert under fire.¹⁰

Resistance to dominant culture encroachment is a constant theme in the politics and culture of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (which sometimes extend as far North as New York City or Chicago). As Paredes illustrates, assimilation has never been possible or even desirable for many working-class Mexican-Americans. However, members of Chicano communities have used open rebellion, conventional political participation and even assimilation, to better the lives of their children. In *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos*, Ignacio Garcia examines the attempts to assimilate of the "Mexican-American" generation, the first generation of Americans of Mexican descent to be born in the U.S.

Time and time again, Mexican Americans had attempted to reach out to the mainstream by developing patriotic organizations, serving in the armed forces in large numbers, adopting American ideals, and deemphasizing their national origins. Yet they remained outside the mainstream and saw the gap widening between them and other Americans. The liberal agenda de-Mexicanized them but

¹⁰Americo Paredes, *With his Pistol in his Hand* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 10.

failed to Americanize them as a group, allowing them into the mainstream as individuals, not as a community. Even this entrance had limited benefits, since Americans of Mexican descent continued to be targets of racism and cultural insensitivity. Mexican Americans were allowed into the American mainstream to the degree that they rejected their “Mexicanness” or diluted their historical experience. A false historical experience became the “Spanish” missions, the *fiestas*, the Mexican participants in the Alamo, and the “Frito Bandito.”¹¹

Survival, resistance and participation mark the multi-faceted experience of the Mexican in the U.S. The experiences of early settlers demonstrated resilience, the Mexican American Generation demonstrated resolve, respect and patriotism (through participation in World War II and through civic clubs) as well as outward defiance and challenge to the norms of society (through the pachuco culture). The Chicano Movement generation demonstrated open defiance and questioning of societal norms through its intellectual production and its art, but also participated in politics through widespread political protest, located in the farm workers, land rights and student movements. While Chicanos criticized their parents for being too focused on conventional participation, these youth made the ultimate bid toward conventional political participation by organizing La Raza Unida Party.

The Mexican American generation was characterized by respect and humility and the Chicano Movement Generation was characterized by its militance. David Montejano observes:

In the sixties, frustrated with the remaining segregationist limits and inspired by the Black civil rights movement, a general mobilization of the Mexican American community took place. The specific catalysts were the farmworker strikes in California and Texas in 1965-1966, which set off diverse organizing energies that quickly reverberated throughout the Southwest and later through the Midwest. These strikes ignited a broad civil rights mobilization among all classes of the Mexican American community—businessmen, professionals, college and high

¹¹Ignacio Garcia, *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 10.

school students, factory workers even street youth. Unlike the assimilationist character of the earlier protests of the 1950s, these protests began to articulate a unifying nationalist vision that in its more militant guises was separatist. The activists took the pejorative lower class label of *Chicano* and *Chicana* and transformed it into a powerful political identity.¹²

The Mexican American generation worked through established channels, but the Chicano Movement generation embarrassed, challenged, and confronted in order to make its voice heard. The Mexican American generation took pride in mainstreaming and coveted upward mobility, but the Chicano Movement Generation celebrated its working class roots and daily blue collar reality. Luis Valdez characterization of the purpose of teatro illustrates the Chicano Movement concern with the everyday and with the working class. In the introduction to the 1970 publication of El Teatro Campesino's *Actos* (short agit-prop pieces that El Teatro Campesino used on the picket lines during California's grape strikes) Valdez writes:

Pachucos, campesinos, low-riders, pintos, chavalonas, familias cuñados, tios, primos, Mexican-Americans, all the human essence of the barrio is starting to appear in the mirror of our theater. With them come the joys, sufferings, disappointments and aspirations of our gente.¹³

And:

The actos were born quite matter of factly in Delano. Nacieron hambrientos de la realidad. Anything and everything that pertained to daily life, la vida cotidiana, of the huelgistas became food for thought, material for actos . . . Huelgistas portrayed Huelgistas, drawing their improvised dialogue from real words they exchanged with the esquiroles (scabs) in the fields everyday.¹⁴

¹²David Montejano, "On the Question of Inclusion," in *Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. David Montejano (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), xvii.

¹³Luis Valdez, *Actos—El Teatro Campesino* (San Juan Bautista, CA: Cucaracha Publications, 1971).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

The Mexican American generation valued culture, but in an effort to protect their children from racism, did not always teach them the Spanish language. Chicano Movement generation youth rejected assimilation. Juan Gomez Quiñones characterized cultural resistance as the “negation of assimilation,” “cultural identity is a safehouse and thus provides strategic and tactical elasticity vis a vis the dominant society.”¹⁵ The offspring of the Mexican American generation took it upon themselves to seize for themselves the popular performance tradition, storytelling and balladry that were always buried in their own psychic landscape.¹⁶ Manuel G. Gonzales quotes Nicolas Kanellos: “‘This period,’ according to the literary critic Nicolas Kanellos, ‘was one of euphoria, power and influence for the Chicano poet, who was sought after almost as a priest, to give his blessings in the form of readings at all cultural and Chicano movement events.’”¹⁷

The Mexican-American Generation

Historians labeled the first generation of Mexican descent born in the U.S. as the Mexican-American generation. F. Arturo Rosales states:

Two factors arose out of the Great Depression that diminished *Mèxico Lindo* ideology. One, immigration came to a halt, thus eliminating for at least a decade the previously constant reinforcing of Mexican culture. Second, Mexicans resisted repatriation; mostly families with growing children committed themselves to

¹⁵Quoted by George J. Sanchez in *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles 1900-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

¹⁶Broyle Gonzales refers to the role of oral tradition: human memory, the body, community: “Memory is indeed the cultural storehouse. Together with the human body it constitutes the central vehicle of cultural transmission within Mexicano (or any other) oral culture. Both cultural identity and cultural survival within an oral culture depend on memory. Memory should not be understood here as a cerebral, individualistic, psychological process, but in its collective and *physical* manifestation: as remembrance and transmission of the community’s knowledge through that community’s performance forms (be they storytelling, *dichos* [proverbs], historical discourse, prayer, dance, jokes, skits songs, etc.).

Yolanda Broyles Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 15.

¹⁷Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 249.

staying in the U.S., thus becoming more rooted. During the decade, a generation grew up who had no memories of Mexico. Their only home had been the *barrios* in their immigrant communities.¹⁸

The Mexican-American generation represented permanency, they were in the U.S. to stay and did not exhibit the same sense of nostalgia, as the previous “Mexico Lindo” generation, which still had strong ties to Mexico, and attempted to keep Mexico alive in to U.S.—*Mexico de Afuera*.¹⁹ Members of the Mexican-American generation self-identified as U.S. citizens. They were willing to participate as citizens and expected equal civil and political rights. The parents and grandparents of Chicano activists employed a “liberal agenda” using voluntary association and conventional political participation to achieve upward mobility and opportunity. As survivors of the Great Depression, this generation attempted to participate in the American mainstream, while retaining pride in their Mexican heritage. World War II unified the Mexican-American generation, as progressives bonded ideologically to fight the threat of fascism. Ignacio Garcia notes:

By the late 1930s, this small but growing generation had identified itself as American first. World War II only further clarified this generation’s identity, as many Mexican Americans enlisted and fought against fascism and tyranny. In the process, the men became the country’s most decorated ethnic group, and the women distinguished themselves in home-front victory committees and in defense industry jobs.²⁰

The Mexican-American generation embraced American values, and used conventional political tools to achieve power and legitimacy. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC—which continues to this day) was a middle-class civil rights organization that challenged segregation, examined the judicial system and supported the

¹⁸Rosales, *Chicano!*, 90.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ignacio Garcia, *Chicanismo*, 20.

war effort through bond drives.²¹ The American G.I Forum “zealously sought the protection of civil rights for veterans”²² and became a force in electoral politics, getting out the vote and endorsing candidates. Bert Corona and Ernesto Galarza, of MANO organized workers and fought anti-immigrant sentiment.²³ Young Mexican-Americans participated in New Deal agencies such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the National Youth Administration (NYA), stressing education and self-improvement. The 1930s Southern California YMCA produced MAM- the Mexican American Movement, a youth civic organization, advocating “citizenship, higher education . . . and a more active participation in civic and cultural activities by those of our national descent.”²⁴ These youth emphasized their American character, but did not deny their Mexicaness. According to Rosales et al. in *Chicanos!* Manuel Ceja wrote a piece in the 1938 issue of *Mexican Voice*, MAM’s newspaper, entitled, “Are We Proud to be Mexicans?” Ceja responds to overhearing a boy claim to be “Spanish” when queried about his ethnicity. He writes: “Why are we so afraid to tell people we are Mexicans? Are we ashamed of the color of our skin, and the shape and build of our bodies, or the background from which we have descended?” Ceja emphasized that the bilingual and

²¹Manuel G. Gonzales writes: “Mirroring the assimilationist attitudes of the time, LULAC too confined its membership to U.S. citizens and therefore to a middle class elite. Its stated objective was to inculcate American values among its members. Consistent with this philosophy, it adopted English as its official language. However it vowed to protect the Mexican community – not just its membership –from the discrimination that was rampant at the time. To a surprising extent, it was successful in keeping its promise. Although in public it claimed to be apolitical – its membership included both liberals and conservatives – politics was one avenue it was willing to pursue.”

Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 180.

²²Rosales, *Chicano!*, 97.

²³See Mario T. Garcia, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) for a detailed conversation about Bert Corona’s life and work.

²⁴Rosales, *Chicano!*, 99.

bicultural attributes of Mexican-Americans could open innumerable doors. “Then why is it that we as Mexicans do not command respect as a nation? Are we doing justice to our race when we do not endeavor to change this attitude?”²⁵ In another essay by MAM member Consuelo Espinoza entitled “The Constitution and the Fourteenth Amendment” she writes:

I am not afraid to say that some parents teach their children not to talk or play with a Negro or a Mexican. This is unChristian and unAmerican. We say that we have to teach the youth of Germany the way of Democracy. Let me tell you, Americans, we still have a great job ahead of us, especially against the same racial prejudice.”²⁶

While Mexican Americans clearly sought inclusion, open resistance occurred simultaneously, and put Mexican Americans from different points of view, backgrounds, classes and of different ages at odds. For example, even as Mexican-Americans fought patriotically, young *pachucos*, and African-American zootsuiters sported pork-pie hats, long coats and baggy pants—an ostentatious display at a time when all materials were being conserved to go to the war effort. The gang culture of the *pachuco* put other Mexican Americans at risk.²⁷ Rosales writes:

The gang activity of *pachucos* (zoot suited street youth) provoked a severe police crackdown and an onslaught of negative media coverage that inflamed a widespread public backlash against Mexicans. Some observers even linked this

²⁵Ibid., 101.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Burt Corona, who organized young pachucos and their parents, offers a more sympathetic view of youth gangs. “Many of the youths who belonged to gangs were children of Mexican men and women who worked in the waste material industry. Paid wages as low as ten to fifteen cents an hour, these Mexican workers were forced to lives in old and dilapidated housing in what was then called the Flats...Many of the Mexican youth—from ages thirteen to twenty-two—who joined gangs represented drop outs from the public junior and senior high schools. As a result of language problems, racism in the schools, and a pattern of sending Mexican kids to continuation schools, which were like detention centers, many kids simply dropped out of school...”

Mario T. Garcia, *Memories of Chicano History*, 104.

youth culture to Mexican *sinarquistas* (fascists). In the atmosphere of World War II, this was enough to paint all Mexican Americans, who were either children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, with the brush of disloyalty.²⁸

And:

Blatant repression of Mexican American youth threatened the gains civil rights activists secured within the American system. But instead of distancing themselves from the issue, many California Mexican American activists came to their defense by forming the Citizen's Committee for Latin American Youth, with Manuel Ruiz as chairman. But the strategies employed were carefully crafted in order to not exacerbate an already intense xenophobia aimed at Mexicans during the war.²⁹

This zoot suit fashion countered the ideology of the dominant culture. The zoot suit was also popular Among African Americans and Shane and Graham White observe:

The term "zoot" meant something done or worn in an exaggerated style, and exaggeration was indeed the key to understanding the zootsuiters themselves . . . For northern whites, the way in which African American zoot suiters were displaying their bodies in wartime America was no longer something to be dismissed with a joke, a raised eyebrow, a shake of the head, or an expression of annoyance; it was something they cared deeply about. In the summer of 1943, wearing a zoot suit was an illegal and more importantly, a dramatically unpatriotic act.³⁰

In the contemporary era, the zootsuiter has been romanticized, but patriotic Mexican Americans regarded the U.S. as home and gladly participated in the war effort. Their identity was grounded in active participation and the war effort was a related expression of their commitment to civil and political rights: making the world safe for democracy while laboring intensely (and with no doubt of their future success) to extend their own civil and political rights at home. Zoot suiters demonstrated a lack of respect, and as the

²⁸Rosales, *Chicano!*, 103.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin' African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 254.

Rosales quote demonstrates, placed other Mexican Americans in a precarious position.

White and White write:

The specific meaning of the zoot suit derived from its context, from who was wearing it and where it was displayed. Very quickly the suit came to signify, as Stuart Cosgrove aptly put it, a “refusal”; it was a “subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience.” In part, the gesture was directed at whites . . . and while the vast majority of black males of fighting age did end up in the armed services, a significant and obvious minority, regarding the war as something solely for the benefit of white America, did their best to avoid the draft and ignore the whole war effort. Associated as it was with leisure and with a dance and music culture that displayed a studied indifference to a work ethic that, for many Americans, seemed even more important as the nation fought for its very survival, the zoot suit was correctly seen by many whites as an insult to their country.

But the gesture was also directed at other blacks, notably the respected middle class, who since their reaction to the suit was mixed with embarrassment for the “race,” disdained the extravagance and lack of patriotism of the zootsuiters even more than did many whites.³¹

The *pachuco* culture represented resistance to the dominant culture and countered the prevalent, conformist view. It is not surprising that in later decades, Chicanos would idealize the *pachucos* who could be interpreted as challenging the views of conformist Mexican Americans, who sought to assimilate, and even to be considered white.³²

Manuel G. Gonzales observes:

³¹Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin' African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998, 256.

³²Rosales writes, “An essential goal of many Mexican American activists was to be classified as white. Basically, this stemmed from denial of Mexico’s racial realities, but other reasons also accounted for this stance. It became obvious to U.S. Mexicans, even in the immigrant era, that if they were to be classified as colored, it would subject them to *de jure* segregation. The strategy employed in a few successful school desegregation efforts, as happened in Tempe (1925) and Lemon Grove (1930) school cases discussed in Chapter Four, was based on the claim to whiteness.

In spite of accepting their nonwhite *mestizaje* Mexico Lindo leaders voiced opposition to segregation because they found being treated like Negroes humiliating.”

Rosales, *Chicano!*, 95.

The pachucos, never very numerous, exerted an enormous influence on a whole generation of Mexican youths in the 1940s and 1950s. Children of immigrants, for the most part, pachucos (and pachucas) felt alienated from their parents who held on to Old World values hoping to return to Mexico. Misunderstood by the older generation, they also found themselves at odds with the dominant society; Anglos, who denied them jobs and educational opportunities, rejected them as outsiders and criminals. Caught between two worlds, pachucos rebelled by creating their own unique society . . . What *was* unique was the degree to which the style were exaggerated, the extremes the youths embraced as a symbol of their defiance. They developed a patois, a strange and fascinating mixture of Spanish, English and black slang which came to be called *calo*. More extreme was the occasional use of marijuana and a proclivity for tattoos, especially by males. In short, pachucos tried very hard to “shock the bourgeoisie’ with their flamboyancy, and did so with a good measure of success.³³

The Mexican-American Generation came of age during a time when people of color were segregated, actively intimidated and even lynched. Their personal experience of discrimination and cultural memory of the sacrifices of their parents and grandparents was strong. Self-identifying as “white,” and attempting to assimilate was one survival strategy that Mexican American parents used to protect their children from racism, and discrimination, and to guarantee greater economic and educational opportunities for them. Rosales et al. write:

According to the *movimiento* canon, the Mexican-American generation of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, in league with Anglos bent on cultural genocide, cast Mexican culture aside, roots and all, leaving only a barren field for the Chicano generation. (Corky) Gonzalez once said that his schooling gave him cultural amnesia: it led to his forgetting Spanish and other Mexican attributes. But Gonzales was probably unaware of how intensely cultural nationalism had permeated U.S.-Mexican communities through immigration at the turn of the century. As *movimiento* activists embraced cultural nationalism, they exalted *mestizaje* and borrowed from the pantheon of Mexican patriotic symbols as did their immigrant grandfathers and grandmothers at the turn of the century.³⁴

³³Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 167.

³⁴Rosales, *Chicano!*, 56.

Furthermore, the parents and grandparents of sixties generation youth experienced a different historical moment, which shaped their attitude toward organizing and political participation. Bert Corona writes:

What we have to understand is that the generation of the sixties did not go through the crisis of the thirties. Consequently, the kids of the sixties still had a lot of hope. . . . But the generation of the thirties went through a different experience. The Mexicans of this period saw starvation. Their parents were uprooted, many deported. They knew what it was to have to share one tomato with others or to have only a loaf of bread for a week. These sufferings made their generation much more materialistic, realistic, and more ready to accept the theory of the struggle of classes.³⁵

According to Corona, the battles of the sixties were more culturally than class oriented, “and not about how one could stay alive.”³⁶ He quotes activist Ernesto Galarza:

Well, I love the way all the young people are turning on to all these things that we thought they’d never do. But I think that what has happened is that they’ve missed one very important thing—and that is an understanding of what it takes to really make a living and how to sustain themselves in their country. It’s so hard. It has been hard for our people.³⁷

The Mexican American Generation attempted to assimilate while retaining culture and cultural pride. The children of the Mexican American generation did not understand their culture as well as their parents, but they did understand what it meant to be second-class American citizens. As the sixties generation moved toward self-definition, and away from the struggle for survival of their parents generation, they determined that the loss they had suffered, in order to gain privileges, had been too great. The emergence of a relatively small middle class, the opportunity for education and advancement was not worth sacrificing their language, sense of history and understanding of culture. Corky

³⁵Mario T. Garcia, *Memories of Chicano History*, 260.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

Gonzalez commented that the choice was cultural genocide with slim economic benefits, versus cultural survival without economic benefits.

“I have come a long way to go nowhere” decried Gonzales, “unwillingly dragged by that monstrous, technical, industrial giant called progress and Anglo society.”³⁸

However, significantly, the political participation of the Mexican-American generation, and the generation before them, created a web of voluntary associations and social networks, very much like the web of relationships that supported the emergence of the Black Civil Rights Movement. Even if the Chicano Movement generation did not appreciate its significance, the foundations laid by previous generations created a necessary precursor for their activism.

The Chicano Movement: El Movimiento

The Chicano student movement arose at a particular historical juncture, as a series of fortuitous moments and opportunities converged to create a national Chicano consciousness. The Chicano Civil Rights Movement was informed by the Black Civil Rights Movement; the liberation movements prevalent in Africa and Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s; the counter culture and anti-war movement that was fomenting in society as a whole; and issue-based movements such as the farmworkers movement in California and the land rights movement in New Mexico.³⁹ Manuel G. Gonzales writes:

Following the lead of the African American community, which initiated a far reaching movement for civil liberties in the fifties, many Mexicans, now calling themselves Chicanos and Chicanas, embarked on their own campaign to improve socioeconomic conditions and win full recognition of their rights as U.S. citizens. While these concerns had been articulated before, notably by the Mexican American Generation of the post-World War II period, after the mid sixties a new

³⁸Ignacio Garcia, *Chicanismo*, 75.

³⁹See Rosales et al., and Montejano, “On the Question of Inclusion.”

aggressiveness developed in the barrios. Socioeconomic gains made in past years seemed woefully inadequate. Many Mexicans began to demand immediate reform. Some called for revolution. Convinced that changes of whatever kind could be instituted only through the acquisition of power, political action was emphasized as never before. Moreover in contrast to their postwar predecessors, the leaders of the so-called Chicano Generation stressed pride in their ethnic roots while deemphasizing assimilation into the American mainstream.⁴⁰

The Civil Rights Movement turned the consciousness of the entire country to questions of justice, to racism and privilege, and fundamentally questioned the contradictions of the dominant culture. The immediacy of the movement created the right environment for a heightened national awareness of social justice issues to emerge. Youth across the country were questioning the Cold War values of their parents, seizing on a foundation laid by the Beatniks. Issues of free speech, and free space became important.⁴¹ Wars of liberation in Africa and in Cuba made youth aware of colonialism, and they could see the impact of dominating structures in their own lives. As the controversy over Viet Nam escalated, youth mobilized to reject the war.

As young Chicanos became more aware, the issue-based struggles of the UFW in California, and the Alianza Federal in New Mexico, led by fellow Chicanos, gave concrete dimension to the values of civil and political justice that permeated the public sphere. Young Chicanos recognized themselves or members of their families in the faces of rural Mexican-American laborers that had already gone to battle. Hungry to take political action themselves, Chicano youth embraced the struggles of rural Mexican - Americans, and El Movimiento expanded quickly into questions of racism, lack of educational and economic opportunity, police brutality, and the War in Viet Nam. Bert

⁴⁰Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 200.

⁴¹Rosales, *Chicano!*, xv.

Corona writes, “The Farmworker’s struggle, in many respects is a much older struggle, but in the sixties, it motivated other activists who went on to be involved in other areas.”⁴²

The Chicano Movement is not an isolated attempt to bring about change. It is one piece of a multifaceted history of survival, opposition and conventional participation. In every phase of history, Chicanos have used multiple strategies, including veiled resistance, open rebellion, and even assimilation, to ensure the safety and well-being of loved ones, to reaffirm cultural values and traditions, and to create opportunities for new generations.

Conventional political organizing provides an important, cohesive thread throughout the history of Mexicans in the U.S.; however, the Chicano Movement represents a significant opening of public space for new conversations that cross over the boundaries of race, class and gender. Ignacio Garcia observes:

The Chicano Movement was not simply a search for identity, or an outburst of collective anxiety. Rather, it was a full-fledged transformation of the way Mexican-Americans thought, played politics, and promoted their culture. Chicanos embarked on a struggle to make fundamental changes, because only fundamental changes could make them active participants in their own lives.⁴³

According to Garcia, the political ethos of *Chicanismo* resulted in a new “cultural-political taxonomy” that explained the involvement of activists. This new taxonomy was neither Pro-Mexican nor Pro-American, it was *pro-barrio*.⁴⁴ It integrated two cultures and for the first time faithfully represented and articulated the experiences and ideas of a

⁴²Mario T. Garcia, *Memories of Chicano History*, 245.

⁴³Ignacio Garcia, *Chicanismo*, 7.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 8.

generation who had not grown up in Mexico, nor as Anglo Americans, but nevertheless as Americans with meaningful and significant contributions and perspectives. The Chicano Movement generation defined and appropriated cultural, social and political space that was neither Mexican nor *gabacho*. Their roots were Mexican, but their entitlement to equal civil and political rights, American. Ignacio Garcia writes:

As a senior in high school in 1969, I remember my friends and I adding “brown” as a racial category on job, scholarship, and financial aid application forms. To be a “brown” meant we were different. Being different opened us to a new definition of our identity. This as-yet-undefined new category gave us opportunity to engage in a “painful self-evaluation, a wondering search for [our] people, and most of all for [our] identity.” As young Chicanos, we were caught between two cultures, American and Mexican. *Chicanismo* was a blending of the two and was simultaneously an acceptance of both and a rejection of both. Most important, our *mestizaje* was our ticket out of white America.⁴⁵

The Chicano generation gave voice, texture and dimension to specific historical experiences that had never been appropriately addressed by civil society. As Chicanos worked to articulate their own understanding of their experiences, other Mexican Americans and allies recognized themselves, and joined the dialogue. Thus, the Chicano Movement generation established an identity that was the product of self-reflection and unselfconscious attempts to faithfully document and express how their experiences had shaped them, to take those experiences and to use them as a means to act on the world around them.

Garcia defines the significance of the Chicano Movement in terms of the ethos that it established.

More focused than just a communal philosophy, a political ethos is the manner in which a community rationalizes and justifies its political participation in society. The development of that ethos requires that intellectuals, politicians, activists and other influential individuals within a community access their historical

⁴⁵Ibid., 72.

importance, recognize or decide on their class status or statuses, promote their cultural roots, and organize a political agenda.⁴⁶

In Crystal City, Texas, Chicanos organized politically to take over the local government machine. Jose Angel Gutierrez organized the Raza Unida Party and he and Corky Gonzalez faced off as potential candidates in an attempt to organize a third political party.

Each dimension of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, the farmworkers movement, the land rights movement, and the student movement represented a specific context and historical experience. However, as momentum grew, activists and interpreters sought out commonalities between areas of movement and many activists, especially students, sought to cross over into multiple areas of movement work

The next step for the Chicano generation was to demand access to rights and opportunities, as well as inclusion in the mainstream society, negotiated on terms defined by Chicanos, not by the Anglo culture. As youth set about to articulate the sense of identity that would define them and their future struggles, art became essential.

The Chicano Renaissance

Artistic expression allowed Chicano youth to articulate and define their sense of self as well as their relationship to society. Chicanos developed a common language and aesthetic dedicated to the beauty and meaning of their experience of being Mexican in the United States: the product of a unique set of cultural, social and political realities. Rather than be ashamed of growing up poor (as the dominant culture taught Chicanos to be), or of being descended from working-class ancestors, Chicanos honored and celebrated the integrity of their families, and the commitment of parents and grandparents who

⁴⁶Ibid.

sacrificed for the good of their families. In their aesthetic product, Chicanos named the racism, lack of opportunity, and injustice that affected them as a people, and embraced the beauty of everyday cultural experience as something that gives meaning to life, as something to be cherished and loved. A newly defined Chicano aesthetic allowed artists, activists and community members to define themselves on their own terms. Chicano art articulated a proud history, based on an indigenous and revolutionary past and revealed a reverence for the sacredness of place; it articulated the stories of families who protected their own and created a secure environment in spite of the threat of the outside world; it articulated issues of importance to the community.

Art, aesthetics, and cultural production were a means to redefine a concrete community base. Art allowed Chicanos to redefine, reestablish, and for some, rediscover relational power. Relational power was expressed through creative production in at least two ways: first, art allowed Chicanos to express their talents—it allowed them to demonstrate concretely, to themselves and others, that their history, language and culture was misrepresented by the dominant culture. Chicano artists rearticulated their history and culture as actors on the world around, and thus, reordered the terms of relational power. Through their art, Chicanos made their creativity, contributions and oppression, known. Art became a means for challenging racism. Tying cultural production to a community base allowed Chicanos to embrace their working class roots, and to acknowledge the commitment and sacrifice of farm workers, housekeepers, and factory workers. Creating community-based art challenged elitist notions of “high culture” and illustrated that everyone has the ability and the right to create art, and to name the world on their own terms. Second, Chicanos learned not only that they had a right to create, but

a history of creating as well. As part of the identity-centered politics that drove the Chicano Movement, activists rediscovered a history of storytelling, balladry, and public performance. Youth reconnected with a sustaining mythology, but more importantly, learned that their personal experience was connected to a larger system of domination, resistance and liberation. Young Chicanos became aware of a constant need to understand relationships in a larger context. Chicana visual artist Carmen Lomas Garza writes:

We (Chicanos) needed to heal ourselves and each other, so we started by choosing a name for ourselves, a name to symbolize our movements for self-determination. The accomplishments of our parents during the 50s civil rights movements were not enough. We started to speak more Spanish in public places; we worked to get better representation on school boards and local governments and we started to explore and emphasize our unique culture in the visual arts, music, literature and theater. . .⁴⁷

And:

We have been doing Chicano art not only for Chicanos but also for others to see who we are as people. If you see my heart and humanity through my art then hopefully you will not exclude me from rightfully participating in this society.⁴⁸

Recognizing that every contribution is valuable is one aspect of consciousness raising. Art demonstrates the human potential to create. In terms of power relationships and systems of domination, appropriating the right to create, to make art, is a significant act. By creating within public space, relational power shifts. By making art, Chicanos showed art is not always subject to domination. It is vital and dynamic, an important expression of power. Creative expression can transcend domination. The expressions of Chicano

⁴⁷Carmen Lomas Garza, *A Piece of my Heart* (New York: The New Press, 1991), 13.

⁴⁸Ibid.

artists spoke directly to race, class, culture, and often gender, but they also made a powerful statement that transcended these classifications.

Political organizing broke down the isolation that kept Chicanos from formulating the political language and creative expression to talk about their experiences, to validate and celebrate them as a community and to express themselves as legitimate members of civil society. The late Tomas Rivera grew up as a migrant laborer. He tells the story of being a young writer, trying to imitate authors like Mickey Spillane, down to stereotypes of different characters—prostitutes, Mexicans, etc. Rivera writes:

. . . Then, one day I was wandering through the library and I came across *With His Pistol in his Hand* by Americo Paredes, and I was fascinated. I didn't even know Paredes existed, though we were only thirty miles away, *pero no había comunicación alguna porque no había movimiento ni nada de eso. Saqué el libro ese. Lo que me atrajo fue el apellido Paredes.* (but there was no communication at all because there wasn't a movement, or anything like that. I checked out that book. What attracted me was the name Paredes). I was hungry to find something by a Chicano or a Mexican-American. It fascinated me because, one, it proved it was possible for a Chicano to publish; two, it was about a Chicano, Gregorio Cortez, *y sus hazañas* (and his deeds). . . . The book indicated to me that it was possible to talk about a Chicano as a complete figure. . . . *With a Pistol in his Hand* indicated to me a whole imaginative possibility for us to explore. Now that, also was in 1958, and it was then that I began to think, write, and reflect a hell of a lot more on the people I had known in 1945 to '55.⁴⁹

Gloria Anzaldúa tells a similar story:

In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was *City of Night* by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and get published. When I read *I Am Joaquin* I was surprised to see a bilingual book by a Chicano in print. When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Jose Limon, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems: History and Influence in Mexican-American Social Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 87.

⁵⁰Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 60.

Rivera and Anzaldua's comments illustrate the isolation of Chicanos (especially those in the academy) prior to the Chicano Movement. As Rivera states, "there wasn't communication at all because there was no movement." The Chicano Movement created a likeminded community of artists and other individuals, who recognized that others shared their experiences. When Anzaldua and Rivera found books by Paredes and Rechy, it validated their own experiences, and showed them that it was possible for them to write and make art about their own lives. The Chicano Movement created the means for individuals to reflect about their shared experience of a hybrid culture. Alurista discusses *la lucha* as "though inextricably connected with material, dialectical, class struggle, more significantly, the desire and struggle of U.S. Mexicans, or Chicanos, to think, or, better yet, *rethink* themselves as one, as whole, and as a meaningful people on earth."⁵¹

Chicano Theater

The farm workers theater represents another form of community that broke down the isolation of Mexican-American youth, who, before the influence of El Movimiento, had not often seen their identity represented publicly. El Teatro Campesino (the founding company of the Chicano Theater Movement) inspired activists and artists in other parts of the country to use the form that lent itself so well both to community performance and public protest. Often, the young activists and artists that formed theater companies showed vision, daring and risk in their effort to affect civil society. Teatro was a project of rearticulation of relational power for the actor as well as the audience who partnered to explore the roots of Chicano history. Teatro named relationships of power and privilege within the dominant culture, and actors revealed themselves as critical commentators on

⁵¹Alurista, "Myth, Identity and Struggle in Three Chicano Novels: Aztlán, Anaya, Mendez and Acosta," in *Aztlán—Essays on the Chicano Homeland* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 220.

existing political, economic and social relationships. Teatro used new language to talk about social justice issues. Community, solidarity and camaraderie marked these endeavors, which were intellectual, creative, and above all, social (although not without conflict). Oftentimes, participating youth longed for new experiences and the freedom of being out, exploring a new world. They were willing to exist on little or no money, to lift heavy things, to sleep on floors, to network and to travel without the weight of responsibilities that affect adults as they take on the responsibilities of families and full-time jobs.

Modern *teatro* began on the *huelga* picket line in Delano, California, when Luis Valdez (a former farmworker, college graduate, playwright and former member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe) began working with Cesar Chavez and strikers in 1965.⁵² *Teatro* was effective, because it graphically illustrated the plight of workers and used migrant workers themselves to tell their own story. Teatro was used initially to keep up the morale of marchers and strike lines and to ridicule growers, and other representatives of institutionalized authority (mayors, governors, local police, and the *gabacho*—white person, or “honky”—usually a grower). The group was soon invited to perform at community sites (starting with Stanford University). Community performances gave farm workers the opportunity to raise consciousness among a broad cross-section of the public, and helped to reinforce the effectiveness of the boycott strategies being used to affect grape growers.

“Our use of comedy stemmed from necessity—the necessity of lifting the strikers’ morale. We found we could make social points not in spite of comedy, but

⁵²Broyles Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino*

through it. Slapstick can bring us . . . close to the underlying tragedy . . . that human beings have been wasted for generations.”⁵³ El Teatro Campesino provided testimony, and bore witness, to the potential of human beings who were seen only as *brazos* by grape growers, and probably as even less by the majority of white Americans. Taking the farm workers theater to communities, allowed citizens to see the workers for the human beings that they were. El Teatro Campesino exposed middle class audiences to the injustices that farmworkers were facing, and forced them to confront these issues. Theater performed by the farmworkers themselves made audiences feel accountable, because they were put in touch directly with the individuals experiencing the injustices of unfair wages, and poor working and living conditions. As a result, many middle class individuals became allies and activists in solidarity with the cause of the farmworkers.

El Teatro began by using the *acto*, a short skit using two to three actors and illustrating a problem. According to Huerta in 1971, Valdez listed the following five goals of the *acto*:

- Inspire the audience to social action.
- Illuminate specific points about social problems.
- Satirize the opposition.
- Show or hint at a solution.
- Express what people are thinking.⁵⁴

The *acto* was not scripted, and usually relied on improvisation, especially in the early stages of development of a particular piece. Many of the original actors in *actos* were farm workers, who, often, did not read or write. Thus, orality was of prime importance,

⁵³Ibid., 27.

⁵⁴Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* (Ypsilanti, MI: Bilingual Press, 1984), 16.

linking the *acto* to the Mexican oral tradition with which farm workers were familiar.⁵⁵

Early *actos* illustrated worker issues. For example, the *acto Las Dos Caras del Patroncito* showed the hypocrisy of growers who insisted living and working conditions for farm workers were comfortable, if not enviable. When the masks are switched, and the farm worker is in the position of power, the grower is no longer willing to live just like “one of my boys . . . hair flyin’ in the wind.”⁵⁶

Teatro became a tool not just for illustrating issues, but for exploring the identity at the foundation of Chicano politics. Myth, the history of Chicanos in the U.S., and the cultural memory that each artist had retained became the basis to relearn the chain of human experience and history that culminated in that present moment.

Broyles Gonzalez emphasizes the collective aspect of creation that was central to the work of the original group and especially credits “body, memory, and community” the collective cultural memory of the Mexican performance tradition that each actor had internalized, and ably executed. She illustrates how the tradition of the *carpa*, a vaudeville-style traveling tent show and its stock characters, had influenced Campesino performers. The *corrido*, a revolutionary ballad, and the folk history that had been passed down in the Southwest (*cuentos*) influenced performers as well.

Similarly, teatristas in other parts of the country used the pieces of their culture and history that they had internalized and combined those pieces with traditional songs and stories. Teatristas, and other activists made a conscious commitment to be bicultural

⁵⁵Broyles Gonzales illustrates this concept in her book.

⁵⁶Luis Valdez, “Las Dos Caras del Patroncito,” in *Early Works: Actos, Bernabe`, Serpentino*. (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1990), 19.

and bilingual, which required many to study the Spanish language and Southwestern culture and history, for the first time.

Sustainable, community-based art, can't just be art used to keep strikers happy, although songs, dance, teatro and camaraderie are an important part of direct action. Art must be organic. It must be integrated into the web of social (and thus political) community life. Communities have many facets and many points of contact where members are protected and cared for and where collective action and social movements can be formed.

Cultural work allowed Chicano activists to explore who they were, where they came from, and how it related to a larger political, economic, and social system. Cultural work allowed them to develop a framework that provided the basis for identity. Articulating reasserting a publicly expressed cultural identity meant reconnecting with myths, corridos, and oral traditions. The ability of Chicano Movement activists to tap into a cultural memory, a time-space continuum, and to connect an understanding of the traditional with their contemporary and unique experience, made the Chicano Movement significant. The Chicano Movement expressed an identity publicly that many Chicanos experienced in their daily lives, and made that articulation available to many Mexican American youth who had been isolated from the historical, political and linguistic roots of Mexican-American experience in the U.S.

Cultural production allowed Chicanos to express themselves as a meaningful people. Making art a part of everyday life allowed Chicanos to honor the integrity of their experience, and to give authentic voice to *la casa, el barrio, y la lucha*. The foundation for this cultural production is identity, perpetuated through a connection to culture.

According to Ignacio Garcia, this is the significant legacy of the movement—
Chicanismo.

The Chicano Movement, though, created a framework for organizing and community building that is ongoing. It instilled a life-long commitment to social justice work in some activists. It opened avenues for Chicano professionals to break into the mainstream, including lawyers, academics, and other professionals. The movement created a consciousness in universities that has allowed most universities to start Chicano Studies departments, one action, which symbolizes the authority and legitimacy of the movement, and creates a structure to pass down the history and lessons from the movement to a new generation.

CHAPTER FOUR: EL CENTRO SU TEATRO—RESISTANCE AND THE ART OF CULTURAL SURVIVAL

Introduction

My *abuelitas*—grandmothers, great grandmothers—my father. . . . They’ve shared their singing and dancing and stories. . . . Our sharing of our stories, yelling about our joys and fears, telling of how we survive, who we love, how we hate, how we deal with attacks towards our lives, how we celebrate—*todos estos cuentos* are the secret of our survival as *gente*. . . . We need to tell the real story of our people and rid ourselves of the negative stereotypes. All our lives, through television, newspapers, radio, movies, songs and stories, we’ve been told that . . . our community is lazy, dumb and smelly. . . . What we don’t hear is the truth and the only way to hear the truth is for each of us to be able to tell our stories. By telling our stories, we challenge stereotypes.¹

El Centro Su Teatro: Theory and Reality

This chapter examines El Centro Su Teatro, a grassroots Latino/Chicano multidisciplinary cultural organization in Denver, Colorado. Su Teatro (the original theater company) began in 1972 as the outgrowth of an introduction to Chicano studies course at the University of Colorado-Denver. Performing in the streets and at demonstrations, the guerrilla theater company was not unlike other *teatros* of the era. Members of the small company became committed to perfecting their craft, and traveled to festivals across the U.S. and Mexico, where they exchanged stories, songs and techniques with other artists. As the Chicano Movement ended and the era of

¹Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (Oakland: New Village Press, 2005), 35.

Reaganismo took hold, Su Teatro actors found that a dissenting voice was “more needed than ever.”² The company took on issues of U.S. involvement in counter-insurgency campaigns in Central and South America, early, embracing *Flor y Canto* and the *Nueva Cancion* coming out of Latin American protest movements.

In 1989, the nomadic theater company, Su Teatro, acquired the Elyria School, at 4725 High Street and became a multidisciplinary Chicano/Latino cultural arts center, El Centro Su Teatro.

Tony Garcia is still a little dazed by his recent acquisition. He wanders around the pink and blue and yellow halls of Elyria Elementary with the look of a rebel who’s suddenly become a homeowner. This April, Garcia’s militantly nomadic theater troupe found a home.³

A walk through the organization’s archives from 1989-1997 reveals a heady time for the organization. Theater reviews from local newspapers, and programs for original plays by resident playwright Tony Garcia, such as *Introduction to Chicano History: 101*, *Ludlow: El Grito de las Minas*, *Serafin: Cantos y Lagrimas* *La Carpa Aztlan presents: “I Don’t Speak English Only!”*, *The Miracle at Tepeyac*, *El Corrido del Barrio*, *The Day Ricardo Falcon Died*, and productions by other Chicano playwrights such as *Ay Compadre*, by Rudolfo Anaya, *How Else am I Supposed to Know I am Still Alive* by Evelina Fernandez, *La Victima* by Teatro de la Esperanza and *Shadow of a Man* by Cherrie Moraga illustrate a high level of artistic productivity .

Under Garcia’s direction, Su Teatro has established itself as one of the city’s premiere cultural institutions, unapologetically political, but never in a way that compromises its art. The theater has staged a wide variety of work, ranging from

²Tony Garcia, interview by author, Denver, CO, September 6, 2005.

³Leslie Petrovski “A Flower Grows in Elyria,” *Denver Arts Roundup*, May 5, 1989, 12.

magic realism and cultural history to urban tragedy, much of it original, written for the company by Garcia.⁴

Su Teatro, which translates as “your theatre,” is not dedicated to producing slick, commercial theater that has been whitewashed for mass-market consumption, even if the company has performed at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts and at Joe Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival. Instead, Su Teatro, a true community theater, values sincerity over theatricality and celebrates the community that gave it birth in 1971.⁵

Programs and mailings are of high quality. Organizational manifestos reveal a dedication to building a secure and stable organizational structure: budgets are intact and ably executed, grant applications tell the organization’s story and argue convincingly that the organization merits funding, and strategic plans outline the organization’s ideas for partnering with community members and local businesses. The energy and excitement of the Su Teatro company of the early nineties, Tony Garcia, Rudy Bustos, Debra Gallegos, Yolanda Ortega, Angel Mendez and Sherry Coca-Candelaria, and the public that supported it, is evident in their artistic and organizational product.

Garcia skillfully juxtaposes humorous scenes and musical interludes amidst the evening’s heavier elements, and when the “big issues” arise, he exercises a lyrical voice which is able to reduce complex events into compelling human terms.⁶

Before the building was even officially theirs, company members began using the building and producing work, visions of the future, and business plans to guarantee success.

This chapter is divided into four sections designed to provide a multifaceted understanding of El Centro Su Teatro. The first section is a survey of the historical

⁴ Alan Dumas, “Su Teatro: A New Era of Denver Theater,” *Rocky Mountain News*, October 29, 1993, 22.

⁵ Doug Caskey, “This Theater Values Sincerity,” *Colorado Daily*, 5-7 October 1990, 9.

⁶Ibid.

development of the organization from the perspective of Executive Artistic Director Tony Garcia, who joined Su Teatro in its second year as a musician, and went on to direct, write plays and to take on increasingly more leadership and responsibility as Su Teatro moved from being a collective to a more complicated organization. The second section provides a nuts and bolts profile of the organization, detailing the values, knowledge and practices that have been developed over thirty-six years, and the successes and challenges from an insider perspective. The third section attempts to partially address some of the issues that affect the arts field as a whole, as they specifically relate to Su Teatro; in this section of the chapter, we examine broad concerns of the field, and the specific experience of Su Teatro, as it relates to fundraising, first, and second, the problem of cultural appropriation. In our treatment of appropriation, we identify an intersection between the historical tension that puts large arts institutions and grassroots arts organizations at odds; the contemporary need of all arts organizations to build “diverse” audiences; and the interest of culturally specific arts organizations to promote cultural equity and to combat cultural appropriation, that is, the practice of using cultural images or products of a specific community, without acknowledging the ownership of that community. This section, entitled Su Teatro and the Field, again, starts with a broad look at the field, and then narrows its scope to examine the changing attitude of El Centro Su Teatro members toward appropriation and the need to establish cultural equity. The proceeding chapter breaks off the field-wide issues of building new audiences and examines aspects of Su Teatro’ approach in depth. Conventional arts participation studies offer assumptions about who arts patrons are, but Chicano audiences enter the discussion from an entirely different reference point. The history and orientation of these audiences

provide meaningful insight about artists and communities and reveal the challenges all arts organizations face (whether they are mainstream institutions or community-based organizations) to cultivate audiences, provide meaningful engagement and open public space for the dialogue, exchange and social engagement that benefits civil society. The concluding section raises the conversation once more to a broad overview of the arts field, and relates those concerns back to Su Teatro.

El Centro Su Teatro, Past and Present

In 1991, Anthony Garcia wrote a play entitled *The Day Ricardo Falcon Died*. Falcon was a respected Movimiento activist and a member of the Crusade for Justice. In 1972, he was killed by a gas station attendant, in Almagordo, New Mexico. Falcon was on his way to the Raza Unida Party Convention, in El Paso, Texas.

The play explores the loss of innocence of the Chicano Movement generation, particularly, young Chicanos who began organizing in Denver as members of UMAS (United Mexican-American Students). Falcon had been a role model for many activists, and when he was killed, the sacrifice necessary to bring about social change became palpable. What's more, young inexperienced students learned first hand that representatives of institutional power—usually in the form of local police SWAT teams—would do anything, even kill, to keep activists from achieving the goals of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Garcia writes:

My memories of the Chicano Movement are not of nostalgia, but of a sense of urgency, purpose and commitment. I remember Ricardo's death as a shocking awakening that the changing rules of society was a game that was played for keeps. For me, it was a loss of innocence or naïveté. I realized how easily one of our own could be taken from us. I remember those that devoted their lives and families to that cause. Some sacrificed both. Nineteen years after Ricardo Falcon's death, we are still going through a healing process. We have not allowed ourselves to mourn properly those who correctly or incorrectly exhibited the

highest level of commitment to their families and to their people. As I was writing, I asked myself which leaders would be willing to challenge the state to that level today? I asked this question of myself, but could not answer convincingly enough. I then asked myself, what lessons can we give not only to our children, but to ourselves to deal with the realities of living on the eve of the New World Order? The answer I heard was to look to our past, to look to our families and to remember the ideals we had before we lost our innocence.⁷

The Day Ricardo Falcon Died is structured to tell two stories at once: a contemporary storyline features the “old Miguel” a blocked writer who has remained true to his Chicano principles, and who is battling an ex-wife that he still loves. He is surrounded by peers who have “sold out” to the Hispanic Agenda of the 1980s. As old Miguel writes, he reveals the roots of his political views in his UMAS (United Mexican American Students) participation twenty years earlier. The experiences of young Miguel, and his fellow activists are reenacted to the audience, as old Miguel writes. Young Miguel explains:

I was sixteen, having graduated from high school a year early, I was a child among elders. Although the sun was setting on that summer of 1972, it nonetheless was the spring of the Chicano Movement, a national movement aimed at the re-assertion of our identity as a Mestizo people: a movement to gain political, economic and social rights long denied us in the United States.⁸

The play’s action takes place, as UMAS students prepare to caravan to El Paso, to attend the Raza Unida Conference, and among other things, to hear Ricardo Falcon speak. Older Miguel says:

Ricardo Falcon had spoken to the UMAS general membership two nights earlier. The effect had been inspiring. Falcon already was a campus legend. He grew up in a small rural Colorado town and recruited Chicanos from farm working families onto the campus. He was one of us. He fought for us daily and when the university tried to fire him, we fought to get his job back. He spoke with

⁷Anthony J. Garcia, *Su Teatro 20 Year Anthology—Select Plays by Anthony J. Garcia* (Denver: Su Teatro self-published, 2000), 75.

⁸Ibid., 110.

compassion. He was fearless and after beating the university, we thought him to be invulnerable.⁹

Before the play ends, the young students learn that Falcon has been killed. Vern Gallegos, a “vendido” (sell-out) character who plays a central role in both storylines (as a politically ambitious Hispanic in the contemporary story line, and as an insufferable misfit in the UMAS storyline) is almost thrown out a window by an emotionally overcome activist, Oso, when Vern insensitively disrespects Falcon. It is the younger Miguel who pulls Vern back in. Older Miguel says:

The irony would haunt me. How a man would rise from a humble campesino background to shake the foundation of the university and state, only to die on the same day as his moral opposite would be given a reprieve. Vern would continue to live and Ricardo Falcon would no longer know that pleasure.¹⁰

As the play concludes, Older and Younger Miguel come together. Older Miguel is attempting to make amends with his girlfriend, not attacking head-on, the entire Hispanic Agenda. Younger Miguel says:

I often sit on Sunday afternoons with my children, on the weekends that I have them, and watch the sunset. From my back porch we can feel its warmth until its very last moment on the horizon. I tell stories, just as my mother and father told me stories, of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. I tell them stories of Ricardo Falcon, Cesar Chavez, Ruben Salazar, and Reyes Tijerina. I never mention Vern, or that I saved his life. I don't think of it that way. Oso was a good man, all I did was help him maintain his principles.¹¹

The Day Ricardo Falcon Died is a play that comes out of the personal experience of Tony Garcia, including his experience as an artist, activist, and individual, both associated with Su Teatro and not. As the play concludes, Miguel does not attempt to

⁹Ibid., 117.

¹⁰Ibid., 125.

¹¹Ibid., 126.

raise the consciousness of upwardly-mobile Hispanics, but in the Director's notes of the Su Teatro Twentieth Anniversary production of *The Day Ricardo Falcon Died*, Garcia addresses the moderate and conservative Mexican-American contingencies, who, in the 1980s criticized Su Teatro for being too angry and too political. He refers to the organization's roots in the Chicano Movement:

I think in those days, performances were carried on the strength of individual personalities and the teatros constantly lost people to other areas of movement work. Very few of us thought that doing teatro would ever serve as a career. Many of us believed that the revolution would take place tomorrow and consequently, our lives could only be planned so far in advance. But the revolution did not take place the next day. Somehow, Su Teatro has continued for twenty years and today is known as El Centro Su Teatro. Su Teatro still clings to the ties of the community and the struggle for social change. Su Teatro has not and will not deny the radical fire that forged its beginning. Su Teatro often takes stands that will keep it from reaching the political and artistic mainstream. Su Teatro will bust its collective ass to provide the best production and artistic values it can.¹²

In thirty years, Su Teatro has changed, although its aesthetic is still Chicano. As the organization has grown, it has produced art for the movement; it has attempted to perpetuate, stimulate and feed a holistically linked community and culture. Over the years, Su Teatro company members struggled to sustain the organization, building and rebuilding the organization, in every successive growth cycle.

A palpable change occurred for Su Teatro when it found a permanent home in the Elyria School, in 1989, and when it received SCFD funding, also in that year. Garcia writes:

The drive to establish El Centro Su Teatro benefited from two external factors. One was the collapse of the local real estate market thanks to Neil Bush and his cronies in the Savings and Loan fiasco, and the other was the establishment of the Scientific Cultural Facilities District and the arts tax that went with it. Although

¹²Ibid., 74.

the vast majority of the money went to support the major (established Eurocentric) arts centers, some of the money actually trickled down to community-based arts centers of color.¹³

Su Teatro became El Centro Su Teatro, a multidisciplinary cultural arts organization, and a much bigger enterprise. The members of Su Teatro were always making art, attempting to serve a community, and balancing the personalities of artists. Suddenly, Su Teatro company members became de facto arts administrators, with no previous experience. The demands of running an actual center were more strenuous than company members might have realized. Garcia writes, that he began to think of acquiring a “home” for Su Teatro, as he worked to strike the set for *Serafin* at the Slightly-Off Center Theater and realized “I’m too old to carry this shit,” he writes, “The plan was very simple. We would purchase a building in the barrio. We would perform plays I had written, everyone would come and life would be so easy.”¹⁴ Opening El Centro Su Teatro gave Su Teatro the opportunity to develop more artists, to provide more programming, and to act as a conductor for broader community development. However, suddenly, El Centro had to look beyond the drama of personality conflicts between company members, to a long-term vision for a sustainable organization.

Garcia comments that El Centro Su Teatro, with all its current challenges, offers more potential for sustainability than Su Teatro: the company of artists that lacked a permanent home before the Elyria School was purchased. He comments that in the early days, he worked extremely hard, and did not get paid. It wasn’t a lifestyle that he, or the others, could carry out indefinitely. Because of the perseverance and dedication of

¹³Ibid., xiii.

¹⁴Ibid., xiii.

members in the earlier years of the organization, the group as a whole was able to envision a long-term future, and through acquisition of the Elyria School, make permanence a possibility.¹⁵ El Centro Su Teatro (the organization is now a multidisciplinary arts center [El Centro] which houses the theater company [Su Teatro]) has a greater opportunity to influence an arts and culture dialogue; indeed, to participate in a national arts dialogue, and potentially, to influence national cultural policy.

In its early years, Su Teatro actors took risks, putting their personal safety in jeopardy in public protests and demonstrations. As a collective, members have publicly defended political views that have kept the organization from attracting a moderate, and mainstream audience and funding base.¹⁶ Equally, as an organization, in some ways caught between the contradictions of an authoritative institution and a grassroots social justice organization, El Centro Su Teatro has the opportunity to confront cultural appropriation, to provide opposition to individuals and institutions that marginalize and misrepresent Chicano culture, to produce and perpetuate forms of cultural expression that are not supported or prioritized in large arts institutions or other public institutions (i.e., the public school system), to provide a critique and opposition to the exclusive arts practices of major institutions, and most importantly to engage the public and to provide access to a wide variety of cultural activities. Additionally, El Centro Su Teatro confronts issues of funding, strategic development, marketing, outreach, and sustainable leadership. Ironically, El Centro Su Teatro is a grassroots social justice organization, whose survival and livelihood, depends in large part on a savvy small business plan.

¹⁵Interview with Tony Garcia. 6 September 2000.

¹⁶Ibid.

Su Teatro: Moving Beyond Activist Politics

The history of Su Teatro is not linear. Tony Garcia writes that Su Teatro experienced three major slumps, in 1974, 1978, and 1983. He claims, “artistic growth has pulled Su Teatro out of each of its slumps.”¹⁷

Although in retrospect the talents and efforts of the core group was tremendous, I really believe that the contributions of the members of Su Teatro is the body of work.¹⁸

When Su Teatro was formed in 1971, teatro culture was a part of the movement. Early successes of the theater included *El Sombrero de Tres Picos*, and *La Familia Sin Fabiano*, a play about how a family is fragmented when the patriarch dies. Su Teatro performers were both artists and activists, as “the cultural arm of the movement”¹⁹ teatristas invited direct action and direct confrontation. In 1974, Debra Gallegos and Yolanda Ortega joined the group, solidifying the company’s strong musical base.²⁰ As Su Teatro moved into the 1980s, the country, as well as the company, experienced a shift in values. Su Teatro members moved to a more complex understanding of community-based art and its intrinsic value. The theory of artistic production of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, especially as developed by El Teatro Campesino supported “Theater of the Sphere”²¹ insisting on an integrated approach to art, culture, politics and spirituality. Theater of the Sphere transcended compartmentalized approaches to the political and

¹⁷Anthony J. Garcia, *Su Teatro Anthology*, ii.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Teatro and other artistic activities were typically referred to in this way. See an example of use in Michelle Habell-Pallan, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 86.

²⁰Anthony J. Garcia, *Su Teatro Anthology*, 12.

²¹See Broyles Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino*, 85, for a discussion of Theater of the Sphere.

social, in favor of praxis. However, in practice, performers served as gimmicks to attract supporters to rallies and demonstrations:

After years of seeing our work as primarily a support mechanism for political issues, and also being told this by our so-called leftist allies, we began to feel the frustration of never developing ourselves as artists. For years we had been called in to keep the rally lively, between the monotony of the more “important” political speeches. Every intellectual could tell you all about the importance of art and culture, but none knew what to do about it. Art and culture were mostly belittled by people who saw it as frivolous, but were willing to use the teatro opportunistically, if it meant drawing people to their events.²²

Although some members of the company were comfortable in their role amplifying and facilitating the movement, over time, some members of Su Teatro felt that their “art” was not valued in the same way as conventional Euro-American art, and they viewed this contradiction as a problem.²³ The question became, do communities of color need and deserve art and culture of the highest artistic caliber, produced by members of their own community? Confronting these philosophical questions represented a major shift for Su Teatro in how the value of that art was articulated, and how the commitment to community-based art was practiced. Su Teatro moved beyond illustrating movement themes to putting audiences in touch with deeper issues within themselves and the outside world.

There were also two different viewpoints, within the teatro, about what the teatro should be doing. Some people felt it was best served by being a “living leaflet”. . . . We received regular calls to perform at rallies, demonstrations, and political events, we mostly performed last to assure that the important speakers were heard first. . . . There were also those who felt that the cultural work alone was a big enough area of work. . . . The final straw came when we found out that these same white leftists that had criticized our political commitment and tried to guilt trip us into countless free performances, were paying large dollars to out of town visiting

²² Anthony J. Garcia, *Su Teatro Anthology*, viii.

²³ Tony Garcia interview, September 6, 2000.

cultural performers, whom they treated with extreme respect and consideration. . . . We lost our fear and guilt in asking for money.²⁴

Garcia calls the period that signaled the end of the Chicano Movement “The Reaganismo Funk,” a time of creative stagnation within Chicano culture and in the larger popular culture. Garcia claims that in the 1980s, he stopped listening to popular music on the radio, because it had nothing to say²⁵. Juan Gomez-Quinones writes:

The Reagan era was a period of selfish emphasis, jingoism and chauvinism, and a lack of access. The number of persons in a poverty status increased. The Reagan administration was not only inaccessible; it was generally negative toward the basic social and economic needs of the community, and it undertook specific negative actions concerning immigration and labor. Both antiworker and antiunion policies impacted on the Chicano community.²⁶

At a time when the entire country was swinging to the right, and many Mexican-Americans were turning to the Hispanic Agenda to answer their political problems, Tony Garcia produced and directed *El Corrido del Barrio* at the Slightly Off-Center Theater. According to Garcia, the group achieved a new level of respect from the community, and from political peers.²⁷ Garcia writes:

By the end of the run, *El Corrido* was playing to overflow houses, and was clearly being talked about in the Chicano community in a way that was causing the conservative Hispanic sorts to have to deal with us. At this time, unbeknownst to us, there were forces who believed that the cultural movement was best served by presenting a more modified view of the Mexican-American experience. To this end they advanced the position that Su Teatro was too radical, and that Tony Garcia was too angry and difficult to work with. The second part was probably true, but Su Teatro has never been too radical, at least for my tastes. In keeping with this viewpoint, they advanced themselves to the major institutions as viable

²⁴Anthony J. Garcia, *Su Teatro Anthology*, viii.

²⁵Interview with Tony Garcia, October 17, 1998.

²⁶Juan Gomez Quinones, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise 1940-1990* (City: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 185.

²⁷Anthony J. Garcia, *Su Teatro Anthology*, viiii.

alternatives to political art. To the contrary, *El Corrido de Auraria* which was too preachy for some, was invited to be presented at the Denver Center for Performing Arts. The weekend run in the 400 seat house ran to three quarters capacity.²⁸

Garcia writes, "It was unheard of for a company such as ours to be getting so much attention, while our business and political leaders ignored us."²⁹

El Corrido del Barrio made money, and the actors were paid for their work.

Garcia writes:

El Corrido brought Chicanos, many seeing theater for the first time, to see a play about themselves. And they were willing to pay five dollars cover, for this experience. It contradicted the mainstreamers, who felt that political theater was passé and that we needed the dominant culture to legitimize ourselves. El Corrido proved that we could succeed on our own.³⁰

With the experience of *El Corrido del Barrio*, Tony Garcia, and Su Teatro started to think more seriously about future achievement.

The lessons confirmed . . . some things I thought I knew. It reinforced my suspicions about large Euro-American institutions, even art institutions. It proved that there was uniqueness and high quality to our work. I began for the first time to see myself as a playwright. It proved that the dominant culture could not give me legitimacy. . . . It also established Su Teatro as a much broader force in the Chicano community . . . there was an even bigger need for what we were doing. That we were not in fact an isolated voice in the shadow of the Reagan years, but instead there existed others like us.³¹

El Centro Su Teatro and the Lessons of *The Day Ricardo Falcon Died*

In *The Day Ricardo Falcon Died*, Miguel has stayed true to his activist principles, while many around him have moderated their views, or become complacent. Although in the play Garcia provides social commentary specific to the 1980s, as Ignacio Garcia

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., x.

³¹Ibid.

observes, the lasting contribution of the Chicano Movement has been establishing a firm sense of identity among Mexican-Americans that is not altered by participation in the dominant culture.³² Older Miguel says:

The Hispanic Agenda wants to shape the future with Coors money. I think that is both hypocritical and dangerous. I hate Hispanic anything. I don't consider myself Hispanic. How many Spaniards came here to marry Indian women?³³

And:

What I call myself is how my children identify themselves. If I let someone call me a greaser or a spic, then my children believe that we have no power to stop racism. On the other hand, if I say that I am Spanish-American or Hispanic because I want to be more European and deny the Indian part of us, then I am lying to myself and everyone else.³⁴

The Day Ricardo Falcon Died is about loss of innocence. It is also about remaining true to principles in a world that has changed. Survival requires organizations to change, to meet the needs of the public they serve. Su Teatro's evolution from a small collective, to a non-profit cultural art organization has required the group to professionalize, which has been challenging. It has been necessary, however, to continue to stabilize the organization, in order to build its long-term sustainability and ability to continue to fulfill its mission. Organizational development has been the organization's biggest challenge.

Su Teatro and Organizational Development

Since 1989, members of El Centro Su Teatro have been required to raise money, build the infrastructure of the organization, produce artistic programming and engage

³²See Ignacio Garcia, *Chicanismo*.

³³Anthony J. Garcia, *Su Teatro Anthology*, 80.

³⁴Ibid.

audiences. The progress of the organization has been incremental, challenged by the ongoing work of training both artists and staff and creating systems and structures that ensure consistency. In spite of the serious impact of capitalization and professionalization on the organization, the hard working company is productive.

Su Teatro (the collective) has produced dozens of original plays, translations, and adaptations for the Chicano theater field. Su Teatro playwright in residence Tony Garcia has written and produced original plays including *Introduction to Chicano History: 101* (which played the Joseph Papp Theater Festival, 1986); *Ludlow, El Grito de las Minas* (which played the TENAZ Festival and the Teatro Pregones Theater Festival in 1991); *Lydia Mendoza, La Gloria de Tejas* (commissioned by Ruby Nelda Perez and premiered at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, 1992); and *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* (El Centro Su Teatro's most popular play, which has toured in the U.S. Southwest, Midwest, and on the West Coast). In 2005, Tony Garcia mounted *El Sol Que Tu Eres*, a retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth set in contemporary Mexico during the Days of the Dead of early November. Garcia workshopped the production over five years at sister organizations: The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, La Pena Cultural Arts Center in Berkeley, California, and at XicanIndio Artes in Mesa, Arizona. Garcia raised money from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Performance Network to hire Daniel Valdez, a founding member of El Teatro Campesino as a collaborator, who provided most of the score for the piece (Garcia also wrote some of the music). When the finished work was ready to premiere, Garcia negotiated with the University of Colorado-Denver theater department and then department chair Laura Cuetara to host the 2005 fall season,

premiering *El Sol Que Tu Eres* in October, and reprising a 2004 new work in collaboration with Valdez, *The Westside Oratorio*. The UCD theatre department contributed \$10,000 toward the projects and provided college students as actors, technical and set designers. Students provided labor for set construction, and UCD's staff provided all additional support including costume design and production and on site technical support during all performances. The production was the largest in Su Teatro history and Garcia ensured the project was realized by writing the piece, initiating participation from sister organizations, raising money for the project and Valdez's participation, and negotiating a partnership with UCD that allowed the production to premiere with maximum impact. In 2007, in the middle of a capital campaign to raise money for a new building, Garcia wrote a new play (in the space of six weeks), integrated it with music by Tish Hinojosa, directed the play, which involved many young and inexperienced actors, and arranged for Hinojosa to come to Denver to perform with the production.

In 2006, Garcia was a United States Artist Fellow, and was a member of the first class for the new initiative. United States Artists was started with seed money from the Ford Foundation, as well as the Prudential and Rasmussen foundations. The program is designed to restore funding to individual artists, and carried with it a \$50,000 cash prize. United States Artists is currently in the process of choosing a third class.

El Centro Su Teatro provides programming most weekends, throughout the year. Programming includes plays in English and Spanish, performances by visiting artists, school touring shows and popular education pieces, an arts and education program and three festivals dedicated to film, poetry and Chicano music. El Centro employs five full-time staff members and two part-time staff members, and contracts four artist-teachers to

work with youth in the Cultural Arts Institute. El Centro pays artists, so every artist appears on the organization's IRS 990 form as contract labor.

In 1988, Su Teatro's total yearly operating budget was \$20,000. In 2008, the budget is \$450,000. The importance of Su Teatro's contribution to the field has been acknowledged through national funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, The American Composers Forum, the Shubert Foundation, the National Performance Network, and Theatre Communications Group.

El Centro Su Teatro attempts to inform its practice with values and knowledge. Organizational values include a commitment to a Chicano aesthetic, which celebrates popular performance traditions, elevates the contributions of the Mexican American working class, illustrates aspects of everyday life in the home and in the neighborhood, and provides discussion and affirmation of the struggle of Mexican-American peoples for social justice. A crucial component of the Chicano aesthetic is recognizing the need to pass down culture as a vital intergenerational process. Culture is a means to survival and to positive self-identity. It provides the power to say who you are and to act on the world around you. Culture provides a source of understanding in a public sphere that fragments it and perpetuates stereotypes.

El Centro Su Teatro fosters intergenerational commitment as part of a chain of survival; it provides an opportunity for reflection on the contributions and sacrifices of past generations, which paved the way for the current generation. It is the responsibility of current generations not to squander opportunities, but to contribute and to pass on the opportunity, so that the chain remains unbroken.

El Centro Su Teatro is dedicated to preserving and promoting the culture of Chicanos and Latinos, including their history, language, and cultural traditions and to creating new work that supports the evolution and dynamism of the aesthetic. El Centro Su Teatro seeks to promote the growth and the advancement of the Chicano community. Members of the organization utilize individual advancement or advancement of the organization as an opportunity to promote the interests of the community. El Centro utilizes advancement to provide additional opportunities to Chicano artists and other artists of color, firstly and to all artists, secondly. Members of El Centro Su Teatro use skills and material resources to benefit the community, other community-based organizations and to strengthen El Centro Su Teatro. El Centro Su Teatro uses community vendors as much as possible.

Members of El Centro Su Teatro regularly participate in field-wide discussions through forums provided by the National Performance Network, the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture, and Theatre Communications Group, and attempt to integrate opportunities to participate in field-wide discussions to all staff. Members of El Centro Su Teatro understand where the organization is located in the field as a whole and how the challenges that the organization faces relate to others in the field. El Centro Su Teatro members actively seize opportunities to learn from other organizations and pass on knowledge to others. Tony Garcia directs projects for other artists nationally and provides workshop and dramaturgical support. Members of El Centro Su Teatro know their audience. Members are engaged with patrons and nurture multidimensional, faceted relationships with them.

A high level of productivity characterizes El Centro Su Teatro's activities. Members are committed to building the infrastructure of the organization and professionally developing artists and staff members. Members of El Centro Su Teatro actively develop relationships with other organizations by collaborating on projects, sending staff to learn successful practices from other cultural workers, and by opening Su Teatro as a haven for artists seeking opportunities and development. El Centro consciously supports efforts of other organizations. For example, Executive Artistic Director Tony Garcia purchases art from sister organizations with visual arts programs, with his own money, and donates the work to El Centro for an annual art auction. Thus, he benefits other organizations by providing earned income, and benefits Su Teatro by providing a product that generates revenue that the organization would not have otherwise. By highlighting the organizations where work was purchased, the Denver community becomes more aware of the work of other Latino arts organizations as well.

In order to better serve the community and to ensure the future of the organization, El Centro Su Teatro is currently conducting a capital campaign in order to renovate a new building in Denver's west side, at 215 S. Santa Fe. The project is scheduled for completion in late 2009.

Obstacles

Like most small arts organizations, El Centro Su Teatro faces challenges that are either caused or complicated by undercapitalization.³⁵ Staff members are undercompensated and overcommitted. El Centro Su Teatro is one of three small cultural arts organizations serving Latinos in Denver. There are two or three other even smaller

³⁵For more information see the report "The Future of Theatres of Color," commissioned by Theater Communications Group, <https://www.tcg.org/publications/at/Mar04/report.cfm>, (accessed April 17, 2009).

cultural organizations spread out across the state that serve Latinos.³⁶ This, in spite of the fact that Latinos numbers over 500,000 in the state (El Centro Centro Su Teatro serves about 25,000 directly a year, and tours programs throughout the state).³⁷ The influx of recent immigrants to the region has had a major impact on schools that are starving for resources to meet the needs of all students, to create a meaningful learning environment and to create a multilingual and culturally varied bridge to help students meet each other.³⁸ El Centro Su Teatro has the capacity to meet a fraction of these needs, but the impetus to do more is immense. El Centro Su Teatro programs have grown rapidly over ten years, but the rapid growth of programs hasn't been matched with support. An inexperienced staff has found it challenging to execute programs consistently, and the fundraising, marketing, and volunteer support that each program requires is often lacking. The quality of the artistic programming itself sometime suffers from the inexperience of directors, artists, and artistic support staff. Staff members are challenged daily with a constant barrage of phone calls, problems related to the facility that they have no idea how to resolve, and when there are gaps in cash flow, the challenge of how to pay the bills. Nevertheless, staff members at times eschew professional development opportunities. Staff members are creative and artistic, but overall lack attention to detail. They resist planning and organizational leadership that pushes them too far from their

³⁶For more information on arts organizations in Colorado see the Colorado Council on the Arts Annual Report, <http://www.coloarts.state.co.us/news/report/>, (accessed March 16, 2009).

³⁷The US Census Bureau reports that Latinos made up 19.9 % of the state's population in 2007. State and County Quick Facts, U.S. Census Bureau, April 1, 2008, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08000.html>, (accessed April 15, 2009).

³⁸For more information on this topic see Jennifer L. Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

comfort zone. When planning does occur, staff members have a tendency to wish list. That is, to engage in planning that is unrealistic and too big, instead of setting specific, realistic and reasonable goals, with time lines and accountability attached.

Not unlike other small theaters of color, El Centro Su Teatro has found it challenging to build artistic leadership within the organization. The artistic space of the organization is very often a place that actors come to get experience. Garcia laments that often actors only stay for one or two seasons, and then feel they are ready to take off for L.A. or New York. It takes a tremendous amount of organizational resources to develop artists, but artists infrequently feel vested, or any sense of reciprocity, or volunteerism toward the organization that would compel them to reinvest their energy and talents in helping the organization to move to the next artistic level, or even to participate in the work of attracting donors, volunteers, or new audiences.

There is a cavernous gap in experience between the executive artistic director and the staff as a whole. Artists often fail to connect with a community base, or to understand the Chicano aesthetic that drives the work of the organization, and this is true for staff as well. There has been a failure of veteran company members to translate values, and to provide historical and political analysis as a context for the mission and the artistic work of the organization. Younger artists and staff members have failed to appreciate El Centro Su Teatro as a Latino/Chicano arts organization with a national reputation and national record of funding and don't take themselves seriously as artists or cultural workers. They are uninformed about the trends in the field as a whole and the range of work of Latino and Chicano individual artists, nationally. Artists and staff members do not actively keep up with the literary or theatrical output of Latinos in the U.S. and abroad or take an

interest in the political, cultural or social trends of Mexico and Latin America or urban issues in the U.S. and therefore do not have a reference point to assess or appreciate a large percent of the artistic work being made by Latinos and Chicanos in the U.S.

The disconnect between veteranos and younger artists and administrators creates a chasm in how the mission and goals of the organization are interpreted, especially with regard to how and why artistic work is made. Veteran teatristas including members of the original Su Teatro company and their contemporaries: cultural workers such as Jorge Piña, formerly theater director at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio and now director of Teatro Bilingue de Houston; Pedro Rodriguez, former director of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center and founding director of NALAC; and Teatro Pregones members, Rosalba Rolon, Alvan Colon, and Jorge Merced understand the political context of their work, apply a political analysis to how they engage in artistic work and are committed to understanding and serving a specific community. At Su Teatro, the context for the work has not been translated to a younger generation and it is possible that younger artists and administrators lack an explicit connection to the context. However, there are not systemic opportunities in place to educate artists and administrators or for ongoing reflection and analysis.

That is not to say that Su Teatro members can only make art in exactly the way that *veteranos* make their art. Within the organization there should be space for a conversation about fluid identity. That is, a sense of identity that is dynamic, vital and interesting, and that relates to the issues and priorities of younger people. Su Teatro's art should not be stagnant or stuck in a Chicano Movement mentality—but younger and older generations of administrators and artists have to share a common reference point: a

shared understanding of history, a compatible political analysis that puts the needs of ordinary people first, and a comprehensive understanding of the seminal work that has shaped the field and which informs the current environment.

As veteran company members have taken on roles as elders, the company's focus has been on developing Chicano artists without concern for grounding in a Chicano aesthetic. Developing high caliber artists is hard enough, without worrying about their politics. Does it serve the organization for artists and administrators to be divorced from the context or community base of the organization? As the organization moves forward and especially into a new space that is being touted as a regional cultural center, it will be necessary for both artists and administrators to commit: take themselves seriously as professionals and to put the effort and intention into being knowledgeable about their craft and the field in which it resides.

In the following section of this chapter, we examine in depth two challenges for Su Teatro: raising money and confronting cultural appropriation. Both conversations start with a broad analysis and then move to the specific strategies that Su Teatro utilizes to confront these problems.

Su Teatro and the Field

Individual Donor Fundraising

In Su Teatro's first 13 years, the artistic company functioned without any infrastructure and largely, without any funding. When the organization received its 501c3 status as a public charity in 1984, the goal, as for many organizations, was to receive grants. Su Teatro's story is interesting, because even though the U.S. possesses a rich

community arts history that is as old as communities themselves, often the story of arts in the U.S. is told through the lens of funding. Tomas Ybarra Frausto writes:

The history of neighborhood arts centers has a venerable trajectory in our country. Back in the late 1800s, settlement houses established programs in art and culture as integral elements of social services focused to address the needs of poor European immigrants. Later, in the 19th century mutual societies, *sociedades mutualistas*, were prominent in Mexicano enclaves throughout the country. These self-help organizations often included cultural programs as part of collective well-being. A third antecedent occurred in the 1930s under President Roosevelt's New Deal. Visual, performing and literary arts projects proliferated regionally throughout the country under several federal agencies, most prominently the Works Progress Administration (WPA).³⁹

Efforts under the WPA were strongly influenced by the populist work of the great Mexican muralists, Goldbard observes the New Deal programs at their height employed over 40,000 community artists, which is significant because "a positive social role for artists was conceived and supported by the public sector."⁴⁰ According to Goldbard, "the WPA was ended by presidential proclamation in 1942, the victim of censorship, the Red Scare and war preparations."⁴¹

The federal government returned funding to art and community service in 1973 with the advent of CETA (The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). CETA funding had a huge impact on community arts. Goldbard observes: "by the late 70s community arts groups across the country were using CETA money and just about every

³⁹Tomas Ybarra Frausto, "Arts and Cultural Organizations," 3.

⁴⁰Arlene Goldbard, "Postscript to the Past: notes toward a history of community arts," *High Performance* 64, (Winter 1993): 22-36.

⁴¹Ibid.

other form of federal funding to finance an array of programs that put people to work in community cultural development.”⁴²

To illustrate, in mid-1980, just before Ronald Reagan’s election as president, Baltimore’s Theater Project not only maintained its core program presenting innovative touring performances; it was also one of the leading community arts institutions in the country: CETA support as well as some Community Development Block Grant money underwrote its neighborhood circus; city Department of Housing and Community Development money financed a performance piece involving kids in the campaign to eradicate rats; and a National Endowment for the Humanities grant enabled a production based on the reminiscences of Baltimore’s old-time neighborhood residents, compiled through a massive oral history project. The Theatre project was especially successful at “working the agencies” to secure this kind of funding, but was by no means the only group to do so. The moment was opportune: public agencies having nothing formal to do with the arts were seeing community arts as valid tools for engaging communities in self-education and self-activation. It’s not that the federal government was especially more enlightened than it is now, but money was available and community arts projects offered highly visible, often effective and always colorful ways to spend it.⁴³

According to Goldbard, funding to CETA ended almost as soon as Reagan took office.⁴⁴

While funding programs linking arts and community service were evolving, the National Endowment for the Arts was formed in 1965. The formation of the NEA provided the catalyst, as the CAN report notes, to “incubate, support and extend work.”⁴⁵ When Senator Jesse Helms began to question senate appropriations to the NEA in the early 1990s, sparking the “culture wars” the loss of funding to organizations, and especially to individual artists was staggering.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Linda Frye Burnham, Steven Durland and Mary Gard Ewell, “The CAN Report: The State of the Field of Community Cultural Development: Something New Emerges,” A Report from the Community Arts Network Gathering, May 2004, <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/canreport/index.php>. (accessed April 23, 2009).

. . . relatively little has changed since 1991, when public arts funding dropped precipitously after the launch of the so-called “culture war” between political liberals and conservatives. Indeed, the situation has worsened, for economic crisis has caused a drastic drop in arts funding across the boards. The crisis in state arts agencies has had the widest impact. The CCD practitioners at the Gathering showed an acute awareness that much foundation funding is reducing as well. Some foundations are withdrawing from the arts to a great degree. Some foundations that have shown interest in supporting CCD have withdrawn that support. Funding for some prominent initiatives is either coming to an end or changing.⁴⁶

And:

The National Endowment for the Arts is slowly regaining the financial footing it had in the 1990s, and many of its programs are earmarked for community cultural development, but the grant amounts are miniscule compared to the past, and the agency is a political football. Standards and policies change with government administrations. Recent history suggests that newly funded federal programs are more likely to tour Shakespeare plays than support living artists and organizations that have been doing innovative creative work in and with their communities for decades.⁴⁷

El Centro Su Teatro was largely unaffected by the culture wars that so profoundly affected organizations receiving large government grants. However, El Centro, along with all other community organizations in Colorado and in most other states, was affected when in the stress of a post-September 11 world, state arts councils rescinded their funding. Suddenly, and without warning, El Centro Su Teatro had to replace \$25,000 in its annual budget.

Su Teatro did not come into being as a result of funding; it was a grassroots entity driven by the vision and commitment of members. Su Teatro came into being as an organic cultural expression of the Chicano Movement. Su Teatro’s early structure (or

⁴⁶Burnham, Durland and Ewell, “The CAN Report,” 19.

⁴⁷Ibid.

lack thereof) was not sustainable, but the organizations did not have any fat funding to lose, and therefore didn't develop a dependency on grants.

Su Teatro's evolution and progress has been an incremental process, driven by work and vision. The current staff sometimes gets disillusioned because as a group, members still struggle to get the organization to the next level of stability. However, Tony (who sometimes also gets discouraged) has better perspective on how the scale of the organization has changed over time. He has a long view that takes into consideration both the accomplishments and continued potential of the organization. He is not deterred by short-term cash flow issues, because he sees them in terms of the entire arc of the organization's development.

Not surprisingly, though, when Su Teatro did start to have cash flow, it was primarily from grants, even though the organization has always enjoyed a broad base of support—250 supporters contributed \$50 apiece to make the down payment on the Elyria School—as a result of the strongly rooted and highly organized Chicano community in Denver. Although El Centro Su Teatro still receives half of its funding from grants, it has worked consistently to diversify its funding base, and a big part of that work has been developing an individual donor base.

A Note of Foundation Funding and Movement Building

Across the nonprofit sector, foundations have disproportionate influence in setting the agenda for the field. Their influence is related to the dependency of many nonprofits, which rely on foundations to provide large percentages of their funding. It is easy to become dependent on grants, because foundations give money in sizable chunks; it takes more effort to generate revenue from earned income and individual donor programs.

Foundations provide eight percent of the money available to nonprofits today (individual donors provide eighty percent). While it might be possible for a development director to string together enough grants to fund an organization for one year or many decades, foundation funding is never stable. The priorities of foundations change over time, and program officers never have the degree of investment of a patron who attends events season after season. Because so many organizations rely so heavily on foundation funding, foundations are able to dictate myriad priorities in the field. It is important for nonprofits to build diversified funding bases (and to not be dependent on foundation funding). Nonprofits must gain autonomy in order to create a level playing field with funders. By reducing dependency on grants, nonprofits have the opportunity to generate equitable dialogue: to give input into funding priorities and to question funding practices. By stimulating individual donor programs, nonprofits have an opportunity to involve the ordinary people that have a genuine stake in their programs, more directly in the work of setting the agenda for the field. Strategies for long-term sustainability have to involve communities, who have the most to gain or lose by the types of nonprofit programs available to them. The future solvency of organizations is based on many factors, but foundations, whose investment is relatively small, have great power in determining the direction of the field. It is important to develop organizations, cultural workers and artists (in the case of the arts sector) as legitimate sources of knowledge, values and practices, and as sources of authority and legitimacy for the field. By developing autonomy, organizations have the opportunity to provide balance to the influence and impact of foundations.

The grease for social movement is money, and few scholars or practitioners delve into this territory. Kim Klein observes that people with power, too often Republicans and the Religious Right, understand money, and know how to use it. Klein writes:

One major effect of money being a taboo topic is that only those willing to learn about it can control it. In America an elite and fairly secret class controls most of the nation's wealth, either by earning it, having inherited it, or both. It serves the interests of this ruling class for the rest of us not to know about who controls money and how to gain control of it ourselves. As long as we do not understand basic economics, we will not control the means of production, we will not be able to finance our non-profits adequately, and we will not be able to create a society in which wealth is more fairly and equally distributed, which is, after all, the underlying goal of social justice movements.⁴⁸

Organizing and fundraising go together—bringing money into the picture asks people to prioritize—and with monetary investment comes ownership, caring and accountability. Many people have negative ideas about raising money, but fundraising is really about shared purpose and commitment to the commons. Someone asking for money and the person giving it come together in the shared space of commitment to mission. Together, individuals who care about a common cause create a web of relationships among individuals who want to have a positive impact on civil society. Success is dependent on creating multifaceted relationships with individuals based on friendship, common interest, solidarity, and brotherhood. Fundraising and organizing are about bringing people together toward a common goal or toward solving a problem. Relationships between individual donors and organizations are about working together to build a better public sphere through the specific mission of an organization (although common interests almost always lead to overlapping relationships between organizations and their members). It is not unusual for someone raising money for one organization to give to

⁴⁸Kim Klein, *Fundraising for Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 153.

another organization or to volunteer time or to recommend resources. Thus, the web of solidarity is not just between one organization and its donors; it is between members of organizations, donors, and all of the causes of interests that bind them together.

Relationships are about working together. In *Organizing and Fundraising: Sisters in the Struggle*, the late Vicki Quatmann an organizer and fundraiser for Save Our Cumberland Mountains (SOCM) illustrates how organizing and fundraising “are equally critical to the health and future of our grassroots citizens groups.”⁴⁹ Consider the following quotes:

Good organizing is about ownership. It’s about providing people with the opportunity to become aware of their own capabilities and potential. In fact, a good organizer, if successful, turns each person she meets into a temporary organizer. Cesar Chavez, one of the great organizers of the 20th Century, said that people are infinitely more appreciative of what they do for you than what you do for them.⁵⁰

I watched the staff at SOCM for 14 years and saw that good organizers must be astute people-readers. They recognize that people who can spare a little time are actually ready to give it all if someone would ask them. They recognize when the moment is right to put someone to work, knowing if they don’t, they’ll lose that person for the cause. They are always looking for commitment. They want to grab that first spark of interest and give it a job. Then they move that person to a more steady involvement—regularly attending meetings, staffing a phone tree, helping with research. Until, eventually, to the kind of commitment that can only be made with risk and total awareness—the kind that moves a person to speak out publicly on issues dividing their local community or to take responsibility as chair of the local chapter or a position on the board.⁵¹

All the skills used by good organizers are the very same skills used by good fundraisers. Both must be very sensitive people-observers. Both must be intensely aware of the potential activist’s/donor’s self interests and how those self interests mesh with the overall goals of the group. Both must be willing to ask the potential activist/donor to make a commitment, to risk, to give over of themselves. Both must know how to inspire confidence, convey to the activists/donors that their

⁴⁹Vicki Quatmann. “Organizing and Fundraising: Sisters in the Struggle,” in *Raise More Money*, ed. Kim Klein and Stephanie Roth, 6.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

contribution is extremely important and show regularly how that contribution is making an important difference.⁵²

All good organizing is about deepening commitment, no aspect of the issue campaigns our organizations address will be more effectively served than by asking everyone involved and everyone helped by our good work to pay the costs. A strong base of constituent support that is giving at its capacity and helping to increase that support in an organized annual campaign is the most important ingredient in assuring our organization's financial stability and long-term future. A big pool of donors is like a major savings account and organizational pension plan rolled into one—and far more reliable and predictable than my single foundation grant. The effort to build such a pool contributes more to the organizing mission of our organizations than a million-dollar grant from a foundation.⁵³

El Centro Su Teatro began a systematic individual donor campaign in 1999, incorporating mail solicitations, a phone bank, and face-to-face visits with major donors. In between solicitations staff members, volunteers and artists have contact with donors through thank you notes, phone calls, donor receptions and through the course of El Centro's regular activities. In 1998, El Centro Su Teatro raised \$2,000 from individual donors. In 2007, El Centro raised \$65,000 from individual donors, and is successfully integrating major donors into a capital campaign to fund the organization's new space at 215 S. Santa Fe Dr. Individual donor fundraising is to an extent concrete and formulaic. Volume yields results, and gifts fall in predictable patterns, with major gifts from a small number of donors accounting for half the goals of a campaign. However, over the long term genuine relationships with donors make fundraising successful. As in any relationship, those between members of organizations and donors only thrive through good communication, respect, and common interest. Relationships, in any context, are built over time and have many layers. As relationships develop, participants in those

⁵² Ibid., 8.

⁵³ Ibid.

relationships learn more about themselves and each other. In the context of a cause (in this case preserving and promoting the Chicano arts) both parties learn over time how to be better advocates for the cause they care about. The more intention, time, energy and money they are able to invest, the more successful they will be in supporting the work they care about. Building relationships is hard, labor intensive work, but organizations can only thrive, and indeed, their mission is only meaningful, when their work is supported by a broad base of donors: people many tiers deep who have a stake in the work of an organization. It doesn't matter how important members of an organization think or know their work is, if they are not surrounded by constituents who feel the same way, they can't fulfill their mission and have no reason to exist. An individual donor base is one component of a diversified funding base. Kim Klein writes:

Diversity means that you have the money you need coming from as many sources as you can manage, raised by as many people as you can coordinate. Most organizations get into trouble because they have only two or three sources of funding or because they only have two or three people really involved in raising money. If any one of the sources or any of the people go away, the organization is in trouble.⁵⁴

Klein's observations are true but few organizations (including El Centro) are as diversified as they should be, and fewer have integrated fundraising throughout their organizations or involved volunteers in ongoing fundraising efforts. It takes time to put a successful fundraising strategy together, and to then manage the pieces, and many organizations have trouble finding ways to balance all of their priorities to make fundraising happen. However, concentrating on the long-term work of building an individual donor program and more generally diversifying is one of the most important things an organization can do to ensure future sustainability.

⁵⁴Kim Klein, *Fundraising in Times of Crisis* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 4.

Many cultural workers and organizations resist fundraising and especially the long-term time investment that individual donor programs require. If more cultural workers field wide dug into the hard work of fundraising, the field would be one step closer to stability, but fundraising is not integrated into the programmatic work of most organizations. Reliance on foundation funding (the easiest thing for a one-person development unit to maintain) only creates dependency, and ultimately, instability. Diversified funding creates autonomy, and the ability to more effectively advocate for the needs of organizations and better cultural policy.

El Centro Su Teatro does not possess a perfect fundraising program, but through consistency, critical analysis, evaluation, and effort, it is improving. Gifts from donors have increased over time, just as fundraising formulas say that they should. But more importantly, donors are organizational partners. They participate and take an active interest in the organization, as members of the organization offer their sincere thanks for their participation and take an interest in them as people rather than mere donors, their satisfaction with their involvement grows. Constituents participate because it makes them feel good to do so.

It is important to involve constituents as much as possible not just for the financial health of an organization, but in order to maintain its relevance. An organization has to have stakeholders who are involved in a dialogue and who have an active interest in the mission of an organization. El Centro Su Teatro serves a constituency that is hungry for Chicano and Latino culture. Constituents realize that the needs of Latinos are not being met as they should in the public sphere and that they are still underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream and commercialized culture outlets. El Centro seeks to

activate constituents, to teach them that their role is to become cultural activists.

Constituents are not consumers of culture looking for a product, choosing between the Denver Center, a movie, or a concert at Red Rocks. Constituents vote with their feet by supporting El Centro Su Teatro. Constituents can get their culture wherever they want, but their participation in El Centro Su Teatro has an impact and if they do not participate, the organization goes away, and with it, a cultural resource. The raised consciousness of constituents is particularly important as cultural institutions face the ongoing problem of appropriation.

Appropriation

In the same way the United States government needs and wants a cheap, undocumented labor force to sustain its agricultural complex without having to suffer Spanish-speaking or unemployed foreigners in their neighborhoods, the contemporary world needs and desires the spiritual and aesthetic models of Latino culture, without having to experience their political outrage and cultured contradictions. Like the border graffiti says, “*Simulacra Stops Here, at the Border.*”⁵⁵

In spite of a long conversation in the U.S. about race, class and gender, it is still often difficult to foster dialogue about the dynamics of power, privilege, discrimination and inequality in public settings. In mainstream institutions, much resistance exists around what cultural experiences have value. Tomas Ybarra Frausto observes:

Today, a central debate in our country is a reconsideration of what constitutes the core values of our society. Some fear that the founding Eurocentric ideals are being corroded by ethnic particularities, while others argue for the moral imperative of expanding inclusion and creating new models of *comunidades* and citizenship. As artists, intellectuals, activists and scholars, we must be especially vigilant at any attempt to limit our participation in articulating the new American social contract.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Quote attributed to performance artist Guillermo Gomez Peña by Tomas Ybarra Frausto in panel presentation “The Vision,” *Crossing Borders : The Next 500 Years. 1992 NALAC Conference Proceedings*, 25.

The significance of cultural appropriation stems from the failure of mainstream institutions to engage in a principled conversation about cultural equity, to understand the transgressions of the past as well as the implications of their current practices.

Communities rightly fear that without a genuine shifting of boundaries, major institutions will use their position, resources, and relationship to other institutions (foundations, corporations, city and state governments . . .) to subsume the work of artists of color. The results could be “advancement” for individual artists who will no longer control their artistic product, and cooptation for communities, who will no longer have access to meaningful art in their own communities. Marta Moreno Vega observes:

The popularization and commodification of cultural diversity has brought forth a recognition of difference or to use the popular terminology, the *other*, while maintaining the paradigm of dominance and control. Within this framework, the Western European American status quo continues to disperse the major portion of public and private funds to artists and arts organizations that they have historically validated. These arts institutions are receiving even more funds to reach out to “new audiences,” us; to experiment with global and world types of projects that blur and decontextualize the boundaries of our cultures, using their definition and criteria for what constitutes cultural diversity. Simultaneously, the process of destabilizing our artists and cultural organizations continues by reducing the funding levels to our communities. The power remains in the same hands. The justification is the same today as it was 500 years ago, except less blatant.

Our artists and organizations are labeled as developing, exotic, alternative, minority, underdeveloped, mismanaged, special, community-based; any definition that sets us in a “less than” frame. This less-than frame demands less resources to our artists and organizations. Yet monies magically appear for consultants to technically develop us. Places open up for token representation from our communities on boards of directors and councils to safeguard against visible discrimination charges. The end result is that although our art forms are more visible, our artists and arts organizations are in crisis.⁵⁷

Appropriation manifests in:

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Marta Moreno Vega. “Reframing Politics,” (San Antonio: NALAC Conference Proceedings, 1992), 18.

- The exploitation, distortion and stereotyping as illustrated in minstrelsy, and the exoticizing of indigenous peoples in Wild West shows, circuses or museum exhibits.
- Exhibiting work by artists of color without providing context or without placing people of color in positions of leadership.
- The practice of funders of granting money to major institutions to do diversity work, rather than trusting small organizations to conduct outreach in their own communities
- Placing small organizations in supplicant roles to larger institutions.

Cultural equity will only take place when entire groups of artists and organizations of color (rather than individual artists) are routinely able to express their views within mainstream venues, have power to make decisions, to determine the canon and to speak openly about marginalization and privilege. Until conversations that name discrimination openly take place and practices change, tensions will remain. Coco Fusco writes:

Writing and talking about cultural appropriation, I reposition myself in a somewhat precarious way within a society that seeks to deny how segregated it is: I go from being a minority critic dutifully explaining Otherness to one who addresses whites as agents in an ongoing dynamic of racialization. This shift in terms disrupts the commonly held assumption that desire for the Other is in itself a way of eliminating racial inequality. Furthermore to speak of whiteness as a way of being in the world still disturbs many of those for whom a racialized discourse is in itself a minority discourse, a mode of marginalization. Dominant culture and white avant garde defenses are cast in terms of aesthetic freedom (*But why can't I use what I want as an artist?*) and transgressions of bourgeois banality (*But I cross boundaries and therefore I rebel too*). What is more fundamentally at stake than freedom, I would argue, is power—the power to choose, the power to determine value, and the right of the more powerful to consume without guilt. That sense of entitlement to choose, change and redefine one's identity, is fundamental to understanding the history of how white America has formed ideas about itself,

and how those ideas are linked first to a colonial enterprise, and, in the postwar period, to the operations of industrialized mass culture.⁵⁸

As many practitioners and theorists working on community-based development know, authentic change only emerges when the people most affected are able to make decisions about their own lives. Unless people of color are organizing events, in communities of color, with the help of communities of color, people of color are not going to attend. However, white, mainstream organizations are offering events designed to attract people of color without involving people of color in the planning. That is, a white cultural organization cannot present a mariachi, for example, and reach people of color (or sufficiently move any other audience) without providing a meaningful cultural context: context that requires bilingual and bicultural understandings. A schoolteacher can learn the traditional Mexican folk song *De Colores*, but if that same teacher does not speak Spanish, or pronounce it correctly, if she cannot provide any cultural context for the song, what good does it do students to learn the song? Some directors express concern that teachers who deliver culturally specific curriculum should be bilingual and bicultural, and that Latino cultural experts should be involved with the process.

More alarmingly, white cultural organizations use multiculturalism as a weapon against artists of color. Coco Fusco writes:

Mainstream museums and curators have become expert at adopting the rhetoric of multiculturalism without having to implement fundamental changes in their institutions. For example, an African American colleague recently received a rejection letter from a prestigious California museum explaining that the exhibit about black masculinity she sought to present there “did not fully take into account artists and attitudes represented in Los Angeles’s African American community,” a sector that has never been paid attention to by the museum before invoking its name served their purposes. Two years before, another staff member

⁵⁸Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*, (New York: New Press, 1995), 68.

at the same museum had told a Puerto Rican artist from New York that giving him a show might be taken as a slight by the local Latino community, which is largely Mexican, although no Latino show had ever taken place there.⁵⁹

Clearly, communities of color have many reasons to distrust mainstream institutions. For communities of color, experience in their own community institutions is the mainstream, not an alternative. What is called the mainstream is an alternative to the meaningful, relevant, critical discussions they find in their own neighborhoods.

Community-based arts organizations work to preserve, protect and develop the ways of seeing born in their own communities. At a meeting in Philadelphia in October 2000, a foundation representative from the PEW Charitable Trust referred to arts and culture organizations serving people of color as “alternative organizations.” In response, Tony Garcia stated that El Centro Su Teatro, is part of the mainstream of his own community. His sentiment was echoed by a young representative of the Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia.⁶⁰ Gaspar de Alba observes:

. . . classic ethnography is a form of domination, a way of condescending to the natives under study. Because both native and alter-Native cultures are “othered” and exoticized in order to be quantified and studied, they get categorized as “subcultures.” Such categorization poses several problems: by definition, “subculture” implies the presence of a superior culture; and, rather than being analyzed in their own right, “subcultures” are used as filters for analyzing the effects of the messages that the ethnographer’s own culture, the dominating culture, projects onto the so-called subculture. When approached from the outside, these Other cultures become grist for the appropriator’s mill. As Coco Fusco says, “the mainstream appropriation of subaltern cultures in this country has historically served as a substitute for ceding those peoples any real political or economic power.”⁶¹

⁵⁹Ibid., 74.

⁶⁰Discussion session, National Arts Administrators Mentorship Program training, Philadelphia, 2000.

⁶¹Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art*, 24.

Arts and culture organizations work to nurture the views of their constituents, because they provide one of the few public resources that validate and legitimize the points of view and cultural practices of members. At the same time, these organizations serve as a bridge between diverse communities. These spaces are pockets of resonance where people go, even entire communities in resistance, where insiders understand each other on multiple levels.

Appropriation and El Centro Su Teatro

Pedro Rodriguez writes:

If cultural diversity is so successful, if it is so threatening, then, “why ain’t we rich?” as the adage goes. Why are cultural centers of color having to compete with mainstream institutions to get funding for the very programming that only cultural centers of color were doing a few years ago? Why are art organizations of color having to struggle so hard to survive?⁶²

For El Centro Su Teatro, the question of appropriation intersects with the tension between elite and community arts, cultural equity and the drive to develop audiences.

Community Art vs. Elite Arts

“I have no use for the pampered poets of the academy or the darlings of fashion. Real poetry comes from and expresses the common energy of the people. Those who divorce poetry from life rob it of its redemptive power.”⁶³

The commodification of popular art began as early as 1852 when P. T. Barnum began to manage vaudeville acts and circuses, exploiting them for profit for himself at the expense of the artist. Jim Cullen writes that in the U.S., “a division between the cultural interests of the elite and ordinary people long predates industrialization, and for that

⁶²Non-Traditional Casting Project, 32.

⁶³Baca, *Working in the Dark*, 41.

matter, the formation of modern societies.”⁶⁴ There has been “a waxing and waning in the degree of *distance* between elements in each society, and in the specific forms, movements or ideological tendencies that mediate this gap.”⁶⁵ At the turn of the century working class audiences sought museums and classical music (much as they might today), and elites enjoyed burlesque and ragtime. “By the early twentieth century a reconvergence of high and low was apparent in movie theaters and jazz clubs for example.”⁶⁶

While audiences of elite art aspire to understand great art, that art sometimes comes out of an artist’s personal vision and is elusive to audience members. Community-based art is an extension of the stories, history and language that has been passed down to community members in their homes and is grounded in popular performance traditions designed to engage audiences. Gaspar de Alba outlines the distance between the elite and the popular:

In *Understanding Popular Culture* Fiske explains the difference between hegemonic pleasures which exert social control by producing meanings and practices in the interest of power and popular pleasures which subvert the meanings and values of hegemony and thereby evade being controlled. “High” culture, for example is said to uplift, edify and inspire, while “low” culture merely entertains, amuses or distracts. The former occupies the spiritual, mental domain and is considered “good for the soul”; the latter focuses on the excesses of the body—eating, drinking, vocalizing, being physically stimulated rather than mentally challenged or spiritually renewed. Fiske finds popular pleasures inherently subversive because they “arise from social allegiances formed by subordinated people [;] they are bottom up and thus must exist in some relationship of opposition to power (social, moral, textual, aesthetic and so on) that attempts to discipline and control them.” The relationship between popular pleasures and aesthetic values is one of resistance from both ends; the popular

⁶⁴Jim Cullen, *The Art of Democracy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996), 92.

⁶⁵Ibid., 93.

⁶⁶Ibid., 94.

resists the imposition of elite interests and discourses; the aesthetic resists the infiltration of public tastes and standards into its sacred domain.⁶⁷

Elite arts are a marker of status and privilege, while community art revels in the popular, the critical, oppositional and sometimes, the intentionally rude.

Schwartzman and DeNobriga write:

Community art is by nature dialectical. It is an expression of both individual and group identity. All creative expression, no matter how “original,” is an expression of both individual and group life. In recognizing this, community art distinguishes itself from more conventional Western approaches in both vocabulary and theoretical approach. Instead of being viewed as an isolated individual genius, the artist (or artists) serve as a cultural catalyst, an integral part of a larger process of social intervention and transformation.⁶⁸

Access

Community-based art often addresses issues related to access, a broad and deep term that encompasses the need for cultural relevance and multilingualism; the need to reach the physically challenged, as well as those living in rural and geographically isolated areas. Access sometimes dictates that programming be provided at low or no cost. Accessible art demands acknowledgement for the experiences and problems that aren't being discussed in mainstream venues and breaks down the isolation of audience members. Art that addresses the issues of women over 60, lesbian, gay or transgendered persons, or people of color find explosive audiences because the stories of these groups are not adequately portrayed in the media or by mainstream arts institutions.

In order to provide access, artists must find a reference point that allows audiences to relate to content; this, whether the content is culturally specific, or not.

⁶⁷Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art*, 10.

⁶⁸Matt Schwarzman and Kathy DeNobriga, “Community-based Art for Social Change,” Original CAN Publication, October 1999, <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/1999/10/communitybased.php>, (accessed March 12, 2009).

Access is about artists providing entry points to make their work meaningful to a community. Providing access requires mutual understanding, dialogue, and the ability to find parallels in many types of experience.

A shift is happening in the field today, and greater attention is being paid to the relationship between art and audiences. The pool of patrons for conventional, mainstream art is shrinking, as older audiences fade away. This is happening simultaneously with the sharpest demographic spike of people of color in U.S. history. Demographic realities are forcing arts institutions that have traditionally served an elite audience to look for new audiences and to radically shift their ideas about what an arts experience is supposed to be. Donna Walker Keuhne notes that historically, mainstream arts institutions systematically excluded non-elites.⁶⁹ While today the field is prioritizing access, many conventional institutions historically sought to make their programs inaccessible. Art organizations cannot survive if there is not an audience for the work of the artists they present. Now, more than ever, the field is prioritizing not just the art or the artists, but the relationship between the art, artists, and communities. Community-based arts organizations for once, have an advantage in the field, because they already have audiences that everyone else wants: and they know best how to reach them and keep them involved.

Barrio Babies, Real Women, and the Santa Fe Arts District

Barrio Babies opened at the Denver Center for Performing Arts in November 1999. “If you don’t think they are trying to take our audiences, then you are wrong,” said Tony Garcia at an El Centro Su Teatro staff meeting in September 1999. *Barrio Babies*

⁶⁹Donna Walker-Kuhne, *Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture and Community* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2005), 14.

was a lavish production with a Latino director and Latino actors, many from Los Angeles. The play enjoyed a short run as part of DCPA's Fall Season. The cheapest tickets were thirty-five dollars. *Barrio Babies* featured Broadway style music, narrative, and choreography. The actors chimed "We're barrio bay-bees" as they glided smoothly across the stage performing up-tempo dance numbers.

Barrio Babies was different from Su Teatro productions, which often use music as an important element in the narrative structure. Su Teatro earned a national reputation in the 1980s and 90s partly because of the company's use of traditional and original music.⁷⁰ For example, *El Corrido del Barrio* features a dry, glib *muerto*, with a fantastic voice as its narrator. It uses popular songs from the 1950s and 1960s to set the tone for period sequences, as well as original songs such as *I Didn't Know*, *I Didn't Ask*, which highlights a young soldier's coming-of-age, as he returns from Viet Nam. *Introduction to Chicano History: 101* tells the story of the entire Chicano experience, primarily through music: from the Mexican Revolution, to the *huelga* picket line, to the Chicano Movement, to the international struggle for human rights and freedom. Other plays also feature music, *La Carpa Aztlan presents "I Don't Speak English Only!"*, uses music in every sequence in a vaudeville-*variedad* (variety) style, and even incorporates a version of *Samba pa' ti*, played on the violin. *Ludlow: El Grito de las Minas*, moves audiences to tears with music that amplifies the hardship, sacrifice and loss, of Chicano miners at the Ludlow Massacre in southern Colorado.

Mainstream theater often addresses issues, and reflects diversity in its programming, as is clear from the success of artists such as Lloyd Richards and August

⁷⁰As noted earlier, the company performed as part of festivals at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, Teatro Pregones and TENAZ festivals.

Wilson. But ultimately, big theater companies make art about issues that their audiences care about—just like any organization that is dependent on public dollars.

It is not surprising that a major, corporate sponsored venue is more likely to include *Annie Get Your Gun* on its season schedule than a residency by the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The corporate drive behind these organizations reinforces the implicit elitist notion, that, if you do not like *this* art, then you must not understand or appreciate art.

The corporate sensibility of major theater venues (although most function as non-profits) makes it impossible for them to be genuine resources for communities. Indeed, genuine community building is a very small part of their mission. Ticket prices are high, as are the associated costs of going to the theater (parking, dining downtown, etc.). Large theater venues *are* dependent on an elitist construct of art: higher income patrons are the market that major theater companies must attract in order to stay alive. They are dependent on corporate dollars: corporations who are interested in communicating specific messages, to a specific audience. Although major theater companies offer free tickets to previews, special rates to students, and school group rates, their contact with grassroots communities is superficial. The Denver Center for Performing Arts has a ticket outlet at the Common Grounds Coffee House at 32nd and Lowell in North Denver's Highland neighborhood to put it more in touch with the community. It also employs a diversity task force to bring more diverse audiences into DCPA shows. However, the DCPA is not a community resource that anyone can access, and its aim is not to provide a vehicle for social change. Nicolas Kanellos observes that grassroots community-based

theaters use theater “with an eye and ear for political changes, for social justice for public cares and concerns.”⁷¹

Although it usually goes unspoken theater that does not use the form with such an eye and ear uses it to maintain the way things are—the status quo.

Grassroots theater consciously steps away from the status quo, analyzing and responding to and telling stories about power structures within our society and their effects on the immediate community.⁷²

The Denver Center for Performing Arts held a fundraiser for Servicios de la Raza, a local Chicano social service agency, as part of its production of *Barrio Babies*. Many Chicano community leaders supported the event, paying \$50 for a reception and performance of the play. Many of the same patrons who paid \$50 for a ticket to a DCPA sponsored fundraiser, would not pay \$50 to an El Centro Su Teatro event, even though the money would be used to benefit the Chicano community. Is the message that a DCPA production is worth the \$50 ticket price, while a Su Teatro production is not?

Su Teatro is successful, because ordinary people seek art that speaks to their own experience. In spring 1999, El Centro Su Teatro produced the Josefina Lopez play *Real Women Have Curves*. The play has been produced successfully by many other Chicano cultural arts centers, including Teatro de la Esperanza in Santa Barbara and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio. Amateur actresses, two who had never acted before, performed the piece. The play takes place in East L. A. and tells the story of a young woman’s struggle to open her own dress factory, with the help of her sister, mother, and friends, who work for her for slim wages in the hopes of participating in a

⁷¹Nicolas Kanellos, quoted in Robert H. Leonard, “Grassroots, Community-based Theater: A View of the Field and its Context,” CAN, December 2003, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2003/12/grassroots_comm.php, (accessed April 25, 2009).

⁷²Ibid.

small business venture that they themselves will control. The women negotiate sexism, racism, corporate exploitation and the threat of deportation in their struggle to maintain their autonomy. As the women work to reach their goals, they discuss body image, relationships, and the decision to make clothes for women who look like them. Their decision to shift their designs away from evening gowns for rich women toward beautiful clothing for low to mid-income *large sized* women challenges the power structure of the garment industry. They are no longer poor women working for low wages to make dresses that department stores will sell at ten times what they cost to make. They are no longer poor women making dresses for rich women to wear to cocktail parties to which they, themselves, would never be invited. By simply making the decision to cultivate a different market, and to start a boutique called, “Real Women Have Curves,” the sweating factory workers are no longer dependent on “Mrs. Glitz” to give them work, and they are no longer complicit in creating an unrealistic expectation of what a woman’s body should be. They control the capital, and their own destiny, while challenging society’s social standards for women.

Actors in Su Teatro’s production performed to sold out houses for most of the play’s twelve-week run. In the second act, the five women toil in unbearable heat. All the windows and doors in the warehouse where they work must be kept shut, so that Ana can avoid the *migra* (INS). As one woman removes her clothing to beat the heat, the others quickly follow suit, revealing five imperfect women’s bodies, clothed only by underwear.

Even though many of the actors in the production were inexperienced, women, Chicana and otherwise, responded to the play, because the women on stage were clearly just like them. The courage of the actors, to get on stage, to perform, and to take off their

clothes, resonated with women across culture, and across class. A woman who contacted me later to become a volunteer for the teatro said the play had been transformative for her. She said the play had made her want to do more work with the teatro, to examine herself, and to reconnect with her cultural identity.

In the Fall of 1996, 1997, and 1998, El Centro Su Teatro performed Garcia Lorca's *Spanish Earth Trilogy*, which included the plays *Bodas de Sangre*, *Yerma*, and *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*. The plays were performed for four weeks in English and two weeks in Spanish. The choice of plays, and the decision to perform them in Spanish was intentional—partially to entice a school group market made up of high school Spanish classes. In all cases, the Spanish language performances were sold out, and additional matinee performances were occasionally booked to accommodate individual high schools. But in 1998, it was not only Spanish teachers calling for tickets. Members of Denver's Latino community—Spanish speaking people from Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Columbia, and Chile—many people who had never attended a Su Teatro performance—were calling to buy tickets. Tickets were gone long before the two-week Spanish language run began.

During Fall 2000 El Centro Su Teatro Executive Artistic Director Tony Garcia collaborated with The Arvada Center, a Tier Two organization that provides multidisciplinary programming. The Arvada Center presented the play *And Now Miguel*, a coming-of-age play about a young boy growing up in Northern New Mexico in the 1950s. The play is a children's play, and was performed twice daily to school groups for an eight week run. Garcia was paid to direct the play, an open audition was held, and Su Teatro company members were encouraged to audition. Many were cast, along with

actors from other companies. Actors were paid \$450 a week, for two performances a day. Additionally, Garcia negotiated to have one performance designated as a fundraiser for Su Teatro. Did Su Teatro's participation bring Latino and Chicano audiences to the Arvada Center? Did any of the white audiences from the Arvada Center subsequently venture into Su Teatro's home space at 4725 High St. in Elyria/Swansea, Denver's poorest neighborhood? The answer is probably not, but the opportunity did create more visibility for El Centro Su Teatro and increased legitimacy among funders, which allowed El Centro Su Teatro to leverage the project to raise money for its own arts and education program.

Tony Garcia agreed to direct the play, because he realized it was a good opportunity for El Centro Su Teatro to expand its own audience base, to give actors more experience, and to learn more about how a tier two organization conducts school marketing, for example, an area that El Centro Su Teatro would like to expand. The Arvada Center is trying to build a Latino audience base, by doing it the "right" way, by involving Latinos in the process. Their goal, though, is essentially paternalistic, to bring art to the people, to "give people back their culture."⁷³ As well meaning as the Arvada Center producers are, they are unaware of the implicit dominating relationships that are at play (or aren't sure how to deal with them). Garcia recognizes the dynamics at work, but also realizes that El Centro Su Teatro stands to benefit from the relationship as well. The attempt of mainstream arts organizations to become more diverse does not change the fundamental relationship of power and privilege that affects cultural exchanges. Again, Fusco writes:

⁷³As one of the Arvada Center staff commented to Tony Garcia.

(Appropriation) is also about reckoning with a history of colonialist power relations vis-a-vis non-Western cultures and peoples to contextualize certain forms of appropriation as symbolic violence. In other words, although appropriation may not connote power inequities when conceived within other strains of postmodern culture, its historical implications in relation to European colonialism and American expansionism cannot be ignored, because the erasure of authorship and the exchange of symbols and artifacts across cultural boundaries have never been purely formalist gestures.⁷⁴

Over time, El Centro Su Teatro has moved from justified concern over the maneuvers of larger institutions (and the response of Chicano audiences to those actions) to strategic leveraging of the organization to better serve the needs of its constituency and to provide voice to its issues. El Centro Su Teatro's bid to become a larger, regional Latino institution is in some ways a positioning tactic to place the organization on equal footing with other mid-sized institutions. There is a danger in the process of losing constituents, and in the end, serving primarily white audiences. Yolanda Broyles Gonzalez states:

As more Chicanas/os rightfully demand their place in the nation's institutions we will need to both monitor that entry and develop a consciousness concerning the extent to which diversity of race, gender and class is accommodated by those institutions; we need to examine and discuss how minority individuals will assert their otherness in the nation's white institutions of privilege. Or will minorities find acceptance only at the expense of relinquishing community interests and ethnic identity? These are some of the questions that arise as we witness the entry of Chicanas/os into mainstream theater, into mainstream educational institutions, into mainstream politics, film, business, and much more. We need to cultivate a critical consciousness concerning our own institutionalization and incorporation.⁷⁵

In the short term, though, El Centro is unlikely to have such problems. The organization has a 35-year history in serving the community, and patrons trust artists and cultural workers. Tony Garcia has achieved mainstream legitimacy to a certain extent, and can articulating the needs of the Chicano community in community and institutional spaces.

⁷⁴Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 29.

⁷⁵Broyles Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino*, 214.

Garcia serves on the Denver Cultural Arts Commission, negotiated with the City of Denver to partner in the purchase of the organization's new building, and now works with major donors on a daily basis. Garcia never fails to tell it like it is, no matter what the context, and he continues to build relationships with artists and organizations of color locally and nationally.

El Centro Su Teatro could sell out, but it is not likely in the short term. Supporters have tremendous ownership and constituents know their support is responsible for the organization being able to progress to acquiring new space. ECST plans to continue to build a broad base of support and to be responsive to the needs of constituents.

People of color arts organizations and artists are in a unique position to name the power relationships and systems of privilege that make appropriation possible. By 2050, people of color will become the new majority, but strength in numbers does not necessarily translate into a dismantling of the existing mechanisms of power and privilege, or an expansion of democracy. As marginalized communities make their stories available to a broader public, those stories—sources of strength and sustenance—will continuously be adapted and borrowed by a larger community and they will be appropriated by states, markets and individuals in order to reinforce systems of domination.

Where there is domination there is always resistance and marginalized people will continue to generate new resources to sustain themselves, to question and critique and to shift the flow of relational power. In order to be useful actors in this process, it is imperative for people of color to create sustainable organizations by building an engaged base, diversified funding and a strong infrastructure. With sustainability comes

autonomy, which for arts organization means the ability to create and control their own cultural product, to activate a constituency, to build dialogue and to define the terms of dialogue, to be recognized as a legitimate source of authority and to push open the contradictions in the system of domination, to expand space for entire communities as cultures to be included, served and protected within the public sphere.

Conclusion

Amalia Mesa Bains states:

I believe that the time of First Voice is long overdue. The time is for our leadership, our people, our *pueblo*, to put their forces into their own self-determination, into their own self-reparation. No one will do it for us. We must do it for ourselves.

It will be our united demands, our shared resources, our collaborative economics, our self-sufficiency, and our own decision making that must be at the heart of our vision and practice. The age of the ventriloquist is over. We are here to speak for ourselves.⁷⁶

Marta Moreno Vega states:

If we are to save our communities, our cultural life, we must assume responsibility as we have done in the past to publicly and actively claim our rights. We must learn from past experiences and form new strategies to expand our resources to our artists and arts organizations and communities. The *quilombo* spirit of safeguarding our sacred and safe spaces must come to the foreground.⁷⁷

In an inhospitable arts climate, the arts field has turned to capacity building as a means to stabilizing organizations and promoting growth of a healthy arts environment in the U.S. Capacity building in the arts field means developing intergenerational leadership, audiences that are broad, deep and diverse, significant artistic products and organizational practices that make productivity sustainable. That is, teaching cultural

⁷⁶Amalia Mesa Bains, "Cultural Resistance," (San Antonio: NALAC Conference Proceedings, 1992), 14.

⁷⁷Marta Moreno Vega, "Cultural Resistance," (San Antonio: NALAC Conference Proceedings, 1992), 19.

workers who are often transplanted artists or intellectuals, business models: the fundamentals of marketing, fund-raising, sound financial practices, board development and other skills that help to create the infrastructure to stimulate healthy organizations. The practices and values of community-based arts organizations are relevant to the field's interest in capacity building but haven't been sufficiently acknowledged or shared. Even within community-based organizations, sometimes novice cultural workers don't realize that the organizing strategies that they employ intuitively are based on principles of community building and traditions of nurturing that have been passed down.⁷⁸ Individuals in this situation learn as a result of the culture around them, but the principles they are utilizing haven't been sufficiently codified or disseminated as a meaningful practice. Junior cultural workers are sometime unaware of the historical context of an organization's work, and are not taught to use community building practices in a specific or systematic way. Submerged in the knowledge and values of communities are resources to allow cultural workers to stabilize their own organizations and to share and exchange successful practices. The community building heritages that define grassroots organizations are essential to their continued ability to meet the needs of their underserved constituencies.

Capacity building is important to the long-term sustainability of all arts organizations. Although the small business models and organizational development strategies proffered by some foundations, consultants, and major institutions provide useful and relevant tools for many small nonprofits, these strategies alone do not address the crux of what it means to be a community-based organization. To focus on building

⁷⁸This has become apparent to me from attending at least six panels on generational change at different conferences.

the capacity of small arts organizations without considering the strengths they bring to the table is to lose something basic about genuinely community centered organizations whose resonance for the constituents they serve comes from the fact that they were built from the grassroots up. The result of this grassroots relationship is art that is accessible to patrons that will not go to the symphony, ballet or opera; art that constituents participate in making and art that represents stories, language and histories that are not portrayed by mainstream institutions. Community-based organizations offer traditions, cultures and artistic modes of expression that historically provided meaning and sustenance to members when their personal security was threatened by an unfriendly state and public sector. Popular art provided identity and continuity in times when to speak up to white power meant risking a lynching. Although these are different times, community-based arts organizations still provide significant space for constituents to name issues, past and present. Indeed, the presence of community institutions not only in terms of their human capital, but in terms of the physical space that they occupy, is a testament to the contributions and sacrifices of many generations of people, who have kept communities moving forward and have helped to secure lasting legacies for future generations.

As community-based arts organizations begin to transform and to professionalize, as a result of using conventional capacity building techniques, it is essential that they maintain intimate, dynamic connections to the communities they serve, in order to continue to fulfill their missions. As community-based arts organizations become “successful” organizations, they are likely to serve more conventional, privileged arts audiences, but must continue simultaneously to serve their community base that rely on community institutions to provide democratic space, a source of identity and

opportunities for engagement and creativity. It seems, then, that any conversation about stabilizing and improving the conditions of community-based arts organizations must start by codifying and disseminating the community building practices that haven't made organizations rich, but have kept them alive and relevant, sometimes for thirty five years or more.

As the 2004 CAN report notes, although the practices of the community arts field has been thoroughly documented by scholars, artists, activists and practitioners, members of the field are just beginning the work of analyzing and codifying practices in order to produce knowledge that integrates practice with theory and methodology.⁷⁹ As efforts to codify the practices of the community-based arts movement go forward, it is important to find ways to integrate the knowledge, experience and community building principles that have been passed down in community-based organizations, especially in communities of color. Even within the community arts sector of the field, many artists are not familiar with each other and each other's practice. As the work in the field to identify, understand and articulate the potential of community building principles to evolve into best practices becomes clear, members of organizations will also gain clarity on the paths that will move their organizations to greater stability and well-being. However, in order for this transformation to take place, cultural workers must talk to each other even more vigorously than they already do, and this conversation must transcend, class, color, gender, sexual orientation or gender expression, ability, geography, and age.

The effort to integrate community-based knowledge more systematically into the practices of community-based organizations is essential to preserving the community

⁷⁹Burnham, Durland, and Ewell, "The CAN Report," 4.

base itself, which is the source of legitimacy and authority for such organizations. The community base is a link to histories, identities, place and culture that provide a foundation for meaningful civil society. The relevance of community-based organizations rests in the ownership and participation of constituents: ownership that translates into power. This power allows under represented communities the means to reach a broad public: to depict issues that are important to them, perpetuate culture that they take pride in, and offer critiques of conventions that others aren't offering. Meaningful change in organizations, then, must come from the people who are most invested in them.

In a public environment where few individual artists are able to prosper, perpetuating stable organizations that support and value artists is a prerequisite to producing significant art and meaningful, relevant culture. The experience of artists and arts organizations in the U.S. illustrate one aspect of civil society and translate to a broader discussion about sustainability, participatory democracy, and living a good life. Just as the community building resources available to artists and organizations have not been legitimized and elevated by the arts field or by cultural workers and artists themselves, the histories, identities and complex and unique cultures that provide context and meaning to public life for all people are buried beneath layers of disconnect. The willingness of citizens to engage, the active involvement of ordinary citizens, and the capacity of communities for participation, are real, but are often submerged as well.

Community-based arts organizations must maintain a commitment to community building principles in order to maintain a community base. In a world fragmented by globalization, community building is significant. In order for organizations to be successful, cultural workers must utilize the resources at their disposal: the principles

they use to organize their communities have value, and they do not have to be thrown out in favor of mainstream business and organizational models. This is not to say that community-based organizations cannot or should not utilize lessons and tools from conventional organizational models, but mainstream tools need to be integrated with knowledge that comes from their first-hand experience. A host of knowledge, values and practices in fact, are available to community-based arts organizations from other disciplines, perhaps most significantly, the sustainable development field. Both community-based cultural workers and sustainable development practitioners are concerned with uncovering histories, cultures, and local practices that promote renewal and sustainability. Shared values include prioritizing indigenous knowledge, dialogue and inclusiveness, as well as change as something that can be brought about through principled action.

Obstacles

Within our communities and organizations are the resources to build a strong and healthy arts ecosystem, lively and engaged civil society and thriving local cultures. But there are obstacles to building healthy organizations that go beyond the oversight of funders and practitioners who haven't recognized the merits of community building as a means to sustainability. Many of the obstacles that organizations have to overcome are caused or exacerbated by the lack of funding available to the field as a whole, which speaks to the low priority of the arts within government and other public sector institutions. The low priority of the arts in the federal funding chain trickles down to a low priority of the arts in the public sphere as a whole. Lack of concern for the arts is widespread in foundations, corporations, and school systems, which then produce adults

who have never been taught an appreciation for art, and thus, fail to prioritize it in their adult lives. The work of arts organizations are further challenged by changing relationships between artists and communities; veteran and junior cultural workers; and mainstream middle class institutions and their grassroots, culturally specific counterparts. Although arts organization work in an unstable environment that affects all aspects of the field, at a micro level, the experience, leadership, talent, work ethic and choices of individual cultural workers affect the success of their organizations. Macro obstacles affect organizations as well, related to larger questions about the appropriate role of art in a democracy, cultural equity, and the cultural commons. Economics, foreign policy, natural disaster, and the mesmerizing impact of consumer capitalism (however interrelated) affect all aspects of public life and further complicate the picture.

As Atlas and DeNobriga have observed, the arts field as a whole is undercapitalized and workers, undercompensated.⁸⁰ The net result is the steady exodus of artists and other cultural workers who can earn more money in other creative fields and in the mass entertainment industry. Within many grassroots organizations, there are veterans who have been doing work for the last thirty years without money, health insurance or retirement plans, and twenty-something cultural workers who are not yet concerned about money, health insurance or retirement. As idealistic cultural workers age, they leave the field under the weight of students loans, their desire to plan families, or simply a need for career advancement, which drives them to other careers. The drain of human capital from the field makes it hard for small and large organizations alike to build or maintain sustainable systems. Small organizations are constantly investing in the training of

⁸⁰Caron Atlas and Kathy DeNobriga, "National Arts Administration Mentorship Program Report to the Field," 4, www.npnweb.org, (accessed April 12, 2009).

workers, who will ultimately take that training somewhere else, leaving the organization back where it started. Without an infusion of capital and smart practices by managers within an organization, the process of training and losing employees is hard to ease: an organization can't achieve sustainability and the higher salaries that accompany it without a stable staff, and staff members can't hold on until stability is achieved.

Raising more money requires infrastructure and building infrastructure requires raising more money. As a result, organizations attempt to diversify their funding bases by building individual donor programs, developing multiple earned income streams, sponsorship opportunities, and sometimes, capital development projects, designed to boost opportunities available to organizations. Individual donor programs benefit organizations by decreasing reliance on foundations and increasing engagement with community members, but many organizations, resist individual donor fundraising. In very small artist driven organizations, cultural workers often prioritize programmatic work over building infrastructure, but when they get tired, both the organization and the art they make goes away. However necessary, it is very difficult for small organizations to initiate and maintain the practices that build sustainability. Building sustainable practices requires assessment of every area of the organization and a split focus to address problems and nurture growth in every area. The work of developing an organization takes time as well as money, and each area demands consistency. It is very difficult for small organizations, who are stymied by cash flow problems and other emergencies to simultaneously write major grants, assuage concerns of difficult board members, recruit and retain volunteers, plan and delegate work, repair the boiler that just busted, and entertain the visiting artist who just dropped in unexpectedly; however,

developing and maintaining solvency demands it.

Inevitably, even veteran cultural workers will leave the field, as seniors in every field, eventually must. A proactive strategy within the field has been to actively develop new leadership for the field, while simultaneously attempting to build capacity in other areas. As a result, leadership and mentorship degree programs and other types of professional development are flourishing. Although these efforts ultimately bode well for the field, the short-term result in some cases has been a generational clash. Veterans have mostly dedicated their lives to fulfilling their personal artistic vision, which has resulted in a great sense of professional accomplishment. They are driven by the desire for meaningful work, the opportunity to connect with communities, camaraderie and self-actualization. Young arts professionals moving into their territory seek ownership and an opportunity to fulfill their own vision. But in many cases, veterans don't detect the same drive that they had at the same age in their younger counterparts, and view their demand for ownership as an unearned sense of entitlement. An administrator from one community arts program commented that most students come into the program with the goal of starting their own non-profit. But by the time they complete their programs, they have put that idea aside.

But some ambitious young cultural workers do start their own organizations, and they experience the same frustrations as boomer founders. They work long hours, and are frustrated by the shiftlessness of their junior staff. They encounter the same challenges to building infrastructure and sustainable organizations. Although they are tired, they derive the same satisfaction, sense of accomplishment and buoyancy as their boomer counterparts. Even for the young and enthusiastic, though, the price for a successful

organization is high and sometimes means trade offs in relationships, hobbies and personal health.

For many nextgens, balance is as important as meaningful work (even though some established managers in major theaters observe that their junior technical staff come out of the culture of university theatre programs with the macho mentality that if you don't live and breathe theatre twenty four hours a day, then you lack commitment. These well adjusted middle aged managers, living balanced lives worry about burnout among their younger staff members). Young cultural workers, looking for space to stretch out and explore their own vision, often observe that the veterans in their organizations have founder's syndrome. Founders Syndrome across the nonprofit field is the phenomena where growth and progress within an organization is retarded by a manager who is no longer willing—either consciously or subconsciously—to take risks, to learn new things, be vulnerable or even to admit that they are not right all of the time. Managers who attempt to control everything in their organizations, force employees to do everything the way it has always been done, squelch innovation and creativity and discourage change. In organizations where founders rule with their own fear of change at the forefront, rather than openness, morale among employees is low, and dissatisfaction is high. Such organizations become obsolete because they can't compete with organizations that are stimulating progressive change, building knowledge, innovating and making interesting work.

Founder's Syndrome is real and organizations suffering from its effects are easy to detect. But usually, the circumstances and personalities that affect the work of organizations are not so black and white. Nextgens want founders to shove over (or off)

and founders are not so anxious to put the car they have spent a lifetime building in the hands of a drunk driver. In many cases veterans are still busy making work and retirement—without a retirement fund—is the last thing on their minds. Much of the tension between veterans and boomers is age-old intergenerational tension. Mentors have to let go, to allow junior staff to develop ownership and vision, and to provide safe space for experimentation and room for employees to make mistakes. Nextgens have to be patient with veterans who will never embrace or understand technology the way they do, who also make mistakes, and who are also learning and growing in a world that is rapidly changing. Boomers have left a legacy in some cases in the form of new buildings. There is a question about what nextgens will do to drive these institutions, to build a sustainable field.

Tensions exist not just between generations of cultural workers but between workers in different segments of the field. Members of elite arts institutions question the artistic merit and value of community-based arts continually. Adams and Goldbard observe the marginalized position of community-based arts: "Because it employs the same art forms as conventional arts disciplines (e.g., dance, painting, film), work in the field has mostly been treated as a marginal manifestation of mainstream arts activities."⁸¹ Community-based arts organizations constantly must defend the quality and merit of the artistic work they produce. Goldbard quotes a practitioner, and then provides analysis:

I resent "cultural democracy" as a term, because it seems to use "democracy," which we all swear by to our flag and to our faith; it subverts the term "democracy" into an autocracy of the uninformed - cultural democracy meaning that we have to be dictated to by those for who we toil . . .

⁸¹Burnham, Durland, and Ewell, "The CAN Report," 12.

[People] understand education, they understand amateurism, they understand community events—but they don't for a moment confuse what they're participating in with art itself. . . . Are we really in the business of supporting amateurism? Where does it all end? The neighborhoods? With the streets? . . . The result can only be dilution, confusion and chaos.

The underlying values of community cultural development have long been perceived as a threat to interests invested in maintaining the arts as a special preserve of privilege. As the above quotations illustrate, some established professional arts advocates are appalled by the democratic idea that culture and creativity belong to everyone. On the most practical level they fear that funds heretofore reserved for their own constituencies will be "diluted"—that is, shared with community cultural development practitioners. In the political arena, the liberatory nature of community cultural development is perceived as threatening the established order. And in the sociocultural arena, adopting certain positions (such as asserting cultural diversity as an asset and opposing a hierarchy of cultures) can be read as an affront to those holding fast to the notion of an elite heritage culture that ought to take precedence over all others.⁸²

Culturally specific, ethnic, people of color artistic institutions, however one defines them, deal with all of the issues that plague the field as a whole and compete in a public sector that prioritizes elite art, and then, any other white art. Small, people of color (POC) run arts organizations often lose funding to large mainstream arts organization, which sometimes produce art to reach POC audiences, but fail to put any POC in leadership roles within their organizations. Invariably, large white institutions receive a bigger piece of the funding pie, which perpetuates a vanilla, one size fits all, public culture that is neither diverse nor inclusive. Artists of color often take their work to bigger white institutions because they have a better chance of gaining visibility than they will with their community-based counterparts. POC arts organizations are then sometimes regarded as feeders to large institutions. POC organizations develop artists who are then appropriated by larger institutions. This makes upward mobility possible for individuals, but doesn't bring equality and inclusiveness to entire groups. Larger institutions

⁸²Goldbard, *New Creative Community*, 165.

appropriate cultural products as well, which are then stripped of their original context and lose their original meanings. POC organizations provide an authentic voice to their constituencies. When larger institutions take those products and audiences, they make community institutions less viable, but provide fewer opportunities to the audiences that they have co-opted, for meaningful engagement.

All of these issues occur in an environment where the relationships between artists and audiences are changing. Large institutions find that their audiences are aging and sometimes obsolete, thus, they seek to diversify their audience base. Building new audiences for elite institutions and small theaters alike, means making material accessible and some artistic directors worry that if they have to work so hard to make their spaces safe, they will never be able to push audiences out of their comfort zone. Artists express concern that increasingly, their audiences resist being challenged. Some artists wonder if today's youth, who will be the next generation of theater goers, will have the patience to sit through a full length theater production, raised as they have been on video games, cell phones, and instant gratification. The work of every arts organization in the country is challenged by a popular culture that turns on celebrity sightings rather than issues that matter. Corporate culture drives out other forms of culture. Artists fight the globalization of culture: art is about individuality, creativity, being thought provoking and stimulating dialogue. The mass culture that chokes out independent coffee shops and books stores, that is, small spaces where people think freely, is anathema to artists.

El Centro Su Teatro is an organization functioning in a local community, in the larger space of the U.S. arts field and within the web of social and political life that makes up civil society. El Centro Su Teatro is one of many organizations that owes its

existence to the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, and to El Teatro Campesino but also to an important and significant history of communities in resistance that provided members with support, resources, beauty, art, institutions and services, when members were turned away by the public and private sector. These voluntary associations, *casas de cultura*, provided safe space as well as civic space for members to come together and to create bonds, skills and relationships that allowed them to be effective advocates and catalysts for change. Cultural arts organizations continue to provide safe space for members, resources for skill building and resistance and a source of organic culture that educates, raises awareness and challenges. Cultural arts organizations are sources of pride in the communities they serve, and sometimes, more legitimacy for their constituents than other public institutions. Today's cultural spaces are many times non profits and as such, they straddle two worlds, protecting the interests of the communities they serve, and publically advocating and articulating the issues and needs of their communities.

El Centro Su Teatro is a direct product of the community it serves and exemplifies community engagement that only happens in small local contexts. By making stories about the Chicano experience and drawing on community members as the primary owners of the organization, Su Teatro provides resources to a community that is extremely underserved. El Centro Su Teatro honestly portrays the issues of the community it serves and captures issues not being portrayed in other mediums. Audiences instinctively understand the critique of the dominant culture that the organization provides, and this critique resonates with them. Su Teatro fulfills a need that is not being met elsewhere and provides a place where people come together and engage. El Centro Su Teatro faces internal and external challenges, many of which are common

to grassroots, social justice organizations and mostly related to building infrastructure, stability and sustainability and meeting the needs of all constituents who vary in age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and gender expression. The organization faces external pressures as well, related to a bleak funding environment, depressed cultural policy, mass consumer culture and an opportunistic public sector that is ready to seize the artistic products of people of color in order to seize new markets, without providing inclusion and access.

El Centro Su Teatro seeks to address at least some of the problems that affect it by prioritizing fundraising and building a strong individual donor program. Individual donor programs cannot and should not take the place of a more vigorous cultural policy, but neither can creating healthier funding streams replace the importance of individual donor programs. Individual donor fundraising is an important component of building engaged, committed constituencies, which is key for any organization functioning in civil society. Cultural appropriation is a serious problem that requires vigilance as well, and again, the onus for protecting culture necessarily falls on organizations and the communities they serve as the stakeholders who stand to lose. Grassroots organizations can only effectively address these problems by becoming stable, sustainable, and autonomous.

Mentoring is a priority for El Centro Su Teatro, as it is for other grassroots organizations. Maintaining and deepening relationships with artists and other cultural workers, investing in artists and administrators in many local, regional and national contexts, is an activity Su Teatro engages in spite of its small size. The organization has taken a proactive, community centered approach to building resources for the field.

Interacting with artists and cultural workers across the field and building

relationships that strengthen artists and organizations is central to building the capacity of the field as a whole. Capacity building and community building begins at the grassroots and is bolstered by the skills, knowledge and values that are already present in the ways that small organizations do their work. Unfortunately, small organizations are balancing too many daily priorities to initiate regional and national networking regularly and most opportunities to bring cultural workers together result from much needed national and regional convening organized by funders, partner organizations, and national service organizations. Actively passing knowledge to each other, mentoring, and investing in the artistic products of one another, is the capacity building that the field needs, not strategic planning from high priced consultants.

In spite of the mass consumer culture that asks us to sacrifice diversity, competing point of view, and originality, there is still a foundation of historically and culturally informed relationships that informs public life as a whole, activism and engagement. In spite of the pervasiveness of mass culture, most citizens care about the well being of others, give money to the causes they care about and invest time and talent to build a better civil society. Just as the community-based arts field must pull up the community building strategies that come out of the history and daily practice of organizations, and codify, apply and disseminate those practices more completely, citizens must also create intentional practices to build community, nurture local culture and the commons as a resource that provides well being, meaning, dimension and satisfaction in our daily lives. The process of building these intentional practices incorporates resistance as much as participation. Resistance is protecting speech, culture, ways of knowing and practices that are not accepted, understood, or legitimized in the mainstream. Resistance is building

enclaves that provide space to nurture individuals through face-to-face unmediated contact. Promoting authentic, organic culture nurtures space where diverse, multidimensional cultures are developed and perpetuated and where people develop skills, perspectives, knowledge and ways of living that feed the public sphere in a dynamic, vibrant and vital way. But these enclaves have to be fed by activated citizens who support local places and advocate for better cultural policy and other policies that nurture the commons.

CHAPTER FIVE: AUDIENCES, PARTICIPATION AND RESISTANCE

Introduction

This chapter explores the community relationships that provide the foundation for audience development—and in small part, the conventional, field-wide concern with building audiences. All arts organizations strive to create engaged relationships with audiences, but developing audiences and especially developing meaningful connections with audiences of color is difficult for mainstream institutions, especially those courting diverse audiences for the first time. This chapter offers two examples of El Centro Su Teatro programs to reveal how relevant programming fuels booming community response in some cases, and how in others, it is hard to nurture a connection that captures the imagination of audiences. The play *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!* enjoys tremendous support from audiences who understand all too well the themes of the play. In the case of the Chicano Music Festival, El Centro Su Teatro has faced greater challenges, especially in building new audiences. The Chicano Music Festival is modeled after the Guadalupe Cultural Art Center's Tejano Conjunto Festival in San Antonio. The Denver festival has enjoyed relative success, but audiences for the event have reached a plateau and the event has never engendered substantive intergenerational interest: a key for the event's long-term sustainability. No doubt, there are reasons for the differences in audience response to the two events. The roots of each are located in the Chicano community. *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English*

Only!” perpetuates a sense of ownership among supporters because its themes are of extreme relevance to the entire community. The Chicano Music Festival links to cultural traditions, but its topical relevance is not as obvious. The Chicano Music Festival has not captured an intergenerational interest from audiences and Su Teatro cultural organizers have not moved deeply into the community to find out why. The success of the Chicano Music Festival is also thwarted by disorganized event planning: a factor that hasn’t affected IDSEO.

Finally, the primary literature in the arts field on cultural participation indicates that educated patrons are more likely to be involved in the arts, and indeed, civically engaged.¹ Not surprisingly, the standard view on building audiences for the arts is consistent with narrowly constructed political participation studies. An examination of popular movement research indicates that individuals from many different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds can and do organize to participate politically, and exhibit talent, intelligence and creativity in the process.² Like popular movements, in the context of the arts, individuals outside of a privileged class, participate vigorously in the arts when the arts in question are for, by and about them, and when they are approached in the process of making art as active participants. The last section of this chapter examines the need to democratize art participation, drawing on resources from both the arts and broadly constructed, political participation literature. This conclusion provides a theoretical counterpoint to the chapter examples and a foundation to further contemplate

¹ National Endowment for the Arts, 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts. Research Division Report #45, Washington D.C., www.arts.gov/pub/NEASummary2004.pdf, (accessed May 11, 2009)

² See for example, Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

the factors that make arts participation happen.

A Priority for Arts Organizations: Building New Audiences

In the performing arts field, the emphasis has shifted to building audiences. The traditional audience for the arts is aging, and it is not being replaced by a younger generation. Additionally, the demographics of the U.S. are shifting toward a new majority, people of color, who have *not been* a part of the traditional audiences for the arts. The task for arts organizations has been mapped out: they must “broaden, deepen and diversify” their audiences.³ McCarthy and Jinnet’s study on participation, commissioned by RAND is widely cited in the field, and shows that education correlates highly with participation in the arts. Although participation studies over the last ten years measure a variety of factors including age, gender, race, ethnicity, income, education, occupation and previous art education,

. . . of these characteristics, education is by far the most closely correlated with participation in the arts, regardless of form or discipline (National Endowment for the Arts 1998; Robinson 1993; Shuster 1991). Individuals with higher levels of education, particularly those with college and graduate degrees, have a much higher participation rate than individuals with less education.⁴

Enter the debate about attracting younger audiences. The dominant thinking in the field indicates that it is difficult to attract younger audiences to traditional theater because young people have short attention spans: the product of video gaming, internet dependency, a decline in reading, and a fast-paced, instant gratification environment. Theater professionals wonder how they will ever be able to get young people to sit through a two and a half hour performance. In spite of what these theorists believe, all

³ K. F. McCarthy and K. Jinnet, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2001).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

who have used the mainstream arts as their reference point, participation is not necessarily linked to education. Furthermore, the length of a performance has little to do with whether or not audiences will participate. The single most significant predictor of participation is *ownership*. Mainstream theater professionals link low interest from youth to short attention spans. However, in Denver, 350 people cram into the basement of the Denver Inner City Parish, sit on hard chairs, and spend three or more hours watching and performing poetry that they have written themselves. This monthly event, Cafe Cultura, is organized by two recent college graduates who are members of the community. The participants are residents from Denver's low-income west side, Latino and Native youth, and supporters from all over the metro area. In Five Points, Cafe Nuba reigns supreme, also a monthly poetry event that is many hours long and is always looking for larger space to accommodate all of its supporters and participants. Studies show that education is the single-most important predictor of arts participation, but the experience of people of color producers, who serve members of their own community, is different. These organizations utilize forms that are an extension of popular performance traditions that served working class constituencies; their performers are drawn from the community itself, and they share the history and cultural references of audience members. This phenomena remains intact for grassroots organizations: primarily, because the cultural organizations that serve underrepresented communities are some of the only places where audiences can hear their stories told. Thus, the audience base for these organizations cross many socioeconomic and ethnic lines, and community members who would not be found in a typical theater audience represent its core.

This chapter uses two examples from El Centro Su Teatro to illustrate on one

hand, the essence of ownership and the corollary participation, and on the other, some of the challenges that even a community-based arts organization has in developing meaningful participation. The first example examines the play, *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* The play is one of the most successful productions in Su Teatro history, I argue, because it is almost a direct extension of the popular performance tradition, and as such, pokes fun and criticizes conventional political ideas and institutions. The play is geared toward Chicano culture insiders, and those insiders relish their position. It would be difficult for a mainstream arts institution to instill ownership in the same way.

The second example examines El Centro Su Teatro's Chicano Music Festival and Auction. El Centro Su Teatro has not always found it easy to develop an intergenerational base and some of the difficulties are apparent in this example.

Creating an intergenerational bridge creates a broader base for participation. Authentic culture resonates for multiple generations, as long as artists can provide a point of entry. Ownership most directly comes from involving constituents in decision making and incorporating their voice. While high art is historically exclusive, community-based art is designed to provide access, to involve communities who recognize themselves in stories, or, who are themselves involved in the making of art. Krafchek observes:

In the world of high art, though, the artist is trained to look inward for inspiration. First and foremost, the artist is encouraged to be his/her own subject — the mind and body (of the artist) focused on itself. Therefore, the artmaker is by training desensitized, often oblivious to an "other-directed" consciousness.⁵

High art often turns on the individual introspection of the artists, a journey of self-

⁵Ken Krafchek, "A New Day in the Academy," CAN June 2008, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/06/a_new_day_in_th.php, (accessed April 29, 2009).

discovery, or personally elusive attempts to discover meaning. “. . . conceptual art is by definition self-directed, a collection of musings focused on art, ideas and the mind.”⁶

High art relies on meanings that are taught in the academy that are purposely exclusive: a certain amount of education is necessary just to access it. Underlying the contrast between high art and community art lies a power dynamic. Krafchek observes:

Western artmaking conventions privilege certain ideas over others. These ideals and principles are in no way benign in nature or significance. They may, in fact, represent ideas or values that are in opposition to those that a community may embody or wish to represent. At the very least, these principles may not accommodate the cultural prerequisites that a person, people or community wishes to express.⁷

The routinely cited arts participation studies that provide the foundation for funding initiatives and audience development strategies alike, are predicated on the experiences of high art institutions, privileging the middle and upper classes. The carpa is not an example of high art, and it reaches an audience that in 2009, large arts institutions are anxious to serve. The carpa is grounded in traditions of popular performance that have been passed down for generations. Its focus is on artistic traditions that have been developed and preserved by communities, and which provide a counter discourse to the art and politics of elites.

The Carpa, Audiences, and the Mainstream

In 1995, El Centro Su Teatro submitted a proposal to perform *La Carpa Aztlan presents: “I Don’t Speak English Only!”* as part of Theater in the Park, a summer theater showcase, featuring performances by local theater companies in Denver’s Civic Center Park. The proposal was accepted, and the company began making plans for the three-day

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

performance. Then, ostensibly because of funding problems, Theater in the Park reported that it would have to eliminate one weekend from the lineup

El Centro Su Teatro Executive Artistic Director Tony Garcia knew, before Theater in the Park Director Betty Emmanuel called to meet with him, that his play was being dropped from the showcase bill. Jim Schwartzkopff was, at the time, a consultant for El Centro Su Teatro, writing grants and coordinating some events. He was also the proprietor of Venture West, a small arts consulting enterprise, and as such, on the planning committee for Theater in the Park. Apparently, Theater in the Park committee members were unaware of Schwartzkopff's affiliation with El Centro Su Teatro, since they spoke freely with him about their decision to drop *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* (from now on referred to as *IDSEO*) because it was "too political and too controversial."

El Centro Su Teatro promptly booked Civic Center Park for the weekend following the close of Theater in the Park, offering instead *Teatro in the Park*, and none other than three free performances of *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* The popularity and substance of *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* had already been established. In 1995, *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* had been performed for almost three years and had toured extensively, both locally and nationally. Critics had recognized the show as a work of high artistic quality. Members of Su Teatro expected to fill Civic Center Park with ardent supporters.

Chicano theater, in the activist tradition, is still necessary theater. It presents authentic, topical issues of importance to the Mexican-American community. The

established popularity of the show, among audiences and critics, guaranteed a turnout for Theater in the Park. Why was a play of such relevance to potentially thirty percent of Denver residents deemed too risky to be placed next to plays more representative of the dominant, EuroAmerican theater tradition? The *carpa* offers a bilingual and bicultural experience, which provides goods to all audiences. When El Centro Su Teatro applied to participate in Theater in the Park, *IDSEO* already had an established audience, Garcia argued; this would be the audience the performance would attract. Emmanuel claimed in her conversations with Garcia that one of the plays in the series would have to be dropped from the bill because of funding issues. She indicated that Theater in the Park decided to drop Su Teatro's play from the bill because the terms *pinche* and *pendejo*, which are used in the play, are offensive to audiences. Garcia disagreed and did not feel that the widely used terms would offend audience members, many of who would be familiar with the terms and comfortable with the context in which they were used.

The real issue, as Jim Schwartzkopff repeated, was the political content of the play. In the play, young Alberto, an architecture student, has been stripped of his cultural identity by the cultural police, who in the year 2020, attempt to keep society homogenous. Within the Gated City, inhabitants are protected from the perceived grit and depravity of the Core City. Alberto's existence is devoid of all things Chicano, until, separated from his class, he stumbles on what seems to be a bum in an alley—a bum who is really Don Aztlan, a great carpero:

Don Aztlan: So you're scared, huh?

Alberto: Well it is pretty dark, and I am a long way from home. I live in the Gated City; we are protected against contact with those in the core city. What if there's a drive-by?

Don Aztlan: The only time there is a drive-by, is when the police drive-by on their way to a donut shop.

Alberto: In deference to your age and all, you seem to exhibit a profound disrespect for the law and almost a complete contempt for order.

Don Aztlan: When you live in the Gated City, I guess one might feel obligated to react as a member of the core city. You know, lawless and left out of the American Dream.

Alberto: Ridiculous. It is common knowledge that everyone has achieved the American Dream. Anyway, disbelief in the American Dream has been illegal since the turn of the century. Where on earth have you been?

Alberto and Don Aztlan banter in circles for a bit, until Don Aztlan surfaces another of Alberto's fears:

Alberto: (*picks up the newspaper left from Don Aztlan's sandwich*) Is this you? (*indicates newspaper*) Are those men arresting you?

Don Aztlan: Language police.

Alberto: Language police? This newspaper is in Spanish. (*He drops newspaper as if it is a hot potato. He wipes his hands as though that will clean them*). I knew you were trouble. Foreign language is only allowed in the foreign section of the country, where it is confined and restricted. This is a homogenous society, there are no ethnicities, we are a melting pot and that pot melts Western European. This is a Christian country, based on the word of the Bible. There are no variations, as they destroy the moral fiber of this country, (*Trying to catch his breath.*) Oh my . . . You have really upset me. (*Trying to regain his composure.*) If anyone sees you, if anyone saw me. What on earth is wrong with you? (*He looks at the crumpled newspaper.*) What were you doing?

Alberto represents the *pelado* figure of the traditional Mexican *carpa*. The great Mexican comic Mario Moreno perfected the *pelado* as Cantinflas, who Charlie Chaplin described as “the greatest comic genius of our time.”⁸ In the case of Alberto, the *pelado* is not only innocent and vulnerable, he is also young. Jose Mercado originally portrayed Alberto in the Su Teatro production. Tony Garcia writes, “I realized because of his age (he was

⁸Broyle Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino*, 10.

nineteen at the time), his character had to have a mentor. It would not have worked to use one so young as the foil for all our jokes without giving him a guide out of his innocence.”⁹ Don Guillermo Aztlan becomes Alberto’s mentor—and the star of the show. Aztlan is a brilliant *carpero* in the Cantinflas tradition. Upon meeting Don Aztlan, Alberto is transported into the fantastic underground world of La Carpa Aztlan, where Chicano culture still lives in the performances of the traveling company:

Don Aztlan: Forced into the underground by insecure monoculturalists, who ban language, burn books and attempt to dictate sexual orientation, La Carpa Aztlan was created. La Carpa Aztlan was built on the great traditions of the carperos of the 1930s, the greatest of which was La Carpa Garcia, led by El Maestro Don Fito Garcia, and featuring such remarkable talent as Lydia Mendoza, Ramirin and Chata Noloesca. Mario Moreno also performed in carpas: you may know him as the great Cantinflas.¹⁰

La Carpa Aztlan is always on the run, for if the performers are caught, they will have to answer to the Cultural Police. Through the course of the play, Alberto learns to explore his identity and returns to the gated city with a better sense of who he is and where he came from.

As Alberto’s story unfolds, it is interspersed with fragments of the carperos’ own personal stories, and vaudeville style skits that explore social and political issues:

Violeta: Don Aztlan, wait a second, please wait. I know you don’t know me, but I snuck in and saw the Carpa Show last night. No, I won’t tell the cultural police. You can trust me. I want to join you. I know it’s a hard life, always running, moving from town to town, never knowing when they will catch up to you. Kind of like a Chicano Richard Kimble (or O.J. Simpson or Bill Clinton). Okay, I know that wasn’t very funny but I want to be a carpero. You think that’s funny? I guess I would be a carpera.

I’m sorry my Spanish isn’t so good—my English ain’t so good neither. But, I

⁹Play program, *La Carpa Aztlan Presents: “I Don’t Speak English Only!”* Su Teatro play program, August 2, 1997.

¹⁰Play script, *La Carpa Aztlan Presents: “I Don’t Speak English Only!”* Su Teatro.

know I can help. What can I do? No, I really don't sing well. No, I've never acted. Don't tell me it's too dangerous, it's no more dangerous than being told by somebody who you are supposed to be.

Throughout the play, biting political criticism is tempered with humor. The Coors family, former CU Football Coach and Promise Keeper founder Bill McCartney, and Barbara Philips, the Colorado Springs legislator who helped draft Colorado's English Only legislation, are the targets of uncompromising jokes. The play touches on sensitive political issues: bilingual education, immigration policy, and straight-up racism.

How is the *carpa*, as a public performance, used to negotiate power relationships?

"The term *carpa* is ancient Quechua for an awning made of interwoven branches. In Spanish it signifies canvas cover, tent, and finally, a type of folksy and down-to-earth circus."¹¹

During the Mexican Revolution, actors and clowns from the more established theaters and circuses took refuge in the *carpas* where the pantomimes originated by Ricardo Bell and the satire of Aycardo fermented to bring about the creation of the satirical, often political, review which starred the character that today is recognized as the Mexican national clown: the *pelado* or naked one, penniless, underdog.¹²

And:

". . . the true voice of the people is heard in the *carpas*, and what no newspaper dare print is said with open frankness by these traveling comics; the *carpas* thus functioned as popular tribunals."¹³

According to Broyles-Gonzalez, "the carpa uses humor, but is dead serious.

¹¹Nicolas Kanellos, "A Brief Overview of the Mexican American Circus in the Southwest," *Journal of Popular Culture* 18 (1984): 78.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

Humor is the bedrock within which the carpa could unfold.”¹⁴

The Mexican carpa and more broadly speaking, the Mexican popular performance tradition have throughout history served as a counter-hegemonic tool of the disenfranchised and oppressed. . . . Their vigorous revival coincides with periods of social upheaval and popular distress.¹⁵

And:

The carpa continued full force into the 1950s and early 1960s, a resilience probably attributable to its native and working class roots, as well as its ability to speak to the daily reality of Mexican workers in an entertaining manner.¹⁶

The carpa exhibits all the jagged edges of Mexican humor; it is resistance culture perfected to an art form. Much of working class Mexican humor is based on the concept of *relajo*, which Broyles-Gonzalez describes as “*una burla colectiva*,” or collective mockery, the suspension of seriousness in the face of a value posited before a group of persons.” There is also *sarcasmo* (sarcasm), *choteo* (derision) and the *albur*, which, according to Ybarra-Frausto, is “an aggressive chain of wisecracks, predominantly of a sexual nature.”¹⁷

“In so far as the laughter of the *relajo* follows on the overturning of values, of the expected, of what has been assumed valid, it constitutes a rehearsal of collective freedom.”¹⁸ The *carpa* revels in its lack of elite sophistication. It is purposely crude.

Ybarra-Frausto notes that “the comic world of the sketch revolves around what Mikhail Bakhtin calls lower stratum humor, related to the drama of bodily life: copulation, birth,

¹⁴Broyles Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino*, 7.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 10.

¹⁷Ibid., 41.

¹⁸Ibid.

growth, eating, drinking, and defecating.”¹⁹ Some skits “bordered on the scatological in terms of themes or language, but always were amenable to a *publico familiar*.”²⁰

According to Gaspar de Alba, there is a tension between popular pleasure and aesthetic values, one of “resistance from both ends.”²¹ “The popular resists the imposition of elitist interests and discourses; the aesthetic resists the infiltration of public tastes and standards into its sacred domain.”²² James . Scott discusses exaggerated compliance as a form of resistance. The insufferable Eddie Haskell puts on his best face when Mrs. Cleaver walks into the room, “My, Mrs. Cleaver, you certainly look lovely today.” The audience laughs, because it realizes Eddie is (perhaps unsuccessfully) attempting to hide his true character from Mrs. Cleaver. The *carpa* is an exaggerated *failure to comply*, veiled by humor. The rasquachis seize the upper class interpretation of lower class character, and make prejudice a source of power. Just as the gay/lesbian community chant, “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” The carperos might chant, “We’re rowdy, we’re rasquachi, get used to it.” The rasquachi aesthetic flaunts its rejection of compliance openly and gleefully.

The rasquachi aesthetic is:

A way of confronting the world from the perspective of the downtrodden, the rebel, the outsider. To be rasquachi is to possess an ebullient spirit of irreverence and insurgency, a carnivalesque, topsy-turvy vision where authority and decorum serve as targets for subversion.²³

¹⁹Tomas Ybarra Frausto, “I Can Still Hear the Applause: La Farandula Chicana: Carpas y Tandas de Variedad,” in *Hispanic Theater in the United States* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1984), 45.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art*, 11.

²²Ibid.

²³Broyles Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino*, 50.

According to Gaspar de Alba:

rasquachismo is more than an oppositional form; it is a militant praxis of resistance to hegemonic standards in the art world. Therein resides its popular pleasure, for in subverting dominant ideologies, in ‘[turning] ruling paradigms upside down. . . . [this] witty, irreverent and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries’ both evades power and empowers itself.²⁴

To exaggerate the characteristics the ruling class finds most fearsome (performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena, refers to his “monstrously huge *bigote* e.g., moustache) is to exercise relational power. The *rasquachi* is not hidden, it is open; it is accessible. The targets of *rasquachismo* either ignore the codes, or simply don’t go there at all, literally. *Carpas* were attended by the proletariat, not ruling class elites. *IDSEO* accomplishes the same goals not by exaggerating stereotypes, but by making fun of authority. Cortez, monolingual teachers and racists in the work place are all targets.

In a scene from the play called *Chicano Man and Chicana Woman*, a professional couple details their struggle to be polite in an ignorant and racist white society. In the end, though, they can’t tolerate the transgressions of the misinformed and insensitive white society, and they must yield to their impulse to transform into their real identities as *Chicano Man* and *Chicana Woman*, super heroes for *la raza*. The entire scene is mostly sung, with the white characters only speaking their parts. The scene builds with the big pay off in the second half of the scene. Hence, the entire scene is highlighted below:

(Chicano man and Chicana woman are dressing for work. They apply makeup as they look into imaginary mirrors).

Chicano Man: Mira bonita, no te olvides que tu dueño se pone muy nervioso cuando hablas español.

Chicana Woman: Si mi vida, I know that the boss likes his brown people real white.

²⁴Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art*, 11.

Chicano Man: Remember, that we are living in an age of tremendous intolerance. In the 1960s and 70s it was okay to be a Chicano, because no one really wanted jobs anyway. During the 80s Reagan cut the poverty programs and all the poverty pimps became hispanic and entrepreneurs.

Chicana Woman: By the mid-1990s, in order to stay out of Denver Police's "Spy Files," you had to become as non-threatening as possible. But for those of us, who were born with the malignant Chicano Militant gene. You face a daily battle to maintain your secret identity as Chicano Man.

Chicano Man: And I am Chicana Woman. (*They stop and realize that they are mixed up, and reverse places*) Wait a second we got that backwards. I am Chicano Man and you are Chicana Woman.

Chicana Woman: Bueno querido, I am off to work, as a mild mannered career professional.

Chicano Man: And I am off to my job as a middle-level manager with a large corporation.

(they go off to work)

Chicana Woman: (*she sings in a horrible light opera motif.*) Here I am at my job. I am an insurance claims processor. All day long I process claims. It's a simple little job, but it's a living.

Over there is my boss, he's a bit of a bigot and most of the men in the office are sexist, and they worship that asshole Rush Limbaugh. But I stick to my job, and mind my own business, because I don't want to start any trouble.

Co-worker: Hey, Juanita

Chicana Woman: You know my name is Mercedes

Co-worker: Who cares? All you tamales are Juanitas to me. Tell me, what is it about you Mexicans and Colored, that you keep popping them babies out so young, and so fast.

Chicana Woman: I'll stick to my job and mind my own business because I don't want to start any trouble.

Customer: Oh Miss. Oh I didn't realize. I mean from our phone conversation, you sounded... you know regular. Tell me. You do speak English don't you?

Chicano Man: I work at my job, this is how I make a living. It puts food on my

plate, but it also takes a lot out of me. Wouldn't it be great to work for a company that cares about people. People who need people.

Oh no, what am I saying. I have these thoughts it's not my fault. My grandparents came from the sixties. This must be the chromosome damage they warned me about.

Oh wait, there comes my boss, he looks like he is angry

Boss: Martinez, there's a problem in our New Mexico plant. The workers there are thinking of organizing a union. I want you to organize a security team to infiltrate and identify those subversives so that we can eliminate them.

Chicano Man: Why me Mr. Davis. I'm just a mid level manager. What can I do?
Boss: Isn't it obvious? New Mexico. You're a Mexican. Are you one of us or one of them? Go do your duty boy.

Co-worker: Martínez, the boss says you got a big job cooking in New Mexico. He's really glad you're with the program. I guess you've proven that you're not just another one of those affirmative action managers. Yeah, too often those minorities get promoted because of their skin color and not because of their skills. You know, reverse discrimination. Of course for me it helps, if your uncle is the president of the company.

Chicano Man: I took a pledge to be as plain as Federico Peña. No extra attention would I draw to myself. To keep my job, I will keep my politics to myself.

(the reactionary voices begin to multiply)

Boss: What is wrong with you people?

Co-worker #1: When are you going to get over losing your land?

Co-worker#2: I wasn't responsible for slavery.

Boss: You know what you people should do.

Co-worker #1: This is America and in America, we speak English.

Chicano man and Chicana woman: How much more of this can we take?

Co-worker #1: Why can't you be a part of America like everyone else?

Co-worker #2: Do we need to build a wall across the border to keep you people out?

Chicano Man and Chicana Woman: This is it, I can take no more, the urge is too strong.

(they face each other.)

Chicana Woman: I must become Chicana Woman

Cast: Chicana Woman, Chicana Woman

Chicano Man: And I will be Chicano Man.

Cast: Chicano Man. Chicano Man.

Chicana Woman: I can breastfeed my 200 children, con mi rifle tied firmly to my back. I will fight the revolución, and make love to my hombre on horseback. At the same time, I will go to law school and to PTA, and make tortillas and chile verde for my esposo and my 200 children. Because I am....Chicana Woman.

Cast: Chicana Woman, Chicana Woman.

Chicano Man: I am a firme Chicano and I wear a ponytail. Just to let everyone know that only my body's middle-aged. Yes I am a male role model, and I serve on every committee on the left. I can change my niño's diapers, just to show that I'm not macho. I won't take no oppression from no rico, or gabacho. Because I am Chicano Man.

Cast: Chicano Man, Chicano Man

Chicana Woman: I will care for my familia as has long been our tradition. I will listen to my mother tell me how my father had no ambition. Then I will rush to the demonstration, because I always support *La Causa*. And while supper is cooking and I'm helping my kids with their trigonometry I'll put on my aerobics tape to exercise my thighs. Because I am Chicana Woman.

Cast: Chicana Woman, Chicana Woman.

Chicano Man: I have organized all my co-workers, so that the bosses all are trembling. Our neighborhood is safe, and the gangs all work at the coop nursery that I built one night when I couldn't sleep. I also am a teacher at the Escuela Che Guevarra. But most of all I am sensitive and I wrote my wifa this poem.
(hummmmm)

The Chicano Skies were bright this morning,
because you had stayed up all night working on that proposal for the restructuring
of the La Raza Unida Party,
and except for a few run-on sentences it was pretty good.

Esposa, I am grateful for your brown skin that presses against me en la media de la noche. your hair cascades down around your shoulders. And I love you as if I were young. And in the morning you bring me Ben Gay, Because last night, I loved you as if I was young.

Chicana Woman: The Chicano Skies were bright this morning, because last night I slept with, Chicano Man.

Cast: Chicano Man, Chicano Man

Chicano Man: And you are Chicana Woman

Cast: Chicana Woman, Chicana Woman

All: Chicano Couple

(They exit as if they are flying off stage)

Anyone who has suffered in an unequal power relationship knows that criticizing and mocking authority figures can be tremendously satisfying, if only in the short-term. Broyles Gonzalez notes that the *carpa*, “turns social hierarchy and dominant authority into something laughable.”²⁵ It creates another, “unofficial truth.” Whether organizers of Theater in the Park recognized *IDSEO* as a threat to the dominant social hierarchy is unclear. It is clear, though, that *IDSEO* presents a non-elitist approach to art. The *carpa* is grounded in a tradition of working class comedy. *IDSEO* prioritizes identity politics. Segments in the first act emphasize the low character and ridiculous lisp of the Spanish Conquistador. In the second act, *El Corrido de TENAZ* counsels that “*la cultura es importante.*” Undoubtedly *IDSEO* is Chicano, Rasquachi, and bilingual. Phrases, songs, expressions and jokes, expressly aimed at a bilingual, and bicultural audience occur throughout the piece; the relevance of the play to patrons has made it the most popular

²⁵Broyles Gonzales, *El Teatro Campesino*, 33.

play in Su Teatro history. There is a duality in how audiences respond to the production that affects both how the *carperos* mold and negotiate public space.

It seems that the very elements that made *IDSEO* too controversial for Theater in the Park, are also what makes it so popular. *La Carpa Aztlan presents; "I Don't Speak English Only!"* made its world premiere at the On the Border/Between Bridges Theater Festival in Boulder, Colorado, October 18, 1993, and opened the newly renovated El Centro Su Teatro, October 21, 1993. The show has toured extensively, and is also Su Teatro's most successful touring show. The play was performed from 1993-95, again in 1997 and revived in 1998, 1999 and 2000. The play continues to sell out and in its last three runs has been performed at The Denver Civic Theater, a two hundred and eighty seat venue (compared to Su Teatro's one hundred and twenty seat theater). Some of those who attend the play have never seen it, and some have seen it countless times. El Centro Su Teatro has published a CD of music and scenes from the play and some patrons have thus memorized entire scenes, which they can perform at will. The play is funny. It is entertaining. It is rife with political satire. Although part of the title of the play is "I Don't Speak English Only!" the play never directly discusses the legislation. The play *is* about the lack of freedom and lack of creativity that a monolingual, and hence monocultural society perpetuates, and a scathing criticism of the dominant culture that threatens to destroy bilingualism and biculturalism: a source of power and sustenance for a community whose experiences and stories are not included in the dominant culture canon. The play observes that to insist on a homogenous society is to sanction a racial and cultural hierarchy. By extension, the play suggests, English Only proponents seek to destroy the cultural and material base that makes opposition possible, and with it the

resources that make life meaningful for many people. The result is a semi-totalitarian society that actively limits freedom, dialogue and the diverse cultures and points of view that fuel a vital and energetic public sphere.

In the success of the *carpa*, El Centro Su Teatro is able to perpetuate an understanding of and an appreciation for, the *carpa* as a performance form that must be passed down. *IDSEO* allows audiences young and old to achieve some understanding of a history of resistance and struggle. Of the *carpa*, Ybarra-Frausto writes:

Essentially a form of entertainment for the masses, *carpas* helped to define and sustain ethnic and class consciousness. This robust ribaldry and rebellious instincts were wedges of resistance against conformity and prevailing norms of middle class decency within Chicano communities. *Carpas* motivated and helped establish a new sense of self identity for the Mexican-American in the Southwest by a) valorization and vitalization of Chicano vernacular, especially incipient forms of code switching b) elaboration of a critical mode exemplified in the anti-establishment stance of the *pelado* c) maintenance of oral traditions and humor in its various modalities as a cultural weapon applied symbolically to annihilate and vanquish oppressors d) elaboration of a down to earth, direct aesthetic deeply embedded in social tradition.²⁶

Frausto's observations are as true for *IDSEO* as any *carpa*. The power of the *carpa*, as any aesthetic form that celebrates things Chicano, is never more apparent than when El Centro Su Teatro performs for high school students. *IDSEO* tells jokes to insiders in the audience. Although the play is enjoyed by cross-cultural audiences, *IDSEO* gets its biggest response when it plays to West and North side youth (and their parents). For many, seeing a Su Teatro performance may be the first time they have seen Chicano vernacular—the pattern of speech they use everyday—utilized in an aesthetic form. They understand the *pelado* in a way that outsiders never will; it is a part of a performance tradition that they know.

²⁶Frausto, "I Can Still Hear the Applause," 46.

West and North side youth laugh the loudest, because they understand that the jokes, tricks, and stories are making fun of the dominant order. They see themselves on stage, maneuvering in and out of the system. It is not that non-Chicano audiences do not appreciate, understand, or enjoy the play, but they certainly relate to it in a different way. In one scene in the play, an undocumented worker tries to make it across the border (the scene has become so classic, that audiences now cheer when the scene begins). As the scene takes place, the theme from *Chariots of Fire* plays in the background. All of the action takes place in slow motion. A rope is extended across center-stage, and actors hold the rope on both ends. Actors also stand behind the rope. The worker, wearing his cowboy hat, and carrying his lunch pail tries repeatedly to jump over the rope, which is tagged with a big sign that says “border.” In the original version of the play, the worker attempts to get across several times, while the other actors look on, alternately cheering, and expressing their anxiety for him, all in slow motion. The scene ends, when the worker gets across. However, a news story about the police beating of an undocumented worker moved the company to change the ending of the scene. Now, the worker makes it across, and is cheering, as are the other actors. But two actors that were holding opposite ends of the rope, have slipped away, and in the darkness of stage left, have donned police helmets, and taken up clubs. They return to the scene, and, still in slow motion, begin beating the worker, as the *Chariots of Fire* music stops. In some ways, the ending to the scene is unfair to the audience. They are laughing, and celebrating with the worker, when suddenly, the mood changes. Those who have never seen the play are not prepared for the outcome, and seldom notice as the actors approach to begin beating the worker. It is not unusual for people to cry out, “Oh no!” and as the scene ends, the mood is somber. The

play moves audiences and the significance of the issues the play addresses are clear to individuals, regardless of their cultural background.

The experience of the *carperos* suggests that citizens who fear “the Other” so vehemently that they are willing to legislate exclusion, indeed may attempt to create the intolerant society that IDSEO portrays. Gomez Pena observes:

The demographic facts are staggering. The Middle East and Black Africa are already in Europe, and Latin America’s heart now beats in the U.S. New York and Paris increasingly resemble Mexico City and Sao Paolo. Cities like Tijuana and Los Angeles, once socio-urban aberrations, are becoming models of a new hybrid culture, full of uncertainty and vitality. And border youth—the fearsome “cholo-punks,” children of the chasm that is opening between the “first” and “third” worlds, become the indisputable heirs to the new *mestizaje* (the fusion of Amer-indian, African, and European races).²⁷

And McKenna:

In this context, concepts like “high culture,” “ethnic purity,” “cultural identity,” “beauty” and “fine arts” are absurdities and anachronisms. Like it or not, we are attending the funeral of modernity and the birth of a new culture.²⁸

The Official English movement—referenced in the title of the play itself—is only one facet of the xenophobic political waves that continue to occur locally, regionally and nationally.

California leads the nation in anti-immigrant legislation having passed Proposition 187 in 1994, sponsored by SOS (“Save Our State”), which denies health and educational services to undocumented immigrants; Proposition 209 passed by voters in 1996 essentially made affirmative action programs illegal in California; and finally in 1998, Proposition 227 the “English for the Children” initiative ended bilingual education

²⁷Quoted by Teresa McKenna in *Migrant Song: Politics and Process in Contemporary Chicano Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 106.

²⁸Ibid.

in California. According to Rodolfo Acuña, “In essence, Proposition 227 was a horror story. It made snitches out of teachers. If a teacher continued to use a foreign language for instruction, he or she could be prosecuted and was obligated to pay the costs of litigation. Additionally, it sought to kill even the most effective bilingual programs.”²⁹

Central is the threat of language, the threat of difference and the inability of the dominant culture to control that which it cannot understand.

La Carpa Aztlan presents: “I Don’t Speak English Only!” resonates with audiences whose understanding of the seriousness of English Only legislation goes back to their own experiences as students and as workers.

Many issues intersect in the controversy over Official English: immigration (above all), the rights of minorities (Spanish speaking minorities in particular), the pros and cons of bilingual education, tolerance, how best to educate the children of immigrants, and the place of cultural diversity in school curricula and in American society in general.³⁰

Proponents of English Only in Colorado such as Barbara Philips focus mostly on the need to create practical learning environments in public schools. Many educators believe that English immersion will facilitate learning, and help students succeed in the long run.³¹

Lau v. Nichols ruled in 1974 that in “cases where children had limited grasp of English, the school district had a responsibility to meet the needs of those children. If the district did not, it deprived students of equal protection under the Civil Rights Act of

²⁹Acuña, *Occupied America*, 454.

³⁰ Robert D. King, “Should English Be the Law?,” *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1997, 57.

³¹ For example see Lance T. Izumi, “The Bilingual Debate: English Immersion,” in “Campaign Stops: Strong Opinions on the 2008 Election,” *The New York Times*, 2 September 2008, <http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/28/the-bilingual-debate-english-immersion/?apage=7>, (accessed March 11, 2009).

1964.”³² Although bilingual education became more prevalent, many conservatives felt bilingualism threatened EuroAmerican institutions.³³ Conservatives felt non-English speaking students had the duty to assimilate. Falcon and Campbell comment in a 1988 study that metro (Denver) area school boards have taken the position that “bilingual education will not be allowed to suffer as a result of the law.”³⁴

Although many English Only proponents may be well-intentioned, the national movement, US English, reflects deep conservatism and reactionary anti-immigrant impulses.

In 1993 the English-only movement reported total contributions of more than \$6 million, some of which came from the right-wing Laurel Foundation, and the Pioneer Fund. These and other conservative foundations and think tanks - like the Center for Equal opportunity - were funded by the reactionary Olin Foundation.³⁵

Ron Unz, is a Silicon Valley millionaire and architect of California’s Proposition 227.

Unz entertained vision of running for Governor of California and sought to appeal to anti-immigrant and anti-minority voters, even though earlier he had opposed Proposition 187.

Unz also gave money to the Heritage Foundation Policy Review.³⁶

For Chicanos, English Only refocuses attention to a public education system that has never met their needs adequately. Denver Public Schools continue to battle high drop out rates among Latino students, and advocacy organizations such as Padres Unidos

³²Acuña, *Occupied America*, 411.

³³Debra Kreisberg, Joy Sobrepena and Peter Van Arsdale, “Immigration Reform and Barriers to Immigration Integration: Enhancing Acculturation by Impacting US Policy,” in *Racism and the Underclass: State Policy and Discrimination against Minorities*, ed. George W. Shepherd and David Penna, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991),71.

³⁴Priscilla Falcon and Pat Campbell, “The Politics of Language and the Mexican American: The English Only Movement and Bilingual Education,” in *Racism and the Underclass*, ed. Shepherd and Penna, 145.

³⁵Acuña, *Occupied America*, 455.

³⁶Ibid.

strive to intervene in instances where students confront racism.³⁷ The fight for educational equity is an ongoing battle for baby-boomer Chicanos, who, as youth, sparked the consciousness of their parents when they walked out of their high school classes in Los Angeles, Crystal City, Texas, Albuquerque, and Denver.

It was Chicano activists of the 1960s who advanced bilingual education.

It was a very simple strategy to transform society into a more culturally tolerant place where all people in the Southwest would speak two languages and select the best of multicultures. Over the years, it became a vehicle to ease the transition of the immigrant into education, and facilitate the learning of English.³⁸

For Chicanos who came of age in the 1960s and 70s, language was a central issue. Many felt that along with losing their language, they had lost their culture, as their parents and grandparents coaxed them to assimilate. For the Chicano Movement Generation, language is an emotional issue. Many youth were punished or teased for speaking Spanish, and many baby-boomers were raised to be monolingual in English, as their parents attempted to shield them from racism. Many Chicano activists reclaimed their language, as well as their culture, as a source of pride and identity. Gloria Anzaldua writes:

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.³⁹

And:

I want you to speak English. *Pa’ hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el*

³⁷“Current Campaigns,” <http://www.padresunidos.org/>, (accessed July 12, 2009).

³⁸Acuña, *Occupied America*, 254.

³⁹Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 53.

inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent,’ my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan-American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents. Attack on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua.* Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out.⁴⁰

A primary tenant of Chicano politics is to fight exclusion, to insist on inclusion. That is, Chicanos should not have to “assimilate.” Social commentary like *IDSEO* challenges the dominant culture, whose institutions have historically excluded minorities.

The Chicano Civil Rights Movement sought to guarantee the rights of Chicanos as a group, to allow Chicanos to advance, with their ethnic identity intact. Language is a part of identity, and Chicano activists view the conservative attack on language as one strategy for dismantling inclusive policies. In one interview on his play *Zoot Suit*, Luis Valdez comments on the question of identity, with regard to Pachuco culture, but his comments could apply to the Chicano Movement as well:

It was a struggle for identity because an identity was needed. The question is of course, why not assimilate when it could be so convenient? Well, for one, the society won’t allow many of us to assimilate. We just can’t pass for white, whether we want to or not. And the other is, what are we assimilating into?⁴¹

The *carpa* challenges the conservative reaction against inclusion by making language subversive, down to the linguistic maneuvers used by players. Don Aztlán and Alberto utilize verbal acrobatics like politicians. They turn phrases that are half in Spanish and half in English. The word play itself in the play is central to its success: it makes the language itself, performance. The play gives validity and legitimacy to a group whose particular form of language is not recognized anywhere else. Language reveals, as

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Carlos Morton, “An Interview with Luis Valdez,” *Latin American Theater Review* 15:2 (1982): 73-76.

Broyles Gonzales notes, “realities of domination and subordination.”⁴² Through the use of language, authority is turned back on itself. The carpa recognizes the power of the subordinated to circumvent control through the use of linguistic codes. The original Pachuco language, calo was designed so that adults and Anglos could not understand it.⁴³ Chicano Spanish is the result of distinct experience, history, geographic location, that reflects culture and individual experience. According to Anzaldua, Chicano Spanish is a living language, a border language, which developed naturally.⁴⁴

For a people who are neither Spanish, nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español*, *ni inglés*, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages.⁴⁵

Implicit in English Only legislation is the fear that immigrants, and others who retain their language, have some sort of autonomous power that the dominant culture cannot penetrate. Those who speak English, but prefer to speak Spanish, insulate themselves from the prying of dominant culture institutions. Those who speak Spanish *and* English can switch codes at will, navigate between different social spaces, and pick and choose what they reveal to either English or Spanish monolingual speakers. Bilingual and monolingual Spanish speakers are powerful. They each have an arsenal of resistance

⁴²Broyles Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 7.

⁴³Douglas Henry Daniels, “Los Angeles Zoot,” *The Journal of Negro History* 82 (1997): 27.

⁴⁴Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 55.

⁴⁵Ibid.

tactics with which they can circumvent the norms of dominant institutions. The threat of diversity, lies in the lack of control and domination that monolingual, monocultural representatives of the white establishment can exercise over multi-talented, multi-experienced, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, flexible, chameleon, unpredictable subjects. One must be able to understand one's subjects in order to control them.

The carpa performance, in contemporary times, is about confronting, alternately gently and alternately biting, the implicit and explicit policies geared toward Spanish speakers and immigrants. The line between anti-immigrant legislation and bias towards Spanish speakers in general is unclear and indicates racism. To focus on language is divisive, it targets any non-native English speaker as an interloper. It perpetuates tension and legitimizes discrimination on the basis of difference. Indeed, targeting groups and penalizing them for cultural practices provides a foundation for hate politics.

La Carpa Aztlan presents; "I Don't Speak English Only!" illustrates an ongoing need for Chicanos to purposely cultivate and perpetuate art and culture that reveals their history as a mestizo people, celebrates brown skin and the Spanish language as something beautiful. Gaspar de Alba writes:

That "esfuerzo . . . para triunfar," or effort to triumph over adversity and oppression, is the pleasure of survival, the most resistant act of all. Indeed, it is through resistance to cultural domination, psychological abuse, and physical hardship that people of color have survived and evolved after 500 years of colonialism.⁴⁶

The success of the *IDSEO*, and the reaction from Theater in the Park reveals a lack of appreciation among some "mainstreamers" of an ongoing need for cultural survival. Yet audiences relate so profoundly to the resistance aesthetic of the carpa. Thus, the contrast

⁴⁶Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art*, 14.

is clear between the needs of an underserved Chicano community and a mainstream that still fears any encroachment on their territory. Gaspar de Alba uses the definition of mainstream offered by Uruguayan artist and professor Luis Camnitzer:

Although the term “mainstream: carries democratic reverberations, suggesting an open and majority-supported institution, it is in fact a rather elitist arrangement reflecting a specific social and economic class. In reality, “mainstream” presumes a reduced group of cultural gatekeepers and represents a select nucleus of nations. It is a name for a power structure that promotes a self-appointed hegemonic culture.⁴⁷

Given the context of the political environment, the rich popular performance tradition of Chicanos, the mocking of authority that has always been intrinsic to the survival of working class people, it is not hard to see how *IDSEO* engages Chicano audiences. It is no wonder that mainstream institutions, whose multicultural offerings are not likely to address the same issues with such candor, or from the same reference point, have trouble recruiting diverse audiences. Even if a mainstream institution were to put a person of color in charge, to produce a cutting edge cultural product, they might risk losing their upwardly mobile white audience base, that doesn't want to hear it. *IDSEO* uses popular performance traditions that are familiar and comfortable to Latinos, and integrates topical issues that resonate for individuals concerned with maintaining culture and sense of self. The themes in the play are meaningful to Latinos, because they are rooted in common experience of culture, stories, vernacular, and experiences of racism in the larger society. The actors in the play are community members, many who grew up in the Chicano Movement in Denver, and who are well-known to their peers, who make up the audience. Thus, there is a deep source of ownership for audiences who attend the play, and this ownership transcends age, income, and education. The success of the play is related to an

⁴⁷Ibid., 21.

identity that is derived from realities that Chicanos from different socio-economic backgrounds and ages, know from their daily lives.

IDSEO is very successful in engaging audiences, but El Centro Su Teatro does not always find it easy to develop audiences. The carpa plays a historical role, communicating culture and identity and an ongoing role in revealing contemporary cultural experience in order to stimulate an ongoing dialogue. It provides a celebration of cultural difference and an open challenge to advocates of assimilation. La Carpa passes on the beauty of cultural art created by Chicanos and for Chicanos. This tradition of Mexican popular performance is organic, it is not the result of gringo education or formal training. It comes out of a system of knowledge that is rooted in the pre-Columbian soil of the Southwest.

The Chicano Music Festival

In May 2000, The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas, presented the Nineteenth Annual Tejano Conjunto Festival, a six-day celebration of regional “folk” music, specific to South Texas. Tony Garcia, Executive Artistic Director of El Centro Su Teatro sent two staff members to San Antonio, to learn first-hand, how to coordinate a community music festival.

Conjunto music is one important element of the history and culture of the U.S. Southwest. South Texas scholar Gloria Anzaldua writes:

The whole time I was growing up, there was *norteno* music sometimes called North Mexican border music, or Tex-Mex music, or Chicano music, or *cantina* (bar) music. I grew up listening to *conjuntos*, three-or four piece bands made up of folk musicians playing guitar, *bajo sexto*, drums and button accordion, which Chicanos had borrowed from the German immigrants who had come to Central Texas and Mexico to farm and build breweries. In the Rio Grande Valley, Steve Jordan and Little Joe Hernandez were popular, and Flaco Jimenez was the accordion king. The rhythms of Tex-Mex music are those of the polka, also

adapted from the Germans, who in turn had borrowed the polka from the Czechs and Bohemians.⁴⁸

The accordion is the core of the conjunto sound, add the *bajo sexto*, a traditional type of bass guitar, and the traditional conjunto is complete. Modern conjuntos feature drums, and sometimes a stand up bass to create a powerful rhythm section.

For the uninitiated, Conjunto Festival might conjure images of old time *cancioneros* singing love songs, and older couples dancing to polka, cumbia, and two-step rhythms. However, the Tejano Conjunto Festival challenges stereotypes. For example, “Show Band” night, features acts like *Grupo Vida*, eight men in their early twenties. Show Bands are so called because they extend themselves to engage the audience and prioritize form as well as content. As *Grupo Vida* performs, each member of the band takes center stage individually; members compete against one another to perform ever more intricate dance moves to please the crowd. *Grupo Vida* one of many show bands, perform side-by-side with legendary traditional performers such as Valerio Longoria,⁴⁹ Ruben Vela, and Los Dos Gilbertos, who exhibit mastery over their timeless craft. Grammy-Award winner Flaco Jimenez, son of conjunto great Santiago Jimenez and brother of Santiago Jimenez Jr., often perform along with conjuntos from Japan and France. The six day event attracts local, national, and international fans. In an evolving regional community of conjunto musicians, the form is multidimensional, intergenerational and dynamic. It is contemporary and progressive, taking influences equally from rock and *rancheras*. The evolution of conjunto music is dynamic and most

⁴⁸Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.

⁴⁹Valerio Longoria died December 15, 2000. At the National Association of Latino Art and Culture Annual conference, Friday, January 9, Tomas Ybarra Frausto commented that although Longoria was universally recognized as a great artist, he died a poor man.

contemporary artists can play traditional songs: the polka, waltz, redova and schottische, as well as modern styles.

Conjunto music was born in the fields among working class Mexican-Americans in the Rio Grande Valley. It has survived migrations across the country. Technology, and the influence of popular music styles such as country, pop, rock, rhythm and blues and modern instrumentation have affected the evolution of the conjunto sound; however, the music's connection to its South Texas roots has kept the music well within the consciousness of Tejanos in Texas, and those who have settled in other states throughout the country.

Conjunto music—as well as other styles of Chicano music (Border music)—is of extreme cultural significance. The pure style is identified with community-based functions, weddings, county fairs and celebrations of all sorts. South Texas has perpetuated a local music industry infrastructure that has allowed Tejano artists to sustain their craft since the 1930s. But conjunto is not just folk music, it is regional music, varying in style between San Antonio, Corpus Christi and the Rio Grande Valley. Because of conjunto regional substyles, the music maintains its connection to local audiences.

In August 2000, El Centro Su Teatro held a three day Chicano music festival, “a roots music festival dedicated to the music developed on this side of the U.S.-Mexican border.” The festival was modeled loosely after the Tejano Conjunto Festival, with the goal of starting a small event, and building it, year by year. The event easily met the staff's goal of drawing 250 participants over the three days.

The Chicano Music Festival was designed to honor Chicano music of all styles and from all regions. It is grounded in an aesthetic that “defies Euro-Centrism in favor of the Americas.” El Centro Su Teatro Executive Artistic Director Tony Garcia writes:

In this age of Hispanicization and mainstreaming for marketing purposes, the question of cultural identity gets lost. Our cultural identity tells us where we came from and also where we are going. Where we are now is only a temporary state. This trinity is presented to us by our Hopi/Pueblo ancestors, it is a way of reminding us that we are defined by our past, which helps us transition from the present to the future.⁵⁰

The festival attempted to showcase conjunto music, manito (based in the folk traditions of Northern New Mexico), ranchera, cumbia, Latin American strains and Chicano Rock. *Johnny Rodriguez y los Diamantes* and *Next in Line* (next in line to carry on a musical tradition) played songs based on the Northern New Mexican style. *Lumbre*, the house band at the Mecca, a small club at Eighth Ave. and Federal Blvd. in Denver’s West Side, brought Chicano *cantina* music to a new audience. Garcia writes:

Many of the bands, you can hear regularly in neighborhood cantinas. They play amid the darkness and smoke, the pool games and the television blare. This is then added to the shouted dialogue of patrons who feel the triviality of their world should overshadow the work of these grassroots cultural messiahs. The Chicano Music Festival begs these artists to come into the light and accept our gratitude and praise for keeping our culture and history alive. This is not just wedding dance music, it is the music we danced to as we circled in pairs around the campfires. It is the music your children will need to teach their children, and if they can’t, its your fault. And you thought you were just coming out to have a good time. We invited audiences to listen, dance and enjoy. It’s okay, you can talk, a little.⁵¹

The idea for the Chicano Music Festival came out of an appreciation for what the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center has accomplished through the Tejano Music Festival. El Centro Su Teatro is attempting to structure a similar community roots event. However, it

⁵⁰Festival Program, *Chicano Music Festival*, Su Teatro. Denver: August, 2001.

⁵¹Ibid.

is more challenging to cultivate a roots festival in Denver, than in San Antonio, a Chicano stronghold that enjoys a thriving music culture and a solid community base. The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center and local musicians have succeeded in igniting a successful, intergenerational commitment to preserving the tradition and evolving the craft of conjunto music. At least initially, the Denver Chicano Music Festival is an attempt to expose audiences to roots-based music and to raise consciousness about the need to evolve and preserve musical traditions. El Centro Su Teatro must generate local and regional interest in Chicano music. The first challenge for the Chicano Music Festival, is to develop an audience out of Denver's community base: those Denver residents/musicians who have migrated from the San Luis Valley, and from Northern New Mexico keep folk traditions and Chicano music stylings intact. Hip audiences know where to find the Chicano bands in Denver. A little piece of San Luis, Chama, Antonito, Taos, Maxwell, or Albuquerque can usually be found at any VFW or American Legion Hall in North or West Denver, a microculture in the midst of Denver's burgeoning urban sprawl. Lechuga's off of 38th and Tejon, Munecas at Washington and I-70, and Splash! in Lakewood, also attempt to fill Denver's need for Chicano music.

Since 2000, ECST has continued to build its music festival. The event is curated; that is, it is not just about throwing a party. It showcases different facets of roots music beginning with traditional music on Friday night, featuring the folk standards that provide the foundation of any Southwestern musician's musical education and ending Sunday with mariachis. The festival is structured to provide an intergenerational continuum, showing how a thread of continuity weaves through the music of the *antepasados* to the

music that now would be considered typically Chicano. The festival has the potential to educate and to entertain.

The event now features a live and silent auction that takes place all four nights of the festival. The auction—a typical fundraiser featuring goods and services—is also an art auction exposing local audiences to art by Chicano visual artists from all over. The auction adds an additional dimension to the festival. It provides additional earned income to El Centro Su Teatro and an additional way to engage festival-goers who come to support individual bands, rather than the organization. The art auction is of particular interest. It began as just another piece of the regular auction—an opportunity to expose audiences to the work of local artists and to support their work through a 60-40 split of proceeds (participating artists set the minimum bid on their work). The event is executed both through the device of the silent auction and the live auction. Small items are left to the silent auction—if the auction committee is successful at acquiring items, and attendance at the event is high, the silent auction can raise \$10,000 or more, just by the sheer volume of participation (the annual Inner City Parish Auction typically raises \$40,000 or more, but some of this total comes from well-to-do patrons who bid on scholarship support for La Academia students [the Parish's alternative high school]).

The live auction is as much entertainment as it is a fundraiser—and if it is done well, audience members participate and bid enthusiastically. If the auction is not orchestrated well, it does not stimulate the anticipation or excitement that fuels it as reality entertainment: individuals fail to bid, the mood goes flat and even desultory, and the opportunity for El Centro Su Teatro to raise money dissipates. Su Teatro intentionally invests in local Chicano visual artists by providing a venue for them to showcase and sell

work and to network with customers. Su Teatro supports other Chicano arts organizations by purchasing artwork from organizations like Self Help Graphics in California, and Xicanindio Artes in Mesa. The activity represents a purposeful investment in the broader Chicano artistic community and it brings greater diversity and a broader variety of artwork for local constituents to choose from. By featuring artwork from well known Chicano artists, El Centro Su Teatro is able to generate more enthusiasm and interest in the event. Local artists support the event more consistently, because it is a great opportunity for them to see art that they have heard about, or to see what artists, like themselves, in other communities are doing. Most importantly, though, the event gives individuals who have never thought about collecting art, an opportunity to own a piece of art that is relevant to them. Seeing people buy art for the first time, is one of the most satisfying elements of the event. It is like watching someone buy their first car or house, and the excitement is just as palpable. Building this grassroots aspect of the festival, making visual art relevant and accessible to ordinary people is a unique and important piece of the Chicano Music Festival. Nevertheless, the event has hit a plateau. The festival attracts primarily Boomer Generation audiences. In order to grow, the festival needs to reach a cross generational audience.

La Carpa Aztlan presents "I Don't Speak English Only has clear, immediate resonance for audiences. Issues of cultural identity related to language have urgency for Latinos from many walks of life who take destroying the cultural base personally. The use of insider jokes in IDSEO and popular performance forms makes its commentary powerful and libratory. Audience members have a sense of ownership because the analysis comes from inside the community and the issues touch their everyday lives. The

relevance of the issues in IDSEO allow the play to catch fire, because it provides a commentary that can't be heard anywhere else, at least not in the same way, and not from within conventional institutions. Audience members feel threatened by anti-bilingualism, and rally behind art that in and of itself might be threatened as the example of Theater in the Park illustrates. It is sometimes hard to have frank conversations about race and culture within the confines of conventional institutions, but IDSEO does so easily, and with humor.

The relationship of audiences to the music festival lacks the same urgency. The sensibility of the music festival has been boomer-centric, reflecting the aesthetic sensibility of artistic director Tony Garcia. San Antonio succeeds in producing a successful festival, but conjunto music in South Texas is many generations old. South Texas youth are playing accordions when they are very young, and the music is handed down from teacher to student, through hands-on teaching. Many conjunto songs are only transmitted through this teaching; they are not available on sheet music. Young musicians who learn through this mentoring process are able to develop a foundation and then to develop their own musical identity. Because of the pervasiveness of the form, there are all types of prolific conjunto music makers of all ages, exhibiting all styles.

Denver youth are interested in Chicano music: Ozomatli, Los Lobos, Los Lonely Boys, and Carlos Santana (for example), but the festival is not creating an entry point that they identify with or appealing to their musical preferences. El Centro Su Teatro has not made a compelling argument to convince young audiences that they should be at the Chicano Music Festival. There is not a broad community base for the music festival in Denver, as there is in San Antonio. The Chicano Music Festival is partially about

educating audiences. El Centro Su Teatro has not invested in the outreach to bring new audiences to the festival. The organization has not created access points to make the relevance of the festival clear, and it is not articulating why *culturistas* should come. Consequently, there is little opportunity to generate word of mouth excitement and to cultivate a more diverse audience base. The structure of the event does not create a cross generational, universal thread of continuity that pulls audiences along from one band to the next, and for the most part, younger people are not involved in programming the festival. Last minute fundraising and advertising make it difficult to grow or transform the event.

In order for the Chicano Music Festival to grow, aesthetically, Su Teatro must grow a cross-generational understanding and interest in Chicano music. Organizationally, El Centro Su Teatro must more successfully plan, promote and fundraise for the event. The programming and the support for the event have never come together seamlessly, which makes it hard to determine what the true potential for cross-generational engagement along musical lines, truly is.

What creates connection, ownership, understanding and identification? Los Lobos is one band that has allowed audiences from many walks of life to appreciate the roots of Chicano music. Chris Gonzales Clarke a Chicano Groove musician from California who has played with Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalapeno band, and with his own band, Los Otros, explains the impact Los Lobos had on his early musical consciousness, and outlines some of the other influences that marked his evolution as a Chicano musician:

The big thing for me was going to a Clash concert and seeing Los Lobos open for them. It was the big experience that transformed what kind of music I wanted to play. Going to a punk rock concert in San Francisco, sitting there waiting to see the Clash, not really knowing who was opening for them. And these guys come

out and presented themselves as an obviously Chicano group, something I had never seen before in a popular music venue.

Of course, there were Chicano bands I had been exposed to growing up, mostly wedding bands. For example, Jorge Santana, Carlos Santana's brother, played at my cousin's wedding. And I remember me, a 7 year old kid, telling one of the band members at the break that they were really good. I had been exposed to music like that growing up but was a little too young to really develop a loyalty for the Latin rock movement. So, as a young adult going to see a punk rock band and seeing these guys take over the stage with the Virgen on the skin of the kick drum, playing accordions... They used to wear pendletons back then. It was really mind-boggling.⁵²

They played a mixture of Tex-Mex and Norteno and rockabilly. It was great. It was really cool to see their mixture. The idea of them playing in front of this punk crowd. It was something brand new. Who would have thought? You'd think you'd have to play like these folks from England. To see those guys playing a total Chicano sound in front of this crowd was amazing.⁵³

Gonzales Clarke notes that the evolution of his career as a musician began with playing a trumpet in school and learning to play guitar alongside an uncle, who learned to play basic chords from a Spanish language television program in Antioch, California. He became a more serious musician in college, where he was surrounded by musicians in the dorm, all influenced by the punk rock movement.. After seeing Los Lobos play, Gonzalez Clarke became politicized:

This was about the time that I became active politically in MEChA and other Chicano movement issues so, there were always community events that required music. I and a small group of friends, Charlie Montoya, Chris Flores, Lucky Gutierrez and other folks would play campus events at Casa Zapata, at MEChA conferences, at rallies or whatever. We spent our time learning Chicano folk music. Stuff like Los Peludos Enrique Ramirez's first recording. The first Los Lobos album, Just Another Band from East L.A. which was all acoustic. Chicano music like Jose Montoya's album Casindio.⁵⁴

⁵²Nic Paget Clarke, "An Interview with Chris Gonzalez Clarke," in *Motion Magazine*, 9 May 2000, <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/cgcint1.html>, <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/cgcint2.html>, (accessed March 18, 2009).

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

When someone like Montoya or Enrique Ramirez came to campus, we might open with a few songs. Once, Enrique brought us onstage to accompany him on *Aquí no Será*, because he probably knew that we had learned every song on the album. Ozomatli released a version of that song on their CD, which is cool, because it is fairly obscure. It's a tune that only Chicanos or activists would have ever heard.⁵⁵

In Gonzalez Clarke's story it is clear that he was initially influenced by the punk rock movement and the music of students around him. But when he saw Chicano culture transformed in a contemporary way by Los Lobos, it stimulated his interest not only in creating a contemporary Chicano sound, but in learning the traditional foundation for the sound. He credits Los Lobos for creating music "that is not only rich in the traditional ways. . . . It's new as anybody or newer."⁵⁶

They may write a song which uses a traditional Cuban form, like a rhumba but also they are using samplers and drum machines and the strange recording equipment that they have at their disposal. When they do this music they are not trying to be like anybody other than themselves. And that's one thing that comes across. It's not forced. It sounds very organic. It sounds very unique. It sounds like their own voice.⁵⁷

When Gonzalez Clarke began playing with Dr. Loco's Rockin Jalapeno band, he himself became adept at experimenting with different styles. The Rockin' Jalapeno band was like a "modern day Tex-Mex orquesta."

We were influenced by groups like Little Joe y La Familia, Esteban Jordan, Sunny Ozuna and the Sunliners. Many of our early tunes were rearrangements or reworkings of songs that they had recorded in the '70s like *Cumbia del Sol*, *Vuelo la Paloma*, etc. We did a lot of songs that were influenced by orchestra in terms of the use of horns, a bigger band with keys, bass, guitar, percussion and drums, throwing in different chord progression versus straight forward 1-4-5 chords. We

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

added a little California style Latin Rock like Santana. It was a Chicano group. A variety.⁵⁸

And:

It was a cool band because it was intergenerational and we could play songs that people who were my mom's age were familiar with and younger audiences would also dig. Songs from the 50s, 60s, and 70s. We would update them for younger audiences. There was a broad appeal across generations. We would play to a group of college kids or folks who were much older than that – three times that age. The music didn't belong to just one segment of the people, rather a broad range of people could identify with it.⁵⁹

In his current work, Gonzalez Clarke continues to combine new and old elements, incorporating instruments used in Cuban music and musical styles from Veracruz into the songs that his band, Los Otros are writing. “We aren't trying to copy the jarocho form but are trying to use some of the elements that are in that form. Such as playing a rhythmic pattern and putting it into a different context.”⁶⁰

Ideally, the Chicano Music Festival needs to find a way to combine traditional and contemporary elements to attract broader audiences. Young audiences will be attracted to powerful role models who reflect their own ethnicity and cultural experiences, but who draw vocabulary from many influences. Jim Cullen observes how new musical forms are not only derived from older sources, they overlap and mix and influence each other:

For all its influence, the Anglo-Celtic strain was not the only force shaping Country Music. African-American music played a role as well. If African-Americans learned to play the guitar (a Spanish import that drifted down from the plantation elite to poor whites and blacks), white Americans appropriated the banjo so thoroughly that this originally African instrument is often considered

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

quintessentially white American. And instrumentation was not the only site of such exchanges: themes, melodies, and various embellishments were passed back and forth so frequently that it is often hard to pinpoint origins. In the 1960's, Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones self-consciously emulated the gruff singing style of Black Chicago bluesman Howlin' Wolf, who himself reputedly got his name trying to imitate white country Jimmie Rodgers. Rodgers, for his part, drew on nineteenth century black traditions- and on the English culture that later produced a 20th century middle class white youth like Jagger, who wanted to sing like a poor black American.⁶¹

Juan Tejada, a conjunto musician, and the original organizer of the Tejano Conjunto Music Festival in San Antonio, notes that when the festival began, the conjunto sound was languishing. The actions of festival organizers helped to revitalize it. In many ways, the Tejano Conjunto Festival made conjunto music visible in a way it had not been before. The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center accomplished its goals by intentionally and strategically crafting a profile for the festival, through “programs and performances as well as by developing a range of events and projects,” including the Conjunto Music Hall of Fame, youth and adult classes and conjunto student recitals, an annual poster contest, (the winning entry becomes the official poster for that year's festival) and a program magazine that contains essays and stories on conjunto music and international conjunto artists.⁶² The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center also documents the festival with “audiotape, videotape, and photographs—for historical, public, and commercial purposes.” In some cases copying the Tejano Conjunto Festival outright (the festival has established its own Chicano Music Hall of Fame) El Centro Su Teatro has attempted to replicate some of the intentional community building of the Tejano Conjunto Festival. El Centro Su Teatro could also ask younger musicians whose families play in Chicano bands to explain how they connect with the music, and how they went about making the

⁶¹Cullen, *The Art of Democracy*, 189.

music their own. Younger musicians who have developed sensibilities that cross over from the traditional to the contemporary, also need to be involved in planning the event (the problem is finding these musicians in a local context). As El Centro Su Teatro builds its capacity, it might also incorporate a traditional music component into its youth theater program. As young artists evolve over the long haul, they will have the opportunity to develop their own musical voice, with a solid foundation that bridges generations. The key for El Centro Su Teatro is to engage developing artists young, and to keep them in the fold as they develop their artistic abilities.

Los Lobos enter the picture again with a children's album they created with Lalo Guerrero, called *Papa's Dream*. Lalo Guerrero died in 2005 at the age of 88, but in his career as the "original Chicano" musician, he won the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1997, the National Heritage Fellowship in 1991 and was named a "National Folk Treasure" by the Smithsonian Institute in 1980.⁶³ Lalo Guerrero possessed a tremendous body of work, that spanned sixty years, but the CD he released with Los Lobos, that tells the story of Papa Lalo's voyage in a hot air balloon to the village in Mexico where his mother was born, gained him an entirely new legion of fans, who had never heard of him or his contributions (and probably don't know him by any other name than Papa Lalo). Finding ways to mix innovative forms in ways that very young audiences can appreciate, provides an opportunity to imprint them with traditional forms, early.

El Centro Su Teatro is just a small arts organization, and there is a vast musical landscape in Denver, that lacks context for and understanding of, Chicano music. The

⁶³Daniel Buckley, "Remembering the Father of Chicano Music: Lalo Guerrero, 88 Dies," *The Tucson Citizen*, 18 March 2005, http://www.tucsoncitizen.com/intucson/living/031805e1_guerrero_wbox, (accessed April 8, 2009).

Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center was already over twice the size of El Centro Su Teatro when Juan Tejada launched the Tejano Conjunto Festival on Sunday, May 24, 1982. El Centro Su Teatro is capable of building a base, but it will take time to grow a constituency to rival San Antonio's musical base. There are however, many things the organization can do better. Planning for the festival begins in May, but it needs to begin in January to guarantee a good event. An earlier start to festival planning and organizing will allow staff to more successfully fundraise, think out curatorial priorities, build anticipation and market successfully. The festival needs to make intergenerational opportunities a priority by involving younger people in many layers of the festival, including programming decisions. Younger audiences can also be incorporated into the festival through workshops with master musicians. As El Centro Su Teatro builds its capacity, it might be possible to offer music classes on a regular basis, which will allow constituents of all ages to become more intimately acquainted with all aspects of Chicano music. Classes provide an important entry point for audiences who feel intimidated or apathetic because they don't understand Chicano music and its influences. Ownership in the festival can be nurtured by reinstating a Battle of the Bands contest that used to happen on Saturday night of the festival but has since been eliminated. In the Battle of the Bands scenario, local bands competing against each other for awards that were announced on Sunday during KUVO's Cancion Mexicana program. Winning bands received free studio time at KUVO and El Centro organized an awards party for all of the bands, following the festival. Because some of the awards were based on audience votes, the bands packed the audience with their fans, whose enthusiasm spread out to other festival-goers.

For El Centro Su Teatro audience's ownership of the play, IDSEO is immediate. The themes of the play and the choice of language and performance styles resonates for audiences who seldom see their stories or their open resistance to cultural fragmentation, portrayed so graphically. In the case of the Chicano Music Festival, the threat of cultural fragmentation is not as apparent on the surface. It is difficult for audiences who have not been exposed repeatedly to more traditional forms to embrace them as their own. In order to encourage intergenerational audiences, younger audiences have to see the continuity between older musical forms and the styles that resonate for them. It is up to El Centro Su Teatro to articulate the bridge that will allow intergenerational audiences to enjoy the festival. El Centro must also encourage performances and demonstrations by musicians who move easily between different musical styles and combine them in innovative ways. When audiences see traditional instruments or regional styles incorporated in contemporary sounding music, it might interest them in exploring the traditional music that provided the basis for that sound. Although audiences don't necessarily see the Chicano Music Festival as an important component of cultural survival in the same way that they see IDSEO, preserving, and perpetuating Chicano music is an important part of revitalizing Chicano culture and spurring an important dialogue between generations. By intentionally working to build the community and dialogue that helps Chicano music evolve, and that makes it accessible to many individuals from many different walks of life, builds the dimension and creativity of public life, and allows individuals to seize new forms of identity. With regard to Chicano Groove bands such as Ozomatli, Grito Serpentino, Quetzal and Aztlan Underground Gonzalez Clarke comments:

I don't think these bands think of themselves as related to then "Latin Explosion" but as a result of the Latin Explosion many of them are going to get looked at sooner than if it hadn't happened. I think it benefited Ozomatli.

Chicanos are the overwhelming majority of the U.S. Latino population. You have to think that there's going to be a successful group from the West Coast which becomes a successful cross-over into the mainstream. At least I do. I think it is just a matter of time.⁶⁴

It has to do with the shift of demographics that everybody has been talking about, especially in California. The interesting thing about it is a lot of people have thought about the Latino population as being mainly an immigrant population, which over 18, it is, or at least about 50-50. But the group of people under 18 who are going to be the folks buying many of the records in the next 10-20 years are almost 90 percent U.S. born. I think less and less they will be listening to music from south of the border. They are going to be looking for home grown cultural images that reflect where they are coming from. That's going to happen musically, and eventually in tv and movies as well.

But if the Latin Explosion is a big deal now because three or four artists are making it big I think it's the tip of the iceberg of what kinds of shifts we may see culturally in the next twenty years.⁶⁵

The Chicano experience replicates itself over and over again as the children of Mexican immigrants plant permanent roots in the United States, with that permanence comes a hybrid identity and a bicultural and bilingual experience. As Chicanos become a larger percentage of the population, they have the potential to shift culture in significant ways, whether it is through an "old school" articulation of chicanismo or not. As young people develop, it is important for them to express their cultural identity in their own way. However, it is important for their mentors to teach them the myriad cultural forms, history, aesthetics and language that has informed previous generations. With the proper tools, new generations can create, innovate, agitate and above all, question.

Conclusion

⁶⁴Paget-Clarke, "An Interview with Chris Gonzalez Clarke."

⁶⁵Ibid.

The studies that link education with arts participation parallel narrowly constructed political participation studies, that examine voting behavior, participation in election activities and citizen apathy. In both cases, participation is narrowly constructed and fails to consider the broad ways in which individuals participate or the barriers that make narrowly constructed political, or arts, participation unsatisfying. Mainstream arts institutions understand that their future sustainability depends on diversifying audiences. But there is a fundamental problem in the way most mainstream organizations approach their work, which is grounded in systems of exclusion. Dudley Cocke observes:

If the not-for-profit arts value being relevant to society at large, then it follows that this audience must reflect society. Generally, the not-for-profit arts is presently comfortable with an elite audience. As I have previously mentioned, with most (80 percent) of its audience drawn from the top 15 percent of the income scale, the assembled spectators for the typical not-for-profit professional theater production don't look like any community in the U.S., except, perhaps, a gated one. From such a narrow social base, great democratic art will never rise. (Even in Shakespeare's era, 150 years before the birth of democracy, everyone from the queen to the joiner was in the house — and each could see something of their story on the stage.) The quality of our art is the most compelling reason for us to care about audience access and each venue's track record of inclusion.⁶⁶

Donna Walker Kuhne observes that the elite arts and commercial cultural enterprises alike have systematically excluded people of color:

With regard to ethnicity, the goal of audience development is to bridge the gap created by the systematic exclusion of people of color from art and culture. The history of exclusionary practices in the entertainment industry, coupled with the ongoing racist portrayal of communities of color in television programming and new media broadcasts, makes it clear that, in addition to our desire to open the doors of our community to diverse communities, it is of critical importance that audience development marketers also understand all the aspects of our nation's history of engagement with arts and culture.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Dudley Cocke. "The Art of Democracy," *TDR: The Drama Review* 48:3 (Fall 2005): 165-173

⁶⁷Walker-Kuhne, *Invitation to the Party*. 16.

A shift in approaches is needed, in which potential audiences are called upon to participate in reframing of the stories that are presented on the stage and to provide feedback to arts organizations attempting to develop a more inclusive perspective.

An elitist position on political participation assumes that decisions should be left to leaders. An elitist interpretation of art assumes that participation in art—popular or high art—is an extension of status and privilege. When the arts are reframed from the perspective of marginalized communities, systems of domination, power and privilege are clearly articulated. However, many large arts institutions and arts participation advocates fail to openly articulate the power relationships that have traditionally excluded audiences of color. For example, the RAND study⁶⁸ emphasizes practical marketing strategies designed to influence the decision making of potential patrons.

. . . information is critical to the design and implementation of effective engagement strategies. This information must flow in two directions: from potential and current participants to arts organizations and from arts organizations to potential and current participants. Arts organizations, for example need various types of information about target populations if they are to design and implement effective engagement strategies. Similarly, potential and current participants need information about arts organizations and their offerings if they are to make informed choices.⁶⁹

While the RAND study offers practical tools and observations about the labor intensive work of building participation it does not address the key barriers to participation that Walker Kuhne identifies in her guide to audience development. As Korza, Schaffer-Bacon and Assaff observe: “Neither the promise of excellent art nor safe space for dialogue necessarily ensures participation when issues are deeply rooted in historical

⁶⁸Kevin F. McCarthy, Kimberly Jinnett, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001).

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 34.

injustices, fundamentally held values, or preconceptions or misconceptions of “the other.”⁷⁰

A more inclusive interpretation of political participation recognizes that, as Calhoun says, people will fight for the things that matter to them; for example, family, traditions and ways of life. People act on the world around them, and hold the power themselves to change their daily lives. Participation hinges on ownership. Evans and Boyte quote Casey Hayden, “a young white southerner who spent years working in the civil rights movement”:

I think we’ve learned a few things about building and sustaining a radical movement: People need institutions that belong to them that they can experiment and shape. In that process it’s possible to develop new forms for activity which can provide new models for how people can work together so participants can think radically about how society could operate. People stay involved and working when they can see the actual results of their thought and work in the organization.⁷¹

A broad conception of arts participation recognizes all people need art in their daily lives that reflects their own experiences and the issues that are meaningful to them. Art, then, can be either a direct extension of daily life, a competing or complimentary view that is made accessible through an entry point. The creation of a dynamic relationship is not top down, it is a two way conversation, with all parties contributing. For example, *Animating Democracy*⁷² provides a detailed and nuanced study of dialogue

⁷⁰Pam Korza, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, and Andrea Assaf, *Civic Dialogue Arts and Culture: Findings from Animating Democracy* (Washington, D. C.: Americans for the Arts, 2005), 109.

⁷¹Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 190.

⁷²*Animating Democracy* is a program of Americans for the Arts “that fosters civic engagement through art and culture. The project conducted an in-depth study of civic dialogue practices with a diverse group of arts organizations from 2000-2004. The results from the project appear in *Civic Dialogue for Art and Culture*, ed. Korza, Bacon and Assaff.

practices between arts organizations and communities designed to foster access, engagement and inclusiveness. The study shows that fostering dialogue requires relationships of trust, openness and cultural competence; but even when optimum conditions are met, there are barriers to the process. “. . . racial identity, class status, and gender can affect intergroup dialogue. Issues of confidentiality, a sense of safety in speaking in a group and possibly even personal safety once outside of the dialogue setting make some people apprehensive about participating.”⁷³ The myriad factors that affect process require sensitive attention, commitment to communicating well and enforcing accountability when necessary; these and many other factors affect process. For example, the authors observe the importance of “recognizing issues of power within and between cultures, both historical and contemporary”:

Jack Tchen commented that, “part of the dialogic process is being able to share authority.” Power imbalances exist not only between dominant and minority cultures, but also within a culture. As the Center for Cultural Exchange (CCE) learned in its *African in Maine* project, historical roots of authority (male and elder dominated) within certain African cultures proved extremely difficult to overcome for the purposes of dialogue. The dynamics between individuals within each African community-based on kin, personality, or political conflicts required CCE to shift its expectation that an environment of “inclusive” dialogue could be achieved.⁷⁴

Animating Democracy’s research illustrates that fostering dialogue and building participation is difficult work no matter what the context, but it cannot be conducted successfully without delving deeply into the needs and desires of communities. Having meaningful conversations in communities, the first step to civic engagement, is complicated, and presents a challenge for grassroots and elite institutions alike.

⁷³Ibid., 106.

⁷⁴Ibid., 107.

With regard to political participation, Lansberger and Gierisch observe: “we doubt that any government really wants thoroughly independent participation by powerful interest groups and class based organizations, rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding.”⁷⁵ Although some large arts institutions will successfully cultivate new audiences, doing so will require not only a reframing of perspectives, but a change in leadership and decision making within organizations. It is not enough to acknowledge and embrace cultural shifts, the locus of power within organizations must also shift. Not only must board and staff leadership within organizations shift: mainstream arts organizations won’t be able to build diverse audiences without truly placing decision making power and control in the hands of audiences. The process can’t be top down: it means changing conceptions about what art is and even how arts organizations should look and feel.

What is true for large arts institutions is also true for small grassroots organizations. In IDSEO Su Teatro mirrors issue that undeniably resonate back to the community, and it does so publicly and assertively. Issues in IDSEO are named forcefully and they have a high impact. However, in the Chicano Music Festival the dialogue that creates resonance is not happening. Ostensibly, the Chicano Music Festival is grounded in traditions, but curators are not articulating meaning in a way that touches audiences, and organizers are not involving the community extensively in a process to create a meaningful festival. Like most organizations, El Centro Su Teatro experiences different levels of participation in different projects, but like all organizations, El Centro

⁷⁵Seligson and Booth, *Political Participation in Latin America*, 81.

Su Teatro must prioritize building deep and meaningful relationships with patrons, that begins with a desire to meet their needs.

CHAPTER 6: THE CORRIDO AND THE BARRIO

*Aquí vivimos en este barrio de West Denver
los vecinos son familia
Trabajamos, lloramos y cantamos
Porque somos todo lo que tenemos*

*esta ciudad está llena de racismo y
nosotros tenemos que unirnos
protegernos uno al otro
trayendo el alma a nuestras vidas.*

Here we live in this West Denver neighborhood
our neighbors are like family
We work, we cry, we sing,
because we are everything to each other

This city is full of racism and
we have to come together
protecting one another
bringing soul into our lives

from *El Corrido del Barrio* by Anthony J.
Garcia. (T. Mote translation.)¹

Introduction

Specific places provide sources of well-being, a sense of belonging and material benefit to communities. In the Americas, Native peoples and other people of color struggle against displacement in a modern context, although the history of their struggle is as old as the Conquest itself. For example, in many colonial contexts, as sustainable resources for farmers dwindle, they are forced to work at least part of the year on

¹Tony Garcia, *El Corrido del Barrio*, unpublished play, revised November 1997.

plantations or in factories for income that is not stable or dependable. Native Americans were displaced and forcibly moved to reservations as the result of Westward Expansion and continue to struggle for equality under the U.S. system. In 1848, The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created the border between the U.S. and Mexico, stimulating a border narrative of displacement and injustice that has not yet reached its peak. In urban settings, poor communities are routinely displaced when factories, garbage dumps and prisons are relocated, or when communities are gentrified.

When communities are displaced, the sources of material well-being for members is disrupted and social relationships are fragmented as well. The fragmentation caused by displacement impacts culture and community. The stories of affected populations, along with their ongoing struggle against injustice, are sometimes made invisible within the dominant culture in the process. As the development and expansion of the dominant culture continues to displace communities, a story evolves, from the point of view of the powerful, which rationalizes and justifies action. Black observes:

Most systems of pronounced inequality, especially those in which inequality is reinforced by radical or ethnic difference are traceable to armed conquest. The violent roots of such exploitative systems are progressively obscured from subsequent generations of the conquered. The system acquires a measure of legitimacy through the implantation of the myth that differential reward and punishment and limitations of access to wealth rest somehow on divine will or merit. Challenges to this myth are labeled subversive.²

Thus, an understanding of systems of domination, power and privilege are left out of grade school textbooks, and Westward Expansion is explained as a movement that was motivated by Manifest Destiny, a concept that hearty pioneers simply seized upon and that requires no further explanation. In instances where a violent history is revealed,

²Jan Knippers Black, *Development in Theory and Practice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 180.

white soldiers at the Sand Creek Massacre are celebrated as heroes, and the women and children who die, as dangerous enemies. The contributions of slaves to the everyday life of colonial America recede from view, as do those of women or Asian immigrants. Black notes that the subjugated too create myths. According to Black, “Any movement that embraces empowerment as a means or an end must begin by discrediting the prevailing myth and replacing it with one which may or may not be based in historical fact that serves to enhance individual or collective self-esteem.”³ Communities create stories that capture the imaginations of members. Paredes observes that in the border ballads of both Scots and Mexicans, it is those on the losing side who produce the ballad.

Unlike the Spaniards, but like the Scots, the Russians, and the Greeks, the Border ballad people ended on the losing side of their conflict. Unlike the Russians and the Greeks but again like the Scots, the Border people were not engulfed by an alien invasion. They were plagued over a long period of years by a comparatively small number of invaders, who settled down among them, often learned their language, and picked up many of their habits, and who could have been defeated but for the protection of a powerful state and a strong army. Again, like the Scots, the Border people were faced by a numerous people with a more advanced technology. The Texan’s six-shooter had its counterpart in the Englishman’s longbow. If the Scot was able to mount a strong attack and score some local victories, he always lost in the end to a superior army from the South. The same situation faced the Mexican Border Raiders. It was the Scot, usually on the losing side, who produced the most stirring border ballads. On the Rio Grande it was only the losers in the conflict, the border Mexicans, who produced ballads.⁴

One of the most famous border ballads is the Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, a real man who found himself in an impossible situation with the law due to a misunderstanding over a horse. Out of Cortez’s predicament the story of a great hero emerged:

They let loose the bloodhound
dogs;
They followed him from afar.

³Ibid.

⁴Americo Paredes, *With his Pistol in his Hand*, 244.

But trying to catch Cortez
Was like following a star.

And:

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
With his pistol in his hand
“Ah, so many mounted Rangers
Just to take one Mexican!”⁵

In spite of the challenges that face displaced communities, members of communities continue to resist fragmentation. Members of communities take action by organizing, lobbying, resisting surreptitiously, and sometimes openly rebelling. The actions of communities and their results, which might be progressive or regressive, are concrete.

A neighborhood may not survive, but culture and community are replicated and regenerated in new and unlikely places, through the memories of former residents, and intentional efforts to pass down history, stories, legends and balladry. Leslie Marmon Silko observes:

The Yaquis may have had to leave behind their Sonoran mountain strongholds, but they did not leave behind their consciousness of their identity as Yaquis, as a people, as a community. This is where their power as a culture lies: with this shared consciousness of being part of a living community that continues on and on, beyond the death of one or even of many, that continues on the riverbanks of the Santa Cruz after the mountains have been left behind.⁶

The need for culture as a source of identity, language, and historical continuity continues unabated, as displaced people continue to be marginalized by the dominant culture.

Culture and community provide sustenance and resources for opposition when the needs of entire groups are not met, and when adequate space for diverse approaches and points

⁵Ibid., 3.

⁶Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 90.

of view are not provided. Thus, members of marginalized communities continue to perpetuate and to produce rituals, traditions, celebrations and forms of cultural expression in new contexts and in surprising ways.

This chapter is about communities and their stories. Marginalized communities face hard circumstances and continue to be compromised in both local and global settings. Stories alone cannot expand democratic space adequately to transform entire systems of accumulation and wealth and communities will continue to be jeopardized in the interim. However, both communities and their stories are frequently made invisible in the public sphere. Disseminating the stories of marginalized communities gives both insiders and outsiders a broader and more nuanced understanding of the issues that face them. Stories, then, are expressions of resistance, but also provide opportunities for dialogue. Stories have lives that are exceedingly more fluid than the communities that they represent. The life of a neighborhood sometimes abruptly comes to a halt, in other cases it changes over time as new influences are introduced. In still other cases, residents show creative ways to resist marginalization and to stimulate dialogue at the same time. The life of a community and the life of a story intersect, even though the life of a story sometimes extends far beyond the life of a neighborhood. Both the actions of communities and the stories about them provide insights into the role of resistance and dialogue in expanding the public sphere. Stories and celebrations sustain communities, and when they are made accessible to outsiders, they have the potential to raise awareness, educate, empower and to foster accountability. By the same token, teaching about the actions of community members and the histories of their struggle, when disseminated, provide the same opportunities. Displaced communities are constantly

under pressure to assimilate, and to give up traditions and celebrations, but people continue to perpetuate culture and new forms of community.

Chapter Five examines the concept of ownership and community involvement as an essential component in developing diverse audiences. Large arts institutions want to attract new audiences, but success hinges on placing some decision-making and power in the hands of community members. Even grassroots organizations, as the chapter shows, cannot be successful without the constant input and participation from an active base. It is unlikely that major arts institutions can engage in top-down reform and be successful. However, when change is initiated from below, and affected communities control the terms and direction of the dialogue, opportunities for reframing and expansion occur.

This chapter uses three examples of Denver communities: Auraria and the remaining west side, encompassing the La Alma and Lincoln Park neighborhood; Elyria-Swansea, two adjacent neighborhoods northeast of downtown, and the neighborhoods surrounding Federal Blvd, in Denver's north side, including but not limited to Sunnyside, Chafee Park and Highlands. Each example reveals either the stories or concrete experiences of the communities. Through the examples, it becomes clear that both dialogue and resistance are useful tools, whether they manifest in cultural forms or activism and organizing. Although the issues that affect communities are ongoing, bringing an awareness of marginalization to the public sphere has value. A willingness to articulate the systems of domination that create unequal relationships is a first step to creating a more equitable and inclusive civil society.

The St. Cajetan's Reunification Project—Auraria

“A long time ago, in a far away place called the Westside, there lived a brown skinned race of people, whose lives had been closely tied to the earth, as had been the history of their ancestors,” writes Anthony J. Garcia in the play, *El Corrido del Barrio*, and in the introduction to The St. Cajetan’s Reunification Project, an event that takes place every December at the Auraria Campus.⁷

In 1991, El Centro Su Teatro developed The St. Cajetan’s Reunification Project as an “exercise in community-building.” The project involves Auraria students and professors, Su Teatro company members, and current “west side” residents in the production of an event which includes a procession, performances by Grupo Tlaloc (an Aztec dance company), and theater at St. Cajetan’s Church. In 1997, the company performed *El Corrido del Barrio*, a departure from the usual production of *The Miracle at Tepeyac*, which parallels the story of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, with a contemporary story about community involvement and personal fulfillment.

The St. Cajetan’s Reunification Project is a symbolic gesture, commemorating the neighborhood that was sacrificed in order to build the campus, while addressing the sacrifices of countless Mexican generations, beginning even before the Conquest. The Reunification Project is about the concept of home, roots and rootedness.

Practically speaking, the event is designed to inspire and nourish area Chicanos, and especially to put displaced Aurarians in touch with support and resources that are available to them on the Auraria campus. Funding requests for the St. Cajetan’s Reunification project read:

⁷Anthony J. Garcia, *El Corrido del Barrio*, 1.

Since the depopulation of the St. Cajetan's neighborhood in the 1960's and the construction of the Auraria Higher Education Center, the near Westside Community has continued to lose territory, homes and residents, the latest loss being the closure and demolition of the North Lincoln projects. The westside is the neighborhood closest to the heart of the city. Denver began on the banks of the Cherry Creek in what was known as Auraria. The Westside continues to suffer from poverty, lack of jobs, educational opportunities, resources, and most profoundly, identity. Thousands of office workers stream through the neighborhood everyday, none stopping to imagine lives who passed through these houses.

And:

All three institutions at the Auraria Higher Education Complex (University of Colorado at Denver, Metropolitan State College, Denver, Community College, Denver) have agreed to honor a commitment to offer scholarships to former residents of the Auraria neighborhood. In addition, the community believes that this project would also help assure that this commitment is indeed fulfilled. It is the plan of these institutions to open themselves up for full community participation. It is the plan of the community that this also takes place.⁸

St. Cajetan's Church is desanctified. It sits in Ninth St. Park, in the middle of the tri-institutional Auraria Campus for Higher Learning (housing Metro State College, University of Colorado-Denver and the Community College of Denver). In 1972, the Auraria neighborhood was demolished, in order for the Auraria Higher Education Center to be built. To an outsider, it is not obvious that homes were sacrificed in order to build parking lots and classroom buildings. However, once one recognizes the outline of a former neighborhood, with St. Cajetan's Church at the center, St. Elizabeth's Church, and a row of Victorian homes remaining, the existing west Denver neighborhood, La Alma and Lincoln Park, become more apparent: the extremities of the community left intact. South of Colfax are Santa Fe Drive, Kalamath, Lipan and Mariposa streets, and along their sidewalks are homes, businesses, parks and churches, the Ganas Community Center,

⁸Unpublished applications for funding, The St. Cajetan's Reunification Project, El Centro Su Teatro archives, October 11, 1999.

the Inner City Parish and NEWSED (New Westside development—Santa Fe Redevelopment Authority).

El Centro Su Teatro Executive Artistic Director Tony Garcia and former Director and company member Debra Gallegos, have roots in the Ninth St. neighborhood surrounding St. Cajetan's Church, as did many of their peers, who still reside in North and West Denver. In 1977, the company began to collectively create *El Corrido del Auraria*, and in 1982, *El Corrido del Barrio* opened at The Slightly Off Center Theater in Denver. The play ran for six weeks in April 1982, and was performed again in September 1982 at the Denver Center for Performing Arts. El Centro Su Teatro revived the play in 1990, and again in 1997, for the St. Cajetan's Reunification Project.

In the "Director's Notes" to the 1990 production, Garcia writes,

The 'West side' called Auraria by the city consisted of Victorian houses owned by the families living in them. The houses are still standing, but the tenants are gone, replaced by offices for the Auraria Higher Education Center. They stand as a monument to the concept of property value over human values. There are ghosts that haunt Ninth St. Park which runs through the center of "Auraria." They are the echoes of the Torres, DeLeon, Rodriguez and Gonzalez families who gave birth, celebrated weddings, and shared sorrows as all communities do.⁹

In 1926, St. Cajetan's Catholic Church was erected at Ninth and Lawrence streets. According to Magdalena Gallegos, whose family had lived in the neighborhood for four generations, the lives of residents revolved around their church.¹⁰ Garcia notes, St Cajetan's was "the first church for the Spanish speaking in the city. Aside from

⁹Anthony J. Garcia, Director's Notes, 1990 Production, *El Corrido del Barrio*,. El Centro Su Teatro archives.

¹⁰Magdalena Gallegos, Interview, July 22, 1998.

weddings, baptisms and funerals, the Church operated an elementary school, a credit union, and numerous fraternal and religious organizations.”¹¹

The West side neighborhood was a tightly bonded community where children were encouraged to explore their talents. Before Garcia or Gallegos, Auraria was home to Maria Gonzalez- Zimmerman, whose family left Mexico during the Mexican Revolution, moved to Denver and opened the Casa Mayan restaurant. Zimmerman attended the Lamont School of Music as a teenager, and performed as an opera singer in New York City. According to Magdalena Gallegos, the sisters at St. Cajetan’s Church played rumbas and sambas on the pipe organ, for interested young students. “They grew their own (talent),” says Gallegos.¹²

The neighborhood experienced tumult as well, including attempts to anglicize the Catholic Church in the 1950s. “Overnight, Father Juan Ordonez, became Father John, Sra. Maria, became Sra. Mary,” says Gallegos. The closing of inner city community schools, including Annunciation, St. Joseph’s and Cathedral High School, encouraged community fragmentation and decreased the quality of education available to Mexican-Americans, Gallegos believes. “We begged them, please don’t close our schools.”¹³

In the late 1960s, the City of Denver began examining plans to relocate residents in order to build a campus near the Tivoli Brewery. Residents learned of the relocation through leaflets distributed by the city, describing the proposal. According to Gallegos, “The residents did not want to move and one hundred and fifty-five families filed

¹¹Anthony J. Garcia, Director’s Notes, 1998 Production, *The Miracle at Tepeyac*.

¹²Gallegos, interview.

¹³Ibid.

lawsuits. Governor John Love then created the Auraria Higher Education Board to act as both landlord and moderator. In 1969 the city called a special bond election to secure funds for the project.”¹⁴

According to Gallegos, Father Pete Garcia, Assistant Pastor of St. Cajetan’s Church, helped to organize the Auraria Residents Organization (ARO Inc.) to oppose the bond election. In spite of these efforts, the efforts of residents failed, possibly due to a letter from Archbishop James Casey, urging Catholics to vote for the bond issue.¹⁵

For residents of the Ninth St. neighborhood, life was forever changed. The play *El Corrido del Barrio* examines the lives of residents and the strength of their community. When the neighborhood was targeted for demolition, the local newspapers described the neighborhood as “dilapidated” and the residents as uneducated and poor. According to Gallegos, it “really hurt” because the city did not see residents as they saw themselves, and did not value the importance of the community as residents viewed it.¹⁶

The memories of residents, a trip in a Model-T from Hotchkiss to Denver; Chicano teenagers “watching” the cars of white patrons dining at the Casa Mayan restaurant, in exchange for being paid a quarter; and the neighborhood hangout—Sammy K’s Bar—are incorporated into the play. But the play primarily chronicles the sacrifices of residents who not only gave up their neighborhood, but also relinquished their sons to racist cops and the Viet Nam War. However, crisis alone does not define the experiences of residents; it is one component of a portrait of the neighborhood that captures the

¹⁴Magdalena Gallegos, *Auraria Stories* (Denver: Metropolitan State College, 1991), 2.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Gallegos, interview.

sweetness of everyday life: women cooking and doing laundry together, kids singing and playing games, and young lovers courting. The play alludes to historical continuity—the cycle of death and renewal—accentuated by Conquest and migration.

*En un barrio sembraremos una vida,
Como un rayo de esperanza, iluminando
una vida, unos sueños comenzó.
Miraremos nuestros hijos floreciendo
la cosecha de amor nuestro.*

*En el alma tuvimos luces
en el corazón, las cruces
como fuego nos quemaron
Vida dura, vida triste vivimos
Dios nos dio.*

*Y ahora el círculo va completo. The cycle is completed.
La muerte la vida y muerte. Like the sun, the earth and all who pass time through
this place, we are part of that cycle. Let us join to celebrate that time.¹⁷*

El Corrido and Community

Historically, Mexican Americans in the Southwest developed an oppositional culture in order to survive. After 1848, Anglos in the Southwest employed every means—from trickery to lynching—to displace and/or subjugate their Mexican predecessors. The outward response of *norteños* was to flee to Mexico, openly rebel, or to surreptitiously anchor Mexican communities facing Anglo domination by maintaining the Spanish language, and *mestizo* culture, values and traditions. The element of resistance—to being displaced, or absorbed by Anglo culture—is an important historical aspect of Mexican American communities.

In *With his Pistol in his Hand*, Americo Paredes notes:

After 1848 the Nueces-Rio Grande area—the northern half of the former province of Nuevo Santander—became part of the United States. A pre-Civil War type of

¹⁷Anthony J. Garcia, *El Corrido del Barrio*, 57.

carpet bagger moved into the territory to make his fortune, using the Texas legend as his excuse for preying on the newly created Americans of Mexican descent. The Mexican's cattle were killed or stolen. The Mexican was forced to sell his land; and if he did not, his widow usually did after her husband was "executed" for alleged cattle rustling. Thus did the great Texas ranches and the American cattle industry begin.¹⁸

The unprincipled approach to expansion by Anglos in the Southwest is one facet of a larger historical framework—the Conquest, Manifest Destiny, big business—driven by the need to acquire and control resources and justified by racism. The early history of development in the U.S. formed the basis for a continuing pattern in which small locally owned enterprises consistently battle larger, corporate entities.

Different aims called for different methods in what is now known as the Lower Rio Grande Valley. There the fortunemakers organized political machines and acquired large blocks of land for later development projects. The foundations of the "magic valley" boom of the 1920s were being laid. Since labor and amenable votes were a part of the scheme, no concerted effort was made to drive the Mexican out of the country. He was merely dispossessed.¹⁹

Enter the *corrido*, a vehicle to unite communities, and to counter the domination of the Anglo. The *corrido* is a song that tells a story. It is used by popular singers, such as *Los Tigres del Norte*²⁰. It was used by *Tejanos* on the U.S.-Mexico border, to tell of the feats of heroes, and the transgressions of Anglo settlers. Great Chicano poets employ the structure of the *corrido*. School children learn how to write them. But the *corrido* is not just a song. It is an aesthetic form that hands down history, reinforces community, and expresses resistance by bolstering the psyche and resolve of a community battling for land and a way of life.

¹⁸Paredes, *With his Pistol in his Hand*, 134.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 134.

²⁰For discussion, see *Border Matters*, by David Saldivar . (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.

Corridos first became widely used along the South Texas/ Mexican border during the early conflict between Chicanos and Anglos. The *corridos* are usually about Mexican heroes who do valiant deeds against the Anglo oppressors. Pancho Villa's song, "*La Cucaracha*" is the most famous one. *Corridos* of John F. Kennedy and his death are still very popular in the Valley. Older Chicanos remember Lydia Mendoza, one of the great border *corrido* singers who was called *La Gloria de Tejas*. Her "*El tango negro*," sung during the Great Depression, made her a singer of the people. The ever present *corridos* narrated one hundred years of border history, bringing news of events as well as entertaining. These folk musicians and folk songs are our chief cultural mythmakers, and they made our hard lives seem bearable.²¹

The modern *corrido* evolved from the border ballads that first became popular along what is now the U.S.-Mexico border. Paredes notes that the ". . . balladry of the Rio Grande Border was not like the Castilian , a border balladry of military victory, but like the Scottish, one of resistance against outside encroachment."²² The *corrido* enjoyed its heyday from 1848-1930, but the modern *corrido* continues to enjoy popularity. The *corrido* can be a powerful, demonstrative, animated statement against domination.

According to Limon, the *corrido* is "an ideological instrument in the context of sharp social conflict."²³ "*Corrido*, the Mexicans call their narrative folk songs, especially those of epic themes, taking the name from *correr* which means 'to run' or 'to flow,' for the *corrido* tells a story simply, and swiftly, without embellishments," writes Americo Paredes.²⁴ The *corrido* is only meaningful when it is nourished by a community. Both a precursor to, and important element in *teatro*, it is a consensual expression of community views. The song is situated "in an intimate relationship to the audience, and by extension,

²¹Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 61.

²²Paredes, *With his Pistol in his Hand*, 244.

²³Limon, *Mexican Ballads*, 16.

²⁴Paredes, *With his Pistol in his Hand*, xi.

to society.”²⁵ The individual folk poet is a representative of the community, and the composer “must identify himself with the *pueblo* and take care that the opinions he expresses are acceptable to the *pueblo*.”²⁶

The *corrido*—and the *teatro* it inspires (in plays such as *El Corrido del Barrio*—arise from aesthetic foundations that fortify a community and amplify its needs. As a song sung to others, the *corrido* provides an occasion for sharing information, initiating dialogue, and bringing people together. The *corrido* “event” is a place where organizing, and potentially, social action, can be initiated. More importantly, the *corrido* is often a heroic story of mythic proportions. It celebrates the prowess, intelligence and ability of the hero as well as his cultural heritage and history. As Paredes observes, the *corrido* hero takes what is rightfully his, “with his pistol in his hand.”²⁷

But the *corrido* is not just the story of a legendary hero. It is about the everyday lives of people. It is both a form of storytelling and a news service. As such, it is still a useful and popular aesthetic form.

Specific conditions led to the rise and popularity of “the heroic *corrido* of the Lower Rio Grande Border.” Among these are the marginalization of Mexican-American in South Texas, a vigorous folk culture maintained by a closed community, and a strong history of orality. Limon notes, “a prolonged period of social domination does not of itself produce this balladry; this relationship must be mediated.” Balladry such as the

²⁵Limon, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems*, 15.

²⁶Limon, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems*, 16.

²⁷See discussion in *With his Pistol in his Hand*, especially “Border Outlaw Corridos,” 143-145.

heroic *corrido* is the product of “actual social resistance to domination, a social source of the ballad’s heroic thematics.”²⁸

The resistance in question might include the armed actions of individuals and groups, labor union activity, and organized reformist party activity. “All of these operated within a general ethnic nationalist temper and formed the wider context of the Lower Rio Grande Border.”²⁹ McKenna argues that the modern *corrido* diverges from the classic border ballad “technically, structurally, and functionally.”³⁰ Nevertheless, both the classic and modern *corridos* are a part of a genre of “cultural performance that acts dialectically within the larger social drama.”³¹

The link then, between the *corrido* and the social drama does not lie in orality per se, but in the narrativity itself, in the politically laden event upon which the narrative is based, and most importantly, in the social group from which it springs, whose constant crises revolve around the dysfunction or breach produced by the Anglo American Other.³²

McKenna compares Paredes’s focus on the border ballad and its history, and contemporary concerns:

Although Paredes’s ideas remain germane to the Mexican experience that followed (the Mexican War) he implicitly argues the existence of the Other, the foreign power, the enemy who threatens the continuity and survival of a people’s cultural and psychological integrity. In the time about which Paredes writes, the Other was the Anglo American and, in particular his/her institutional representative, the *rinche* (Texas Ranger); later on, the Other became the Anglo

²⁸Limon, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems*, 25.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰McKenna, *Migrant Song*, 29.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

American dominant authority, either the police or the amorphous they of the hegemony under which contemporary Mexicans felt themselves to be living.³³

Like the Lower Rio Grande Border ballad, the play, *El Corrido del Barrio* and the production values of the St. Cajetan's Reunification Project, reflect the battle of a community against a foe made more powerful by its institutionalized authority. The play chronicles a history of *vecinos* who fought politically to save their neighborhood, but were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the struggle continues. New generations take advantage of the chance for an education, question, and militate for change in a continuing cycle of death and renewal. The St. Cajetan's Reunification Project as an event, brings members of the former community back to the heart of the West side, to a church that explicitly promoted the Mexican-American community. By staging a procession the four nights of the show, and hosting potlucks every night after the event, students, professors, actors and community members are brought together to learn, bond and exchange stories.

In 1998, El Centro Su Teatro performed *The Miracle at Tepeyac* as part of the St. Cajetan's Reunification Project. The play recounts the 1531 sighting of the Virgen of Guadalupe by Juan Diego, and parallels it with the modern story of a priest who has trouble committing himself to a community who needs him—a community dealing with AIDS, homelessness, and the impact of political repression.

In his director's notes, Garcia writes,

How does *The Miracle* connect with St. Cajetan's? Tonight, when you walk in the doors and look around, examine the familiar and the foreign. What are the scents? What is the feel? Now, imagine a long time ago, how a community of brown skinned people came together, much as they had been instructed to in another lifetime. Go back further to 1531, when a poor campesino, barely conversant in the newly imposed Spanish language, stood before one of the most powerful men in the Americas, and ordered him to build a church. Imagine that connection to

³³Ibid.

the past, and look at your children, and the young people around you, in the play, and see them as the connection to your future.

Ask yourself what is real and what are the values with which you want them to continue? The connection is people, the families and the community in which you participate and contribute. A neighborhood can be depopulated, a nation can be conquered, but the people survive through traditions, values and the stories that help us remember.³⁴

While the corrido tradition essentially expresses resistance, when it is incorporated into new contexts, it can become a part of a larger narrative designed to express opposition and foster dialogue simultaneously. Artistic projects such as The St. Cajetan's Reunification Project make insider histories and stories available to a wider audience. Communities expose themselves to outsiders by sharing memories of neighborhoods, the strengths of residents, and the intelligence and wisdom of a community. The decision to share memories with outsiders is a risk. Historically the powerful have taken advantage of expansive gestures to further subjugate the marginalized. But, by making histories and stories available to outsiders, members of marginalized communities make a significant investment in public space. Sharing stories and insider information provides an opportunity to enforce accountability among public officials and individuals that attempt to limit the participation of poor citizens. Auraria was not an urban blight that needed to be removed. El Corrido del Barrio instructs individuals who may not have thought about the lives and livelihoods of westsiders. By making Chicano stories available to a wider audience, Su Teatro passes on universal human experiences and promotes understanding. Making community histories available to a wider audience, is a risk for members and thus, illustrates a commitment to building a better civil society. Making histories

³⁴ Anthony J Garcia., Director's Notes, *The Miracle at Tepeyac*, 1998 production.

available provides an opportunity for accountability, but it also provides an important opportunity to make the experiences of people in marginalized communities visible and to demand acknowledgement of those experiences, within the mainstream culture. Articulating the stories of displaced communities makes the contributions poor communities known to a larger public. Stories, myths, song, and theater illustrate the deeds of members of a community and provide a source of strength for members, as well as a challenge to the dominant culture. However, the problem of marginalization continues to affect communities, and cultural representations do not substitute for organizing and activism.

Resistance, Power, Stories and Dialogue

Individuals who are raised in communities with deep histories develop a sense of place and a sense of self related to a strong understanding of home or to a historical continuum that lends coherence to daily life. Robert Gard writes:

How empty a trip westward from Madison toward Mount Horeb and Mineral Point would be for me if I did not know that I was traveling on the ridgeroad, the old military highway which carried the heavy lead wagons rolling slowly from the mines at Mineral Point, New Diggings, Benton and the whole southwest. How empty my journey would be if I could not imagine the rolling wagons, the drivers, their speech, the dust, the blue jackets of cavalymen, the settlers' rigs, and the immigrants from Europe on foot plodding along the ridgeroad, seeking new freedoms of many kinds, finding new freedoms in the valleys and on the hillsides. How empty my journey if I did not know that to the north and the south of the road were valleys where Norwegian names are thickly sown with, here and there, a few Irish, English or German shoots sticking through.³⁵

The commitment to place and a sense of rootedness is reinforced by oral traditions: communal knowledge that is handed down. For marginalized people home is worth fighting for, but efforts to maintain it are not always successful. The history of the

³⁵Robert Gard, *Grassroots Theater: A Search for Regional Arts in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 127.

Americas is a history of appropriation: of colonialization and neocolonialization. Poor or subjugated people in countless contexts and historical periods have been displaced or forcibly uprooted. In response to the fragmentation that constantly bombards marginalized peoples, narratives have developed that ground displaced community members and allow them to access a historical continuum. A fluid narrative that transcends physical space, allows them to pass on stories, knowledge and ways of seeing the world. According to Martha Ramírez Oropeza:

The indigenous culture of Mexico has survived repeated waves of colonization because our ancestors preserved their worldview in a highly disciplined oral tradition. This is a tradition that recognized the ordering principle of the number as the invisible structure of visible time, the expression of the seasons of life that bind individuals into a living community. Many centuries before the European invasion, the indigenous cultures of Mexico devised a writing system based on the ritual calendar that governed the community's relationship with the agricultural and spiritual forces that sustained human life and spirit. By unifying the ritual life of the community in the traditional day-count of the calendar, our ancestors bequeathed us a vision of the organic unity of the world and our original place within that world.³⁶

Oropeza founded Los Mascarones, a teatro in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, and Nahuatl University, which teaches traditional knowledge.³⁷ Oropeza suggests that it is necessary to resist the other, to find strength in traditions and to “foster the same strength in the community as a whole; to adapt to the other, or, to subvert institutions of power to our

³⁶Martha Ramirez Oropeza, “Huehuetpohualli: Counting the Ancestors’ Heartbeat,” in *Community Culture and Globalization*, ed. Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard (New York: The Rockefeller Foundation, 2002), 33.

³⁷Oropeza explains, “By the late 1980s, our work had become more narrowly focused on the rights of indigenous peoples, inspiring us to create an institution that would preserve and disseminate our ancestors’ culture in such a way as to increase awareness of and respect for our historical identity. Toward this end, we founded the Nahuatl University,” 34.

own ends.³⁸ As a result of this tandem process, meaningful cultural practices transcend the barriers of marginalization.

Stories have long been used to maintain and preserve cultures and communities, fighting against displacement and marginalization. Juan Bruce Novoa observes the concern of Chicano writers such as Miguel Mendez who caution that when oral traditions are written down, they make culture available to the undeserving.

. . . Mendez's central concern is the silence resulting from a breakdown in the essential structure of interchange in the oral tradition, that is, the disappearing relationship between the old and the young. When the old stop talking to the children, the oral tradition ceases to function. Mendez sees a generation of disinterested young people and another of silent old ones. As the treasure house of culture silently dies out with the older generation, Chicano culture, devoid of its historical base, will begin to disintegrate. At the same time, the written version of history is controlled by the conquering Anglo American and within it the Chicano's role is falsified by omission and distortion; the written word is the enemy's tool.³⁹

And:

Mendez responds to this threat in and with the written text, which he seeks to convert into a vehicle for the Chicano's traditionally oral history; to be preserved and passed on to the reader. . . . Mendez sees the threat not only that no one is listening, but in that writing makes the culture too easily available to the undeserving. Cultural secrets give power to those who possess them, so they must not be divulged carelessly to less than dedicated Chicanos or to the frivolous outsider.⁴⁰

Oropeza and Bruce Novoa each observe that culture has a life that goes beyond the material resources of a community. Culture is protected by members, adapted and shielded from the prying eyes of outsiders. In order for culture to be perpetuated, though, an intergenerational tie must bind community members together, in order for vital secrets

³⁸Adams and Goldbard, *Community Culture and Globalization*, 36.

³⁹Juan Bruce Novoa, "Righting the Oral Tradition," *Denver Quarterly* 16 (1985): 79.

⁴⁰Ibid.

and empowering methods for interpreting the world to be passed down. The dominant culture provides one version of reality. In the case of the Lower Rio Grande border culture described by Paredes, the encroaching Anglo characterizes the Mexican as “cruel by nature,” “cowardly and treacherous.”⁴¹

The Anglo-Texan legend may be summarized under half a dozen points. . . .

4. The degeneracy of the Mexican is due to his mixed blood, though the elements in the mixture were inferior to begin with. He is descended from the Spaniard, a second-rate type of European, and from the equally substandard Indian of Mexico, who must not be confused with the noble savages of North America.
5. The Mexican has always recognized the Texan as his superior and thinks of him as belonging to a race separate from other Americans.
6. The Texan has no equal anywhere, but within Texas itself there developed a special breed of men, the Texas Rangers, in whom the Texan’s qualities reached their culmination.⁴²

By contrast, Mexicans had their own interpretation of Los Rinches—the Texas Rangers:

1. The Texas Ranger always carries a rusty old gun in his saddlebags. This is for use when he kills an unarmed Mexican. He drops the gun beside the body and the he claims he killed the Mexican in self-defense and after a furious battle.⁴³

Only the frame of reference of the Anglo interloper is sanctioned as objective reality and institutionalized as legitimate, while alternate interpretations are subverted from view.

Building inclusiveness and expanding public space through dialogue begins with an honest appraisal of systems of domination. Krafchek observes, “A community that is sensitive to issues of power and related dynamics may be very concerned about ideas and modes of thinking (visual or otherwise) that are linked to a history, institutions and/or systems that hold power to convey privileged meaning and authority over that same

⁴¹Paredes, *With his Pistol in his Hand*, 16.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., 24.

community.”⁴⁴ When members of marginalized communities have the opportunity to share their stories with outside audiences, they also have the opportunity to expose the system of power and privilege that prioritizes one version of reality over another.

Resistance is necessary when culture and oppositional discourse is directly threatened, but dialogue can occur simultaneously and is useful when it is initiated intentionally from within marginalized communities with a goal of raising awareness and accountability. When dialogue starts from below, it has the potential to nurture productive relationships.

Community stories provide a fixed location that in the context of a dialogue directed by community members, allows insiders and outsiders alike to see, name, own and integrate repressive histories and contexts that have been buried or ignored. When histories are integrated, the frame of reference shifts, and the acknowledgement is empowering to marginalized peoples. When repressive histories are integrated into a multidimensional interpretation of reality, a result might be, for example, that all school children learn about Cesar Chavez and his contributions to the American labor movement. The movie *Mississippi Burning* might be remade to feature the central role of African American activist Fannie Lou Hamer, rather than two white FBI agents.⁴⁵ A shifting of boundaries only happens with conversations that start in marginalized communities: dominant culture legitimacy is a function of institutionalized power.

⁴⁴Ken Krafchek, “A New Day in the Academy,” Community Arts Network, June 2002, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/06/a_new_day_in_th.php, (accessed April 16, 2009).

⁴⁵For a discussion of the contrast between the movies *Mississippi Burning*, which featured two white FBI agents investigating the murder of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, rather than the central characters in the incident—black civil rights activists—and the Spike Lee movie, *Do the Right Thing*—a movie that goes to the heart of the urban African American experience, see Vincent Harding, *Hope and History*, 154-165.

Community-based organizations build understanding and accountability, when they initiate and control the parameters of dialogue. Freire writes:

Dialogue is the encounter between humans, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny other humans the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.⁴⁶

Communities might be displaced but members of communities, artists and activists assure that stories do not die. Individuals who document the histories of their communities use their skills and talents nurtured in communities in new contexts and continue to question and oppose.

However, members of communities exercise agency in multiple contexts to ensure the well being of members. The following two examples illustrate that in some cases, the obstacles to dialogue are vast, and others, a willingness to collaborate among community and institutional partners can allow dialogue to happen.

Elyria and Swansea

Dolores Hayden observes:

The power of place—the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory—remains untapped for most working people's neighborhoods in most American cities, and for most ethnic history and most women's history. The sense of civic identity that shared history can convey is missing. And even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance.⁴⁷

Lucy Lippard observes:

⁴⁶Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 77.

⁴⁷Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 111.

Today in the United States there are internal and external exiles, voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious. The complexity of their experience has led to the concept of “deterritorialization.” . . . This applies not only to those who have been voluntarily or involuntarily uprooted, but also to those who remain in their geographical home, only to find the ground moving beneath their feet.^{48 49}

Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker observe that often citizens do not participate in local politics because either they distrust local authority; are unaware of opportunities to participate; feel alienated due to the lack of responsiveness of public officials when they have attempted to participate; have suffered social exclusion when they have attempted to participate.⁵⁰ In many instances, North and West Denver residents have not been able to protect or improve their neighborhoods through conversations with public officials. The failure of citizens and officials to approach neighborhood problems cooperatively and effectively is explained by the historical disregard of local politicians for the concerns of residents in some low income neighborhoods; the lack of experience of residents in placing demands on representatives (and the failure of representatives to explore alternative strategies for communicating with residents); and the historical pattern of community members turning inward to seek solutions to problems; that is, to resist conventional, institutional authority, which they do not see as protecting their best interests and well-being.

In many cases, meetings and interviews between residents and public officials have not been productive. Residents feel that their experiences and perspectives are not considered valid. Residents, and the community organizers who work with them, observe

⁴⁸Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 12.

⁴⁹Raul Homero Villa uses both quotes to begin his article “Ghosts in the Growth Machine: Critical Spatial Consciousness in Los Angeles Chicano Writing” *Social Text* 17 (Spring 1999): 42-46.

⁵⁰Vivien Lowndes, Lawrence Pratchett and Gary Stoker, *Trends in Public Participation, Part Two: Citizen Perspectives. Public Management*. v. 79 n. 2 (Blackwell Publishers 2001), 445-455.

that officials have assumed that their interpretations are superior, and the views of residents, “backward,” or ignorant.⁵¹

In one of the final scenes of *El Corrido del Barrio*, El Muerte stares down Mrs. Mendoza, who refuses to relinquish her home to the Denver Housing Authority. “Mrs. Mendoza, everything must come to an end. The neighborhood’s time is now. Now once and for all, sign the paper.”⁵²

In the play, Mrs. Mendoza signs the paper. In reality, Auraria residents relinquished their homes. In the Elyria neighborhood, where El Centro Su Teatro is housed, neighborhood residents give up their homes one by one, to Interstate-70 expansion, and to the colossal presence on the National Western Stock Show Complex.

In 1990, El Centro Su Teatro presented *El Corrido del Barrio* in its home space. The Director’s Notes read:

On September 13, 1990, the latest manifestation (of the play) will come to life. Ironically enough, it will be seen in a neighborhood that is more than one hundred years old, that is in a fight for its very life, with encroachment from I-70 expansion, National Western Stock Show expansion and the heavy industry (surrounding the neighborhood) that treats residents in total disregard.⁵³

Alternately, the residents of Elyria have fought to save their neighborhood, to improve the community, and to stop the development that either gobbles up their homes, or destroys their property value. Elyria residents do not trust the government. As Mel Muñoz of COPEEN (Colorado People’s Environmental and Economic Network) observes, in the 1960s, when I-70 was originally built, neighborhood residents fought

⁵¹Interview, Melissa Munoz, Colorado People for Environmental and Economic Justice, Oct. 16, 1998.

⁵²Anthony J. Garcia, *El Corrido del Barrio*, 55.

⁵³Anthony J. Garcia, Director’s Notes, 1990 production, *El Corrido del Barrio*.

against it. “I-70 could have been routed through (highway) 276 which was already a heavily industrialized area.” I-70 will eventually expand to five lanes in both directions. According to Munoz, eventually all that will be left of Elyria is the small stretch of High St. between 46th and 47th avenues.⁵⁴

Residents know they will eventually lose their homes. Most of the National Western Stock Show expansion has taken place without any direct input from residents. Acquisition is quiet. Keeping the community as safe and healthy as possible in the interim is the focus of most community involvement. COPEEN, MOP, and the Cross Community Coalition, attempt to bolster the local economy, provide child care and family services, and attempt to combat the significant pollution problems in the Elyria/Swansea neighborhood. Confrontations with public officials, are designed to keep the neighborhood intact as long as possible. “If we don’t fight,” Garcia says, “it will all be gone tomorrow.”⁵⁵

“Our only weapon, is our ability to sacrifice—our time, and our dignity in confronting them (representatives from the National Western Stock Show).”⁵⁶ Residents facing displacement, negotiate unyieldingly to protect their legal rights. According to COPEEN:

The state has the right to destroy any property in the way of public facilities and development, but must compensate individuals and businesses for their lost property. According to Paul Forester, Regional Right of Way Supervisor, property appraisals have already been conducted on 34 homes and businesses, and will be available in late August or early September.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Mel Muñoz, interview with the author, October 16,1998.

⁵⁵Interview with Anthony J. Garcia, *Stories of Elyria*, BBC Production, 1991.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷COPEEN newsletter, vol.4, n.3 Summer, 1998.

COPEEN pushed hard to have the Federal Right of Way program distribute materials in Spanish. They were at first reluctant because of the cost.

Even knowing their neighborhood will eventually be destroyed, it is hard for residents to leave. “Yes, residents will be compensated fairly. But these are homes that have been in families for generations. The sense of home, family and place cannot be replaced. Some of these families have paid off their mortgage. They will either have to start all over again or move into retirement communities.”⁵⁸

“The attachment to our roots, to our land is something that is inherent in our culture. We’ve always been close to the land. The land is our Mother. So consequently, our homes represent that same thing.”⁵⁹

The biggest problem that residents have had in their interactions with local officials and representatives from the Stock Show Complex is the failure of officials to value the “epistemology of knowing” of residents. Muñoz uses the term to characterize the intuitive ways of seeing that residents have learned through experiences, and ways of interpreting the world that have been passed down.⁶⁰ “This is home, and people have a

⁵⁸Mel Muñoz, interview with the author, October 16, 1998.

⁵⁹Garcia, *Stories of Elyria*.

⁶⁰This is explained further by a community arts activist and Francisco Guajardo who references Gramsci. The following quote occurs in the context of a conversation about individuals who might serve as bridges between different cultural contexts: however, referencing the Gramscian framework of *traditional* vs. *organic* intellect, Guajardo reflected upon the difference between traditional and organic bridges. According to Guajardo, some people have been “tailored” as bridges and are more aligned with an institutionalized understanding of bridging, while others may have “emerged” as bridges thanks to the “organic reservoir of knowledge” they possess.

Edyael Casaperalta, “A Bridge Conversation on Traditional and Organic Bridging,” A series of conversations commissioned by the Center for Civic Participation’s Art and Democracy Project and the Community Arts Network, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/04/a_bridge_conver_6.php, (accessed April 27, 2009).

sense of peoplehood,” Munoz says. Since the ways of knowing of residents are discounted as inferior, the concerns of residents are also easily discounted.⁶¹

Garcia observes that the history of communalism runs deep. Communalism is rooted in survival. “The remaining vestige of that communal concept is the family. The family becomes an extended family—cousins, uncles, aunts, and then it grows to be the family becoming the community—neighbors, merchants, pastors. And there is still a strong element of that communalism.”

Residents resist change. Rather than lose homes that have been in families for four generations, a sense of belonging, and their only material possessions, residents wait.

In the past, residents have been active, politically. Members of the Cross Community Coalition, COPEEN and MOP still look for ways to get residents more involved in conventional political participation. But many residents do not want to talk to outsiders.

Residents know their neighborhood will be destroyed. Residents work with community organizations to provide constant vigilance against the heavy industry surrounding the neighborhood. They express concern in order to protect their children against industrial pollution. If they did not express their concerns loudly, the industries surrounding the neighborhood would act with even less concern for the well being of residents.⁶²

The North Side and Cinco de Mayo

⁶¹Mel Muñoz, interview with the author, October 16, 1998.

⁶²Organizing led by COPEEN, Cross Community Coalition and Metro Organization for People (MOP), and publicizing the pollution levels in the neighborhood, has prevented further encroachment of heavy industry in the neighborhood.

In the case of Elyria/Swansea, citizen organizing has had mixed results, but ultimately may not preserve homes that lie in the path of potential Interstate 70 expansion. Neighborhood residents have at different times experienced disenfranchisement, but also small community successes. For example, small community-led cultural programs flourish at Our Lady of Grace Church in Swansea and at Swansea Elementary.

With reference to the displacement of Chicanos and Latinos due to urban growth in Los Angeles, Raul Homero Villa writes:

Since the original Anglo-American makeover of the pueblo landscape in the 1870s, a particular nexus of dominant culture institutions and agents—most notably metropolitan growth coalitions, the allied police-judicial system, and the mainstream media—has combined in conscious and unconscious fashion to culturally marginalize and spatially contain the Chicano (and now greater Latino) working-class residents of Los Angeles (Acuña 1984; Moore 1991). As their neighborhoods have been displaced, their cultural heritage objectified—whether as the exotic “Spanish romance” or the maligned “Mexican problem”—and their daily affairs policed, Mexicanos have been both forced and enabled to observe “the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.”⁶³

The situation Villa describes has been the case in many urban, and as Paredes demonstrates, rural contexts, for hundreds of years. Villa’s illustrates the resistance of Spanish-language journalists “to the erasure of Mexicano social space.”⁶⁴

In calling for an organized response by the community, they make this poignant proclamation: “We still have a voice, tenacity and rights; we have not yet retired to the land of the dead.”⁶⁵

⁶³Villa, “Ghosts in the Machine,” 112.

⁶⁴Ibid., 112.

⁶⁵Ibid.

Although Villa's concerns refer to a specific context, his observations can be generalized. In many contexts, marginalized peoples resist encroachment, not least of which is, access to social space. Citizens respond the encroachment through a variety of means. In north Denver, a clash of competing interest occurs, when youth cruise Federal Blvd, especially during Mexican days of celebration, when cruising intensifies, and the Denver police, whose interest is to alleviate traffic congestion, and the potential for altercations that sometimes occur during cruising. At the root of the tensions between police officers and cruisers, though, is a difference in opinion in the legitimacy of cruising activities. United Families for Safe Cruising has attempted to quell police abuse of youth; to provide an elder presence and thus community accountability to youth prone to violence; and to reframe cruising as a potentially important and accepted component of Cinco de Mayo and Dieciseis de Septiembre celebrations.

When collaboration occurs between community members and willing public officials, an opportunity for openings arises. In the case of Citizens for Safe Cruising, citizens and community organizers intervene to assuage antagonist relationships between Denver police officers and "cruisers" on Federal Blvd. Although the assumed starting place for United Families for Safe Cruising is opposition, a cooperation and dialogue between the group and members of the Denver police department willing to enter into dialogue and collaboration proved effective, even though it did not eliminate tension between police officers, and cruisers and/or citizen observers.

Citizens for Safe Cruising is a community task force combining involvement and sponsorship from Escuela Tlatelolco, Barrio Warriors, Servicios de la Raza, Padres Unidos, the Parent Concilio de la Escuela Tlatelolco, El Centro Su Teatro, and End the

Politics of Cruelty. End the Politics of Cruelty is a human rights organization that was started by local members of Amnesty International, who are also involved at El Centro Su Teatro. End the Politics of Cruelty forms a bridge between Chicano service and community-based organization, and other progressive organizations such as WILF, Amnesty International, and AFSC. One of End the Politics of Cruelty's primary concerns is police brutality and police accountability. The goal of the EPC Police Accountability Campaign is to "ensure that law enforcement officials of the Denver Police Department maintain standards of behavior that respect the inherent human rights, dignity and fundamental freedoms of all people without distinction as to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, language, or religion."⁶⁶

EPC contends that only a minority of Denver police officers abuse their authority but when they do, the cases are serious. In 1998, EPC worked with Barrio Warriors and Escuela Tlatelolco to ensure safe cruising of Federal Blvd. during the Cinco de Mayo and *Dieciseis de Septiembre* celebrations. The Safe Cruising effort occurred in response to police activity at the 1997 Cinco de Mayo celebrations that community activists perceived as too aggressive. In spite of massive police presence, one young man was killed. Members of the West side community believe that the large and aggressive police presence along Federal exacerbated tensions that resulted in widespread conflict. In 1998, United Families for a Safe Cinco de Mayo deployed community teams on every block of Federal Blvd. for two reasons: to serve as human rights observers, documenting the actions of police, and to impose the authority of community elders on youth, prior to police involvement.

⁶⁶Unpublished campaign fliers, EPC Police Accountability Campaign, May 1997.

While community policing during Cinco de Mayo ensured the safety of participants, the approach of citizens and police were still not uniformly complimentary. Police continued to issue tickets for minor violations, included cracked windshields and offset tires, which was perceived as badgering of the cruising youth. Additionally, access to Federal Blvd. from I-25 was blocked, which made it difficult for cruisers to “make the loop.”

There is some collaboration between the police and community observers. Some officers and citizens are committed to working together to diffuse tensions and maintain peace. Some community members are antagonistic toward police, and some police view citizen observers as an annoyance—e.g. they see community members as interfering with their legitimate right to do their job. United Families for Safe Cruising has suggested that Cinco de Mayo be treated as other cultural celebrations such as Mardi Gras or St. Patrick’s Day in which sections of the street would be closed off to traffic and cruising would be made an official part of the celebration, anchored by other public events - a best “low rider” contest, judged by the DPD, is even suggested as a viable option.⁶⁷

During 1998 Mexican Independence Day celebrations, DPD had accepted the presence of human rights observers, “Citizens for Safe Cruising” as par for the course. No major incidences occurred. However, it was clear that certain displays of power were perceived as threatening by the police. For example, a small pickup truck with a Mexican flag safely secured in the bed of the truck was pulled over and ticketed. The driver was encouraged to meet with lawyers, on hand to consult with citizens at the Escuela Tlatelolco, and to fight the ticket. At this point, the ticket was waived, and the driver

⁶⁷Families for Safe Cruising community meeting, Denver, CO, March 1998.

returned to his cruising. It seems at least implicit that displays of pride and power, whether legal or not, are viewed as illegitimate to holders of “legitimate authority.”

United Families for Safe Cruising has established a precedent of community presence during Mexican holidays. Their involvement illustrates that adolescents from the community respect the authority of parents and others from within the community, rather than the authority of outsiders. Nineteen-Ninety Eight was the first year that parents and organizations organized to monitor police and adolescent behavior. With consistency and commitment, United Families for Safe Cruising could become an important organization in negotiations between police and the community, and an important liaison that might allow the police and neighborhood residents to communicate and resolve conflicts effectively. Lastly, United Families for Safe Cruising highlights the importance of Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day as cultural celebrations that deserve respect. Parental involvement could potentially move discussion in the City of Denver toward sanctioning activities, rather than approaching revelers with hostility.

Conclusion

For more than half a century, the Rio Grande people have remembered Gregorio Cortez and in that time, the figure of a folk hero has been shaped out of historical fact. It has been the vivid, dramatic narrative of the *corrido*—a well-established form—that has kept the image of Cortez fresh in the minds of the Border people.⁶⁸

Chapter Six examines the St. Cajetan's Reunification Project, an annual event designed to commemorate the Auraria neighborhood (a neighborhood which was demolished so that the Auraria Higher Education Center could be built), the Elyria and Swansea neighborhoods, which are constantly pressured by the expansion of the National

⁶⁸Paredes, *With his Pistol in his Hand*, 108.

Western Stock Show Complex, I-70 and heavy industry, and the efforts of Chicanos in North Denver to keep contemporary cultural expression, namely, cruising Federal Blvd. during Mexican holidays, safe and even potentially accepted and embraced by local officials. Families for Safe Cruising open dialogue and create systems to protect cruisers and the public, and force conversations about what types of cultural displays are perceived as legitimate within the dominant culture. Each is a very different case, providing different and sometimes divergent insights into neighborhoods. The chapter shows that art made by marginalized communities is often not accepted, understood, or safe from threats. But it is not just culture that is threatened by public institutions: the material foundation for sustenance and sustainability, in the form of homes and kinship networks, is also threatened.

Community building does not always guarantee the well being of neighborhoods. It is not unusual for poor communities to be compromised for various kinds of expansion or revitalization. Planners have historically targeted poor communities as potential sites for garbage dumps, heavy industry or prisons. Often, low income neighborhoods are bought out by private developers, or become gentrified and thus, too expensive for their original inhabitants. The impact of displacement is dire, because within long-standing, tightly knit communities, members have fashioned survival networks that guarantee both sustenance and sustainability. When members are forced to leave neighborhoods, they also give up support systems that make survival possible.

Participation in the public sphere is multidimensional. Sometimes the activities of a community, such as producing the public presentation of a play, bridge community and public space, providing opportunities to educate, celebrate, and to herald the actions of a

community. An action as simple as presenting a play publicly, perpetuates cultural practices and ways of seeing that are jeopardized in a public sphere that prioritizes assimilation. A play can also document the history of a community and provide an oppositional discourse that criticizes the dominant culture. Citizens move from dialogue to direct public action to bring about the types of change they want. Through a cultural activity, community members can actively criticize the unjust practices of the dominant culture; make their cultural practices visible and demand acceptance; and promote dialogue and understanding. Although the barriers to dialogue are profound, cultural forms provide an opportunity to provide ongoing, fluid, opportunities to build awareness, and to educate members of the dominant culture. Korza, Schaffer-Bacon and Assaff observe:

Arts and humanities projects can unsettle traditional power dynamics that privilege certain viewpoints, or ways of working in a community, and can help equalize power in the dialogue experience. As Daniel Yankelovich, author of *The Magic of Dialogue* explains, “Subtle coercive influences are often present in discussion and when they are they undermine equality and, hence dialogue.” Therefore, balancing power dynamics among dialogue participants is difficult but essential. Cultural organizations and artists have to invest in understanding the history of various participants, their current power dynamics, and the perceptions they hold of one another.⁶⁹

It is essential that when stories are shared, the efforts are initiated by members of the communities represented, and that these community members control the context of the dialogue. Only in situations where members of communities represent themselves can a true democratic opening occur. By sharing culture, members of communities expose outsiders to their talent, creativity and humanity, at least theoretically, making it harder for them to justify injustices : through the sharing of culture, outsiders have the

⁶⁹Korza, Bacon, and Assaf, *Civic Dialogue Arts and Culture*, 106.

opportunity to develop a critical perspective by understanding the historical experience and point of view of the marginalized.

Outsiders often view poor communities as dilapidated and inferior. Public and private representatives alike fail to respect members. Frank Fresquez, a Su Teatro supporter, occasional performer and life long west sider tells the story of a day in the 1970s when a photographer and reporter from The Denver Post visited Horace Mann Elementary School. The photographer took a picture of Frank and some other boys and told them to look for it in Contemporary Magazine, a pull out section of the Sunday paper. The boys eagerly waited for Sunday, but when they opened the paper, they were instantly disappointed to see the caption under their picture, describing them as poor barrio kids. The boys were disappointed and insulted because they expected to be represented in accordance with how they saw themselves. They did not know until they saw the caption in print that outsiders viewed them distinctly from how they viewed themselves. It is easy for outsiders to compromise neighborhoods, for their own purposes, but these neighborhoods are nevertheless sources of material, social, and psychic well being for members. Sometimes individuals and institutions in the public sphere eschew displays of language, culture or heritage that do not represent the dominant culture. In this way, minority voices are made invisible on many levels. El Centro Su Teatro's play *El Corrido del Barrio* calls upon the corrido—a ballad that heralds the exploits of a community—to tell the story of the Auraria neighborhood. A community might be displaced, but the corrido lives on forever, making the importance of the community known and replicating resistance in new contexts.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Organizations—nonprofits and all manner of voluntary associations—churches, unions, PTAs, clubs, bowling leagues and arts groups—are the vehicles that move civil society and as active components of civil society, they occupy space that is legitimized and sanctioned by conventional institutions. In a context that is constantly changing, and where the potential for participation and engagement by ordinary citizens is constantly being reinterpreted and reevaluated, it is worthwhile to examine the potential of civil society through the broadest possible construct: one that acknowledges that opposition, resistance and conventional participation operate simultaneously.

That is, in order to understand the potential of citizens for engagement, it is necessary to reinterpret and redefine political space. Alvarez and Escobar observe that movement is characterized by multiple social actors, operating within separate spheres of autonomy, within fragmented social and political space.¹ Evans and Boyte observe autonomous enclaves known as free spaces the “settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary people can act with dignity, independence and vision.”² The phenomena that these scholars observe are grounded in the idea that movement is found in everyday life, in the personal and the social.

The issues and ideas that motivate everyday citizens to participate, engage, protest and struggle are not only located in the often fluid contexts of contemporary life. They

¹Escobar and Alvarez, *New Social Movements*, 2.

²Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 17.

are grounded in older histories and ongoing traditions of resistance. Resistance keeps marginalized people alive and allows them to organize networks, infrastructure and institutions that give them the ability to call for change and to leverage resources effectively when fissures in political systems provide openings and opportunities.

The organizing that keeps communities viable in response to domination also gives citizens skills to oppose, resist, criticize, participate and engage under any circumstances. The traditions of reciprocity that drive Putnam's social capital in a conventional context also drive effective resistance. Both Putnam and Taulbert, for example, examine the value of connections among individuals and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, although Putnam refers to the vitality of bowling leagues (and thus, of public life) while Taulbert refers to southern black communities battling segregation.

Thus, the everyday, the social, the points of reference that allow individuals in autonomous enclaves to create hubs for thought and action within a fragmented landscape are grounded, and even though they may be fluid, they are not floating.

Hawken observes that groups—either nonprofit organizations or voluntary associations—“remain supple enough to coalesce easily into larger networks to achieve their goals.”³ When the ideas of Escobar and Alvarez and Hawken are merged, a view of autonomous organizations, flexible enough to come together in broad based coalitions, is revealed.

The dynamics that Escobar, Alvarez, Boyte and Hawken observe are valid and important to developing a broad understanding of participation, the potential of civil society and the transformation of public engagement. However, the enclaves where

³Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*, 6.

movement building occurs, especially those most embedded in everyday life are sometimes isolated from one another and often ordinary citizens don't know that movement builders walk among them, making their own potential to participate in an active community life and engaged civil society, less tangible.

Civil society is most often viewed as conventional political space: organizations provide the intermediary space where citizens learn democratic habits. But the organizations that populate civil society are multifaceted, and often the legacy of older histories of organizing and movement building. Many organizations are actively developing new identities and ways of working in response to the complexities and contradictions of their surroundings, but they are all the product of a continuum where in the best circumstances intergenerational learners work together to improve public life.

Intentional community building is an antidote against isolation but it requires organizations to filter through the complexities of the public sphere; to encourage ownership and accountability; and to provide safe space as well as resources for criticism, opposition and dialogue. Intentional community building requires organizations to activate passive individuals, to encourage consistent, ongoing productive relationships between individuals and organizations and to encourage individuals to utilize organizations as tools to accomplish goals they can't achieve by themselves.

Community-based arts organizations like Su Teatro affect the public sphere through artistic and cultural work that directly affects constituents; through advocacy work and organizing that catalyzes a broader understanding of issues like cultural equity, the problem of cultural appropriation, and the role of art in a democracy; and through their organizational practices that have broader implications for other movement builders.

A broad understanding of political participation relies on the notion that ordinary people are capable and potentially creative stewards, who will act, engage and invest in order to make public life worthwhile. Likewise, community-based cultural traditions focus on ordinary people and communities and emphasize the central role of audiences. Community-based cultural organizations prioritize the needs of audiences, and engage them as vital participants.

The case of Su Teatro illustrates how an organization that is embedded in the community it serves, operates. A group of young activists came together in 1971 as students of Rowena Rivera at the University of Colorado-Denver. Rivera refused to call her class remedial reading and instead, taught a class on teatro. The members of Rivera's class became the original members of the Su Teatro company, with new members to follow. Su Teatro came to life during the artistic renaissance of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Young activists reaffirmed their cultural identity by steeping themselves in traditions of muralism, ballet folklórico, balladry, poetry and the physical comedy and veiled political commentary of popular performance traditions that had long been used in Mexico to communicate the shrewd, resilient and uncompromising views of a peasantry and working class that never hesitated to portray itself as half-witted, compliant and passive, if it was advantageous to do so. As part of its cultural project, the movement drew on these older traditions of resistance: the *carpa* a vaudeville style traveling tent show, employing and serving the working class, provided a celebration of the culture of the masses, and straightforward, ribald opposition to economic, social and political elites; the *corrido* a ballad that tells a story about the heroic exploits of an individual, and the trials and tribulations of a community, articulates the resistance of communities being

subjugated: although they are being pressured and compromised they will not submit to the powerful; the *cuento*, a story, a form of oral tradition that is passed down and which preserves history, a continuity between generations, and a source of identity and culture.

Su Teatro is the third oldest Chicano theater in the country. Only El Teatro Campesino and Teatro de la Esperanza are older. Although there are many organizations, large and small, throughout the country that perpetuate the Latino arts, very few Chicano teatros, rooted directly in the Chicano Movement, remain. Because Denver's Chicano community remains strong, members continue to support community institutions such as Su Teatro, and other nonprofit organizations such as Escuela Tlatelolco and Servicios de la Raza.

Community based organizations have an advantage in engaging community members because ownership, direction and decision making remains directly in the hands of community members. El Centro Su Teatro has a specific physical presence in the community, in a building the organization owns, and it represents the permanence of the community and the institution. Chicanos have toiled in Denver and they have left a permanent marker with the organizations they have built.

Under any circumstances, though, an organization like Su Teatro cannot continue to exist unless it successfully meets the needs of constituents. In Denver, the population of recent immigrants has soared, challenging the Denver public school system to expand its capacity to meet the needs of all students effectively. Su Teatro is a small organization, serving 25,000 constituents a year. It can only serve a fraction of the need, but it attempts to do so effectively.

One way that Su Teatro satisfies constituents is by providing plays that examine political issues that are important to the community, such as *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* a play that questions the wisdom of a monoculture helmed by an exclusive cadre of the privileged and powerful. Audiences approve of this play, because it articulates the shared values of a community. The uncompromising political commentary of the play is couched in humor: it modernizes the working class humor of the vaudeville tent show. It heralds the culture that elites eschew. *La Carpa Aztlan presents: "I Don't Speak English Only!"* illustrates the determination and resolve of Chicanos to force openings in the public sphere that encourage competing cultural perspectives and experiences.

Grassroots Latino arts organizations like Su Teatro reside in a public sphere that is replete with challenges and opportunities. The existence of grassroots arts organizations is constantly threatened by an unstable external environment that does not support the arts. Old models for producing arts events and nurturing audiences are being abandoned because of their growing ineffectiveness. As the New Majority grows in influence, the interest in cultivating this untapped market is growing in all sectors and mainstream arts institutions are no exception. Large arts institutions present multiple threats to small organizations that include competition for artists, artistic products and audiences.

The impact of shifting demographics for small organizations remains to be seen. It seems unlikely, though, that large institutions will be able to consistently attract people of color, if people of color are not in leadership positions within organizations, making policy decisions as well as designing and shaping creative content. Small organizations

like Su Teatro are routinely challenged, but they enjoy advantages as well. For example, they produce content that reflects the stories of the communities they serve, they are able to meet the needs of underserved audiences, but also to initiate dialogue and to raise awareness. Plays like *El Corrido del Barrio* document the history of a neighborhood, celebrate the contributions of members and publicly reframe histories from the point of view of the marginalized. In this case, members of marginalized communities offer an opportunity for citizens at large to understand their struggle and the inequities that affect poor communities.

Su Teatro provides art to citizens (and involve citizens in the making of art) as their fundamental purpose. Ideally, the art they make is a resource that audiences embrace as a right. The goal of organizations like Su Teatro is to teach audiences (especially young audiences) to seize upon art as a meaningful and relevant force to integrate into their daily lives, and to teach young people that a career as a cultural worker is possible.

Su Teatro is one among many arts organizations nationally that participates in formal networks and acts independently to collaborate with other organizations in the field to promote advocacy, collaboration, exchange of resources and mentorship. In spite of the challenges that organizations like Su Teatro face, they utilize many positive principles that provide lessons for the field. Veterans in small organizations are committed to mentoring and networking. Small organizations have created leadership development programs where mentors stay involved with participants after they have graduated, in contrast to large leadership programs that place graduates in the field without appropriate support.

Top down changes are not likely to promote genuine equity, but when small organizations and communities initiate dialogue, there is an opportunity to share stories, but to also name and articulate dominating relationships. When artists, organizations, and individuals create space to share stories, they also can link to a history of marginalization, and then perpetuate integrated histories, that acknowledge both the dominating and responsive aspects of individual and of state-civil society relationships.

The ability of small organizations to initiate meaningful dialogue, to act autonomously and to broker relationships within civil society that expand democratic space, hinge on building the infrastructure that affords long term sustainability and stability. Small organizations have to prioritize the grassroots fundraising that stimulates ownership and accountability. The principles of sustainability serve grassroots organizations well: building intentional, face-to-face, collaborative and cooperative relationships with supporters, investing in the work of other like-minded organizations, and incorporating a systematic mentoring program into the activities of an organization promote well being.

The practices that serve grassroots organizations are related to a larger interest in sustainability and broad concepts of participation. Carole Pateman observes that democratic behavior and efficacy starts in small spaces. People learn democracy by being active in public life. But a corollary principle also applies. Active citizens support organizations by contributing income, time and participation, because organizations engage in work that individual citizens cannot accomplish on their own. An organization serves as a vehicle that allows citizens to be involved in meaningful work. An individual citizen might not be able to devote her life to saving the rainforest, but by being involved

in the work of an organization, she is still able to contribute to the effort. The work of organizations is necessarily collaborative, and the organization is just the engine: citizens drive the work. The bond between citizens and organizations allow them to attack issues they agree are important, together. Organizations earn legitimacy by doing good work and if an organization operates unethically and/or fails to fulfill its mission, a crisis of legitimacy may occur, just as it does (in theory) for a state. Organizations cannot exist without support, and citizens will not continue to support an organization that is ineffective. Small organizations have an advantage in building a broad base that fosters stability and autonomy, because they are able to build immediate, intimate relationships with constituents, and the depth of relationships between cultural workers and supporters stimulates ownership and accountability. Supporters who feel vested will not hesitate to provide feedback, or to make their needs and preferences known. Immediate and meaningful relationships are essential to building organizational support. Individuals, who invest in one organization, will usually also invest in another, and when likeminded organizations also collaborate and cooperate, a web of solidarity based on friendship and reciprocity spreads between individuals and organizations. Thus one individual (including staff and board members of the various organizations) donates and contributes time to many other organizations with overlapping and complimentary concerns, creating a powerful enclave of mutual support.

The result is sustainable systems that have an impact on one another and a larger public. With sustainability comes the ability to draw out stories, to engage in dialogue and to name the systems of privilege and power that damage communities and limit democracy. Although it is difficult and not without challenges, intentional community

building creates a process where members can engage in dialogue and confront the contradictions within communities that detract from their effectiveness.

Arts organizations are important components of civil society. Community based arts organizations that serve marginalized communities speak to issues that other institutions aren't addressing, preserve and perpetuate culture that is threatened and meet the needs of citizens who aren't being served well by dominant culture institutions. The position of these organizations within their own communities and within the public sphere, places them in a unique position to raise issues and to enforce accountability among institutions and the larger public who often lack cultural competency. Small arts organizations have direct and immediate relationships with their supporters, which promotes ownership and accountability. When the organization makes a mistake, the impact is instant. However, relationships that have been developed over time have staying power, and they provide the building blocks for broad bases of support and active, participatory publics.

In spite of commercialization and consumerism, citizens still seek meaning and engagement. Although they are not always apparent many enclaves exist where citizens choose to come together. Just as citizens make choices to consume, they make choices to invest in activities and organizations that expand democracy in public life. Investing in youth, green practices, local businesses and slow food are a part of a larger concern with building meaning, but also sustainability. Citizens draw on multiple resources to influence civil society: histories of resistance, traditions of conventional participation, and a broad spectrum of practices from sharing songs, food and skills, to supporting community arts and social events that make public life worthwhile. It is important that

individuals intentionally build community, by investing in a web of sustainability that fortifies social change, slowly, incrementally, but for the long haul.

In order to understand the potential of civil society, a broad understanding of participation—in politics, in social relationships, and in everyday life is necessary. The idea of citizenship is useful. That is, considering the responsibility that individuals have to nurture public life. Kymlicka and Norman observe, “. . . the concept of citizenship seems to integrate the demands of justice and community membership. Citizenship is intimately linked to ideas of individual entitlement on the one hand and of attachment to a particular community on the other.”⁴ Citizenship doesn’t have to be a conformist concept, associated with the status quo and reaffirming the dominant order. Movements from below bring about positive change, when collective actors transform their immediate environment or put pressure on leaders. Citizenship embraces engagement and affirms the efforts of individuals to get involved, to do it themselves, or to help their neighbors. Members of communities that have been historically marginalized engage in practices designed to sustain one another. The practices of sharing resources, disseminating information, building sustainable networks, and developing the skill and talents of insiders kept members of marginalized communities alive and provided them with the sustenance, and organized systems to resist and oppose, when opportunities to pressure for change presented themselves. The quality of relationships and talents that are developed in marginalized communities, or in the semi-autonomous free space of voluntary associations, combined with external opportunities presented by a contradictory dominant culture, affect if, how, and when, an agenda developed behind closed doors is

⁴Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, “Return of the Citizen: A survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory” *Ethics* 104.2 (January 1994): 352-381. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2381582> (04/30/2009).

put forth in an open, participatory environment. The practices developed within communities in resistance, whether they are designed merely to ensure survival, to undermine the powerful and the privileged, or to make political statements that dominant authorities cannot trace, are in and of themselves political: but the practices that communities establish within the spaces that they define for themselves are a precursor to both broadly and narrowly constructed political participation and include both sanctioned and unsanctioned activities. The link between small spaces where future participation incubates and tangible participation in the broad public sphere (sanctioned or otherwise) provides an opportunity to reinterpret the role of the citizen and the nature of relationships between the state, civil society and citizens. When the activities of communities in resistance are taken into consideration, what has traditionally been seen as citizen apathy might rather be interpreted as a rejection of the elitist political model.

The practices that have sustained communities are the same practices that sustain citizenship, and it follows that one can participate in narrowly constructed political practices and engage in broadly constructed participation: protest, opposition and resistance, all with the consistent goal of expanding the public sphere.

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