A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.

Song workshop conducted by M.U.G.A.B.E.E. with college students and community members in Los Angeles. Photo by Melisa Cardona

Cultural Organizing:
Experiences at the Intersection of Art and Activism

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Cultural organizing exists at the intersection of art and activism. This paper explores the power of cultural organizing with examples of groups and individuals placing art and culture at the center of organizing strategies: organizing from a particular cultural identity, community of place, or worldview. Third World Majority collaborates with grassroots organizations in communities of color and indigenous communities to provide new media training that enables people to create media that speaks to their lived experiences and reflects their visions for their world. Raices activates the power of cultural identity to engage rural Latinos in forging solutions to the challenges their communities face. M.U.G.A.B.E.E. offers the transformative power of art to community-based initiatives rooted in struggles for justice and social change. Ricardo Levins Morales uses the power of visual symbols to magnify currents of power and possibility in community and social movement contexts.

Animating **Democracy**
A Program of **Americans for the Arts**

Cultural organizing exists at the intersection of art and activism. It is a fluid and dynamic practice that is understood and expressed in a variety of ways, reflecting the unique cultural, artistic, organizational, and community context of its practitioners. Cultural organizing is about placing art and culture at the center of an organizing strategy. It is also about organizing from a particular cultural identity, community of place, or worldview.

In 2007, the Arts & Democracy Project organized a series of gatherings across the country that brought together artists, activists, and cultural organizers to discuss what is needed to increase the impact of work that integrates art, culture, and organizing. Cultural organizing emerged as an important area of inquiry in this process and, as a result, several gatherings focused specifically on this practice. This paper explores the power of cultural organizing and draws on the experiences and insights shared at one of these gatherings, which took place at the United States Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia, in June 2007. It offers three examples, based on presentations made at this gathering by Thenmozhi Soundararajan (Third World Majority), Amalia Anderson (Raices) and Carlton Turner (M.U.G.A.B.E.E.) that reflect different approaches to this work and raise some of the questions and challenges facing this emerging field**.**

The Arts & Democracy Project was initiated to support work that draws on the transformational power of art and culture to expand participation at all levels of our democracy. As part of the Center for Civic Participation, the Arts & Democracy Project is dedicated to contributing to pro-democracy movements that are rooted in communities that have traditionally been disenfranchised from the U.S. political system. We view democracy-building movements within a social justice context. While these movements consist of efforts to increase voter engagement in elections, they extend beyond that to include grassroots organizing that enables people and communities to actively and directly participate in decisions that impact their lives.

APPROACHES TO CULTURAL ORGANIZING

Third World Majority: New media training to enable communities to reflect their visions for their world

Thenmozhi Soundararajan is a filmmaker, grassroots media organizer, and second-generation Tamil Untouchable Dalit woman committed to linking grassroots organizing with media and technology in order to advance global justice and social change. For Thenmozhi, the power of imagination is at the heart of what makes media such a powerful asset to social justice movements and liberation struggles. "We can't fight for freedom," says Soundararajan, "unless we can imagine ourselves free."[1]

In 2001, Thenmozhi founded Third World Majority (TWM), a new media production and resource center in the San Francisco Bay Area. TWM was founded at a unique time in media history. Media production tools such as digital video cameras had become increasingly accessible, enabling ordinary people in communities across the globe to create their own media. At the same time, national and international media policies were paving the way for greater media consolidation, enabling a small group of media corporations to assert control over media distribution platforms. In addition, there seemed to be a lack of political analysis of the media system and what it meant to be creating one's own media within this political context.[2]

In an effort to address these disconnects within the media landscape, Third World Majority was created as an explicitly political media center. The founding members were primarily young women of color who chose a collective organizational structure in order to challenge the top-down, white-male-dominated model so prevalent in corporate media. In addition, they decided to focus their efforts on working with communities traditionally misrepresented or ignored by corporate media to "provide multimedia training and to develop strategies for how we can reclaim technology for our self-determination." [3]

Third World Majority is deeply influenced by the Third Cinema Movement of the 1970s and its ethos of creating media for the people, about the people. The accessibility of new media technology enabled them to take this philosophy one step further and place cameras in the hands of people so that they could make their own media.

Drawing on the work of the Center for Digital Storytelling, Third World Majority developed a three-day community digital-storytelling training that integrates aspects of popular education, creative writing, oral history, facilitative filmmaking, and new media manipulation; it has become the cornerstone of their work with communities. Through these trainings communities learn how to use found material from their lives—photographs, recordings, letters, newspaper clippings, and drawings—and new media technology to create short movies that reflect their own experiences and wisdom. The collective dimension of community digital storytelling enables people to connect with each other across stories rather than across issues and political positions. This provides a powerful way to build the trust and common ground necessary for the development of shared vision and collective action.

While it is not uncommon for activists and organizers to incorporate art and media into their campaigns, these elements are often brought in at the end of the process as either entertainment or tools of persuasion. Thenmozhi believes that it is critical for art and media to be incorporated into political organizing campaigns from the beginning. This makes it possible to take advantage of both the creative process and the creative products themselves in order to "make the imagination around campaigns come alive."[4]

Raices: Activating a community's cultural identity to confront and forge solutions to challenges

Amalia Anderson is a Guatemalan-born and Minnesota-raised Maya/Latina organizer, activist, and media justice advocate. During the 2004 election Amalia worked with National Voice[5], directing outreach operations to Latinos in rural communities. Through this experience it became clear to her that traditional political organizing did not resonate with rural Latinos. This motivated Anderson to try a different approach to organizing—one that respects a slow pace of work, isn't tied to election cycles, and focuses on base building and relationship building.

With this in mind, Anderson created the Main Street Project, "a grassroots public policy and organizing initiative that works to document the economic challenges facing people in rural communities, give voice to their hopes and aspirations, and the tools to create change."[6] Raices is a program of the Main Street Project that works specifically with rural Latino communities in Iowa, Minnesota, Idaho, and Oregon.

Raices uses a cultural approach to organizing that draws on the power of identity to address the economic challenges facing rural Latino communities. The name *raices* means roots and reflects a belief in the power found in history, culture, and community. "Culture is who we are as a people," says Amalia. "It is how we struggle and retain resiliency in the face of colonization."[7] Through shared cultural practices that involve food, language, music, and dance, Raices affirms and maintains a shared sense of identity and community among migrant rural Latinos.

Drawing on the rich history of popular education, liberation theology, and social movements in Latin America, Raices has developed a participatory approach to cultural organizing that values the knowledge and wisdom of those most affected by poverty. Through an extensive community interview and story collection process, Raices works with community members to identify the communities' issues, needs, challenges, hopes, and dreams. Then, community members come together at *encuentros,* or community gatherings, where they identify issues, share what they have learned from each other, and develop plans for action.

This approach to cultural organizing is less about acquiring or utilizing a specific set of skills and more about organizing from who you are, where you come from, and how your life experience and ways of knowing impact the way you move in the world. Rather than operating from a deficit mentality, this approach affirms that migrant rural Latino communities have "everything we need to survive."[8] This process recognizes that, in an age where information and communication move at an accelerated rate, it is necessary to slow down time and honor human connection. This allows people "to peel away the garbage that prevents us from seeing clearly."[9]

M.U.G.A.B.E.E.: Offering the transformative power of art to community-based initiatives rooted in struggles for justice and social change

Carlton Turner is an artist who was born in New York City and raised in rural Mississippi. He comes to cultural organizing with a deep belief in the transformative power of art. In 1994, he began producing and performing music professionally with his brother, Maurice Turner, under the name M.U.G.A.B.E.E. (Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction). Their "vision was to get a big contract in New York and put out healing music that would change the course of the whole industry."[10] After several years of trying to "make it" in the music industry, Carlton and Maurice met artists involved in Alternate Roots[11] who exposed them to a new way of thinking about the relationship between art and social change and the value of working in community. This changed the course of their work.

Still firmly grounded in their belief in the transformative power of art, M.U.G.A.B.E.E. is now a multidisciplinary arts group that travels throughout the Deep South and across the country, bringing art and culture to bear on the needs and concerns of communities. Carlton believes that a community-based approach to making art is a necessity that extends far beyond the art product. "The process by which we make art is also the process by which we build community," says Turner.[12]

Rather than leading with their own agenda, M.U.G.A.B.E.E. approaches their artist residencies with the following questions: What does your community need? How can we help propel your process to the next stage? In this way, a community's needs are placed at the forefront of the agenda. Story circles, a process in which participants are invited to share their experience and tell stories on a particular issue or set of issues, play an important role in M.U.G.A.B.E.E.'s community-based work.

As a touring artist and cultural organizer, Turner believes it is important to make connections between communities. "When you do a story circle, you have a piece of the stories that are shared inside of you," says Turner.[13] The stories shared become the threads with which Turner and M.U.G.A.B.E.E. weave together a broader community that is not bound by the limits of geography, but rather by shared principles, values, and visions for a just future.

M.U.G.A.B.E.E. is currently involved in a long-term partnership with the Mississippi Delta Cultural Research Institute and the Town of Glendora, MS, as part of a cultural heritage and tourism initiative. A town of 298 residents, Glendora is one of two all black towns in Mississippi and the place where Emmett Till was brutally murdered in 1955. The goal of this initiative is to celebrate African-American culture, specifically blues and folk traditions, and to raise awareness about the legacy of the civil rights movement and the lessons learned from the ongoing struggle for human rights and justice in the Mississippi Delta region.

The cornerstone of this initiative is the creation of the Emmett Till Intrepid Center, a memorial museum and technology center that will house artifacts—including photographs, oral histories, and audio-visual archives—that illustrate Glendora's relationship to the history of the Till kidnapping, murder, and trial. Another component of this project is the development of a walking tour of Glendora that reflects this history and that engages the community in conversation about race and racism.

Ricardo Levins Morales: Using the power of visual symbols in community and social movements

Artist organizer Ricardo Levins Morales says the organic nature of cultural organizing is like planting a garden. "There are processes that take their own rhythm, no matter what anybody does." In the context of a long history as organizers, Ricardo and his sister, Aurora Levins Morales, have returned to do cultural organizing work in the rural area in Puerto Rico where they were raised. In this mountainous coffee-growing region where economic prospects are uncertain, many young people are leaving for the city. "It became very clear to us as people skilled in cultural organizing that…the community was losing its self-image that was so strong when we were young—and its memory," Ricardo says.

Based on this, Ricardo and Aurora are creating an oral history and imaging project, based on conducting oral-history interviews with elders and creating posters illustrating stories highlighted in the interviews. "Young people didn't know that this spot by the side of the road was Don Paco's store and bakery, and the two rooms on the side of the store were where their parents had gone to school and their grandparents went to school," Ricardo shares. "Some have related to the history of hurricanes in the neighborhood. That's one of the ways that people think about the time."

The resulting posters are stocked in the local store, where many villagers pick up copies. The posters are popular. Some people are using them in their altars. Though posters weren't part of the local tradition, they have become a currency that has integrated into the community context. Now the Levins Morales team is considering doing portraits of local people with quotes from their interviews, to be displayed on the front of a store that is a local hub. This is a way of creating a self-awareness of the community that can foster cohesion and solidarity.

Choosing how to focus the art for a particular organizing endeavor is an intuitive process. "It's a question of what stories are needed," Ricardo asserts. In his work with the union [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (](AFSCME[)](Ricardo designed a logo showing the range of activity of union members: people working, giving birth to babies, helping in hospitals, doing roadwork, and fighting fires. In this choice around how to portray the union, Ricardo chose a diverse set of humanizing images to illustrate the identity of the union. He describes how one AFSCME member used the logo

to hold the leadership accountable around their practices, saying, "You put this image everywhere, that is a visual mission statement. You're not living up to it," referring to a particular discrepancy in the leadership's behavior.

For Ricardo, the underlying question is about power: What is keeping this group of people from feeling powerful and/or from acting on that power? And the job of the cultural organizer is to find the currents of possibility. He notes, "There's levels of power that we don't move into….And so it's common sense to think that those levels of power are way out of our reach." Using the metaphor of a butterfly, he describes how butterflies don't fight the wind, but instead go to a high altitude and coast on the current. He sees his own role as an artist in each new organizing situation as intuiting a sense of possible currents and translating those into images. "It's a form of inserting a story or a symbol into a particular environment that can cause rapid change and a shift in power," he says.

In one instance, a woman who was one of the first in the building trades would go and stand in front of Ricardo's poster recognizing women in the trades. Isolated in her profession, she described her regular viewing of the poster as an act of renewal that allowed her to continue her work. Ricardo believes cultural organizing work has a range of possible impacts. It can be like "a water bottle in a desert" for the isolated woman in the trades; it can also create bigger impact waves with available currents to ride.

Common Ground

Third World Majority, Raices, M.U.G.A.B.E.E., and Ricardo Levins Morales offer compelling examples of the diversity and power of cultural organizing. Each organization approaches this work in a different way. Third World Majority collaborates with grassroots organizations in communities of color and indigenous communities to provide new media training that enables people to create media that not only speaks to their lived experiences, but also reflects their visions for their world. Raices activates the power of cultural identity to engage rural Latinos in a process that honors their knowledge, wisdom, and experience and supports them in forging solutions to the challenges their communities face. M.U.G.A.B.E.E. offers the transformative power of art to community-based initiatives rooted in struggles for justice and social change. Ricardo Levins Morales uses the power of visual symbols to magnify currents of power and possibility in community and social movement contexts.

While each of these approaches is unique, they share the overarching principles and values of working with communities, engaging in sustainable and participatory ways, connecting work to long-term organizing goals, and valuing the process as much as the product. In addition, they each find a shared value in stories. Whether through digital storytelling, community-based interviews, story circles, or visual art, cultural organizing is bound by a shared belief in the power of people telling their own stories—speaking their own truth, using their own voices—to pave the road to justice and social change.

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R. Lena Richardson was the Coordinator/Co-Editor of the Bridge Conversations at the Arts and Democracy Project. From 2008-2011, she also developed an intergenerational oral history project with activist elders at the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists. She currently manages an intergenerational project called Adopt a Grandparent that builds relationships between elders and young people in Portland, Oregon.

For more information, visit: www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy

End Notes

[1] Soundararajan, Thenmozhi, Cultural Organizing Session (USSF). Atlanta, GA. June 2007.

[2] Jones, Chad. Interview with Thenmozhi Soundararajan. Clamor Magazine. Issue 35.5. January/February 2006, p. 1.

[3] Atlas, Caron. Cultural Organizing: A Conversation at the Intersection. Grantmakers in the Arts Reader. Volume 17, No. 2, Summer 2006, p. 35.

[4] Anderson, Amalia, Organizing Session (USSF). Atlanta, GA. June 2007.

[5] National Voice was national voter engagement campaign that coordinated the registration and turnout of over 5 million voters in the 2004 election.

[6] Main Street Project website. Accessed March 1, 2008. www.mainstreetproject.org

[7] Anderson, Amalia, Organizing Session (USSF). Atlanta, GA. June 2007.

[8] Anderson, Amalia, Organizing Session (USSF). Atlanta, GA. June 2007.

[9] Anderson, Amalia, Organizing Session (USSF). Atlanta, GA. June 2007.

[10] Turner, Carlton, Organizing Session (USSF). Atlanta, GA. June 2007.

[11] Alternate Roots is a network of artist-activists who do community-based work in the southeastern region of the United States.

[12] Turner, Carlton, Cultural Organizing Session, USSF.

[13] Turner, Carlton, Cultural Organizing Session, USSF.