
Cultural Organizing

An exchange among Amalia Anderson, Caron Atlas, Jeff Chang, Dudley Cocke, Samuel Orozco, Peter Pennekamp, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, and Ken Wilson, facilitated and edited by Caron Atlas

"I believe that if we can keep our values close, our imaginations open, and our stories fierce, we can and will win."
- Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Caron Atlas Introduction

"Cultural organizing" means placing culture at the center of an organizing strategy. It can be done to unite people through the humanity of culture and the democracy of participation. It can also be used to divide people through fear and polarization. Karl Rove, in his appeal to the Christian Right, is a master of cultural organizing. So are thousands of progressive grassroots leaders working for social and economic justice. What is different are the values, principles, and vision for the future (and definition of whose future) that lie at the heart of the organizing.

At the 2005 GIA conference, eight individuals - activist artists, community organizers, and funders - began a conversation about the purposeful intersection of art and activism. That session stimulated follow-up email exchanges and writing among the conference participants and a few others. The resulting discussion is reflected in this article.

Our intention is to make cultural organizing visible by sharing its principles, demonstrating its rigor and creativity, and illustrating its diverse methodologies. The question is not whether this is art or whether it is activism. It is a combination of the two - a hybrid that needs to be understood on its own terms. We are asking, what is needed for this work to succeed? We want to further understand the contexts for cultural organizing, including the backlash to it, and explore how funders can support it. In doing so we recognize the challenges of connecting work that seeks to shift power with institutions that embody power.

We know that cultural organizing takes time and that its process is as creative as its product. Taking time and allowing for a creative process are just as important for funders coming to an understanding of the complexity and potential of this work. If we want to make change we can't just replicate the systems that we want to change. If we want to stimulate imagination, we need to start with our own work.

In the spirit of cultural organizing and of our own lively exchange, we have created this article together. We will explore our experiences and views on cultural organizing through multiple voices and stories in three parts. The first illustrates what it looks like when we break through lines that separate us;

and the second shares the principles and methodologies that give this work rigor, purpose, and integrity. We conclude with a conversation about grantmaking that explores both barriers and possibilities.

Practicing connection

Peter Pennekamp (executive director, Humboldt Area Foundation) begins by speaking of the value of blurred lines and challenging us to find artistic meaning in a context of connection.

Peter Pennekamp

What comes first, a people's health or a people's dance?

I am not American Indian and have no right to speak for them, but my friends on California's north coast have often said there is no such dichotomy. Ceremonial dances, health, environmental justice, community action are all part of community life constructed of relationships that blur lines and confound artificial separations.

Over thirty years ago the tribes of the region began to both reclaim and rebuild sacred ceremonies that had been largely scorched out during the days of forced boarding schools and their aftermath of social destruction. A fully committed generation of young leaders reconnected with elders who remembered the original practices, and a movement to regain health of the spirit, body, and community grew. Over the years it became strong, vigorous, and vibrant. Now thousands participate in the sacred ceremonial dances, strong health institutions have been built, many youth go to college. The people are regaining their power and center in a contemporary world.

What came first? The spirit needs sacred ceremony and practice, art, and health of body and community to prosper. The body needs a well spirit and practices of wellness and healing, traditional and western, to heal. The community is only as healthy, as nurturing, as the people are well in body and spirit.

There is no "silo" of activity, no arena of life that if given attention in isolation will result in the wellness of the whole. The hope for wellness in isolation is purely a western fiction, one that continues despite the fact that most of us know intuitively that it is wrong.

So why do we in arts philanthropy who deeply value the arts usually believe that artistic meaning comes in the context of connection yet only minimally practice the connection in our work? We often travail about the "lack of support" for the arts, yet few funders put into practice what the American Indians and others have known for millennia, that art as community practice is art valued beyond product. It is not amateur, or secondary, but is the

very reason a culture's art will be valued and supported highly and widely, not just narrowly by an elite.

When art strengthens a community, it is at its best - energizing the spirit in the face of adversity, strengthening the soul before those who would smash it down, feeding muscles that have to keep the resolve of the march.

Samuel Orozco (director of news and information, Radio Bilingüe) answers Peter's question with the wise words of an elder healer and describes how Radio Bilingüe draws on cultural tradition to strengthen and mobilize communities.

Samuel Orozco

La Cultura Cura

Many years ago, while dining with fellow Radio Bilingüe staff members at a local Fresno restaurant where we were served the best *sopes* and *salsas* in town, the owner, an elderly woman approached our table with the need to share her feelings. She began by saying, "I don't know if you have any idea what your station means in our lives." She paused and then continued, "Let me tell you, if it were not for your programs, I am sure that I would be dead by now."

Years later, I remembered the discussion when an elder healer in the San Francisco Bay area summed up in three words the best way to deal with the ills in the Latino community: *La Cultura Cura*, or "Healing through Culture." That phrase has since come to represent much of the programming that Radio Bilingüe broadcasts in this virtual plaza pública for Latinos and farm workers.

The idea behind the *La Cultura Cura* radio information stream is that Latinos have in their own culture the power to heal, to fight the threat of illness and their abysmal lack of access to the health care system. Instead of looking for wellness in a world that values consumption and disposable assets, Latinos need to look to themselves, go back to their traditional values, become literate about the issues impacting their health, and mobilize around those issues values as a community.

The emphasis on social contributions coupled with the pride about cultural identity is important to develop a sense of ownership of the land and an interest in being part of community-wide efforts to solve public problems. The recent rise of an unprecedented movement for immigrant rights attests to the sense of urgency by immigrants to break their isolation in an immigrant-bashing climate as well as to the growing enthusiasm to become practicing citizens in this country. Talk shows on Radio Bilingüe are flooded these days with calls from young students direct from the school walkout lines,

parents who accompany their kids in vigils and demonstrations, and migrants who join lobbying efforts for the first time in their lives. In early April, a listener, Gonzalo called in from Yakima, Washington, in the wake of a national day of mobilization against draconian laws and for immigration reform:

I want to send a message to congressmen and senators. All those students (joining walkout marches) are not illegals as they are called. They are our future. Most of those who are taking to the streets are American citizens. I want the government to know that the lion is waking up.

Ken Wilson (executive director, the Christensen Fund) offers a funder's point of view. The Fund, which is mainly focused on indigenous and tribal peoples internationally, supports people "dreaming, carving, struggling, and adapting to their cultural, livelihood, and environmental futures."

Ken Wilson

Why should we do it?

Cultural organizing is about a kind of participation/engagement that comes from an affirmation of community and culture. Thus it enables people to speak and live from their own power (from what gives them strength: their identity, values, and networks), rather than from their marginality, which is what they have to draw on if we ask them to speak and live on the terms of the powerful. This kind of participation is important both because it can enable people to win against the odds, but, even more importantly, because the very processes that enable the victories also affirm their cultural ways and community processes going forward.

Principles and methodologies

Raíces Rural Latino Capacity Building Initiative is a culturally-based approach to organizing. It is a collaboration between the Main Street Project, the University of Iowa's Latino Institute, and the Northwest Area Foundation. The Initiative works with rural Latino communities in Iowa, Minnesota, Idaho, and Oregon to support rural capacity-building and poverty reduction. Raíces co-director, Amalia Anderson, underscores the importance of cultural competence and a principles-based approach to the work.

Amalia Anderson

Culturally-based organizing: identity = power

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting my time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together.¹

Our approach is steeped in culture and tradition - using a Latin American model that consists of *encuentros* or community gatherings, popular education, and *Frerian concientizacion*.² The name of our project, *Raíces*, or roots, refers to the deep connections that rural Latinos have to their communities, and the strength that our culture, history, and identity brings when addressing challenges facing our communities today.

Our work is based on the deep belief that all communities possess the tools, knowledges, and abilities to forge the solutions they are looking for. As such, the following principles are fundamental to all *Raíces* work:

- Latino/a led and accountable to Latino communities
- a popular education approach that respects the knowledge and wisdom of the people most effected by poverty
- culturally-competent and language-accessible
- respectful of a rural context and its realities
- strength-based and capacity-building

For me, *Raíces* is about being able to be part of a way of working that speaks to where I have come from, who I am, and how my life experience and ways of knowing and being in the world are part and parcel of how I work with communities. My worldview and the worldview of other Latin American peoples are recognized as valid, important, and complete. As an organizer and cultural worker, I believe culture is essential to create new spaces for ourselves and our peoples.

With *Raíces*, we are constantly in a state of learning, unlearning, and relearning. A dynamic process that is not linear, it's about what it means to be in this moment, in this period of time, and to ask, am I open to hear it or feel it? How do I share this? To us, learning is a process in and of itself and is never one-sided. We are always both teachers and learners.

We need to acknowledge the power in language and to challenge the current narrative around "immigration," which implies choice. We also need to question our definitions of communities and to challenge instances when people are denied the right of community. We are communities without borders, transnational communities, single communities in multiple spaces, "both/and" peoples. Survival depends on maintaining the identity, language, and the traditions that hold communities together. Our identity is our power.

While Raíces is initiated by organizers who are grounded in culture, Roadside Theater in Appalachia and Thousand Kites, a program of Holler in the Hood (H2H), is generated by activist

artists. Both approaches, however, draw on similar principles. Appalachia's growing prison industry is a part of a new national pattern of prisoners from poor urban neighborhoods being locked up in poor, remote rural communities. Thousand Kites is a multi-year story-based collaboration among those most affected by the U.S. prison industry: prisoners and prison employees, their families, and their respective communities. Dudley Cocke is director, Roadside Theater and interim director, Appalshop, the Appalachian cultural center that is home base for the work. He describes the key role that artists play in the work.

Dudley Cocke

Communities becoming aware of themselves

Artists have always helped us understand ourselves and our changing world by helping us tell both our old and our new stories. After all, it is our stories, those that we collectively and individually tell ourselves and others, those we can understand and imagine, that define what is possible for us as human beings.

The general purpose of our cultural organizing is to help communities become more aware of themselves, of their local life, and of their democratic aspirations. We have evolved a community residency methodology that rests on four broad principles we call our pillars:

- partnerships and collaborations with an inclusive range of community organizations,
- local leadership,
- engagement over the course of at least several years, and
- our flexibility to alternate between the role of teacher and student.

Our method encourages a willingness among all partners to reexamine basic assumptions and test hypotheses through repeating cycles of posing questions and trying to answer them. Together, we ask ourselves: What are we trying to change, and why is changing it important? How are we trying to make the change, and why is this the best strategy? How will we know we are making the change; what data will provide us evidence so we can improve the work and demonstrate its accomplishment to others? A humble curiosity, an openness to simple questions and unexpected answers, a willingness not to know the answers - these are the qualities of a learner that our cultural organizing model cultivates.

Using their respective live and digital storytelling expertise, Roadside and H2H artists will develop a prison script in a format that can be readily adapted for production by local groups of citizens, including prisoners. Fifteen of these live productions will be produced nationally. Three will be audio recorded by a professional team and immediately sampled in a studio with a live overlay of narration

by a spoken-word artist. The resulting production will be quickly distributed to 150 community radio stations for a holiday broadcast, which will also stream on the web.

Ken Wilson

The digital revolution has made possible strategies around production and networking that were almost unimaginable until recently. The cost of producing content - people's own stories - has declined massively; likewise, the Internet and file sharing have helped the cost of distribution to collapse. With these changes has come the capacity to move the content around the world in milliseconds. The digital revolution is also allowing the integration of sound, image, and word in ways that speak much more to the nature of the content of community life. (Frankly, the academic notion that all could be conveyed with the linear written word was a pretty extraordinary one). And as we've seen, not only does multi-media content convey ideas more directly and richly it also enables the ideas to be conveyed in non-linear fashion that can be far more driven by the demand of receivers.

Amalia Anderson and Thenmozhi Soundararajan, executive director, Third World Majority, understand the digital revolution within the framework of media justice. As articulated by the Media Justice Network, of which they both are part, "Media Justice takes into account history, culture, privilege, and power. We seek new relationships with media and a new vision for its control, access, and structure. And we understand that this will require new policies and new systems that treat our airways and our communities as more than markets."³

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Reframing the media to create spaces for cultural resistance

Third World Majority. Think about it. Isn't it funny how a name can reframe the entire way the nonprofit industrial complex defines the majority of people locked out of most of the world's resources? Are we your under-resourced and marginalized minority constituents, welfare mothers, juvenile delinquents, terrorists, maids, sex workers, drug addicts, illegal aliens, and sweatshop workers? Or are we our own visionaries, singers, poets, architects, filmmakers, organizers, scholars, and historians?

We are a collective of young women of color building a new media center. In some ways, our gift has been the stubbornness to build an institution that doesn't reflect the system we are trying to break down but to create the world and relationship we want now. A key part of our work is to "problematize" the media and the way that it shapes the public opinion and then to empower communi-

ties with digital tools to get their stories out to a broader audience. We partner with communities of color and indigenous communities to provide multimedia trainings and to develop strategies for how we can reclaim technology resources for our self-determination.

We focus on the digital storytelling movement, in which communities create their own four-five minute movie from the found material in their lives (art, oral history, creative writing, photographs, music, written script, letters, news clippings) and combine it with new media production (digital video, the web, graphic design, sound engineering, animation) to tell their own truths in their own voices. Our work draws on the "third cinema" (which advocates for a cinema of the people where the most poor and marginalized control all parts of the production process), popular education, and organizing traditions from our communities.

Community Digital Storytelling is a movement to recreate and remember the power of story in honoring local wisdom, connecting people to each other through that wisdom, and moving them to collective action. It considers the sharing and distribution of the skills, process, and products of digital storytelling to be as important as the production of stories themselves. For us, the process of a community mining its wisdom is a shared political experience.

We train in the spaces where communities feel at home: barns, churches, community centers, schools, and people's homes. This acknowledges the primacy of the community, with technology being a tool - and just a tool. Another value we practice is co-teaching with a teacher from the community we are working with. It is important for the curriculum to come from our communities' perspectives and for us to challenge people's understanding of what an expert can be.

We give priority to the leadership of young women of color as our trainers, organizers, and tech support. Such a simple shift in who is teaching is not a simple thing at all. I think as young women, we assert and recognize the leadership women have had for a long time in our communities, leadership that, from mother to daughter, nurtures the passing on of our stories, culture, and traditions. We believe it is vital to recontextualize our work as not only technology training but also as a space for our cultural resistance.

For journalist Jeff Chang, hip-hop is "a venue we have to tell our truth" - one of the "spaces of cultural resistance" that Thenmozhi mentions. Jeff was an organizer of the 2004 National Hip-Hop Convention which he describes as "an unprecedented effort to mobilize a sleeping giant - a generation

of tens of millions for whom 'politics' is but a profanity – and to leverage its cultural power toward political power.” “Delegates,” he said, “would qualify by registering fifty people to vote, and would fashion the hip-hop generation’s first national political agenda.”

Jeff Chang

Hip-hop and political organizing

In all the breast-beating and hair-pulling over the 2004 elections, one significant fact was lost: 4.3 million more voters between the ages of 18 and 29 came to the polls than in 2000, and over half of those new voters were African American or Latino. Turnout rates for young African Americans and Latinos were higher than they were for whites. The 2004 election was an historic moment, the emergence of the hip-hop generation.

It’s important to note that the Republican Party didn’t make this happen. Nor did the Democratic Party make this happen. An uncoordinated but converging push of mass grassroots efforts and high-profile celebrity campaigns brought this new constituency to the polls.

But no sooner did the hip-hop generation make history than they were erased by history.

At the heart of the culture war that divides progressives is a fear of a browning nation. The most non-white precincts in the country are also the youngest, and they have been abandoned by both parties.

At the same time, it has become common sense, a cliché: young people are apathetic. They don’t care about politics the way Baby Boomers did when they were our age. This, too, is a lie.

Young people care that schools are closing.

They care about their corners turning into police states, that they are profiled and chased out of public space.

They care that they are the most “surveilled” generation in American history - that in some cities, 80 percent of youth of color are in a gang database.

They care that educational tracking has become deadly, that half of them are on a track that leads to the torture chambers and suicide machines that make up a burgeoning prison-industrial complex.

They care that we are in a war without end and their bodies are on the line.

They care a whole hell of a lot about politics. It’s electoral politics they question.

They know that politics is not what it was to the Baby Boomers, who grew up during a time of *Brown v. Board*, Kennedy, King, the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act. They know that lawmakers of this era have been quick to harm (No Child Left Behind, and the evisceration of youth jobs programs and the federal financial aid system...the list goes on and on) but slow to help.

So they look at electoral politics with a jaundiced eye. They aren’t apathetic; they are militantly skeptical. How, they ask, would voting change things for us?

If we can answer this question, we will have gone a long way toward rebuilding a progressive movement. Despite being the target of so much bad policy, young people have already begun to organize themselves. In 2004, they tested the system in unprecedented numbers. Whether this marked a passing moment or the cresting of a new wave is a question that is in our power to answer.⁴

Grantmaking

Ken Wilson

So why are we foundations not doing more?

Indeed the field of cultural organizing IS difficult for foundations, involving as it does age and ethnic demographics that are little represented on our staffs, let alone on our boards, and, typically, the field is not replete with 501(c)(3) agencies making neat applications on a quarterly basis. But beyond this we should be thinking about other reasons this field is difficult for us:

- We as foundations tend to look for solutions among the powerful and the experts, and we are less oriented to making a bet on communities developing their own ways to envision and realize their voices. Even when we are prepared to listen we’re not always very good at hearing such voices and at backing things that are so nebulous when viewed through grants administrative eyes. This is difficult even with existing community voices, let alone with voices from transnational communities, communities with new demographics, and the increasingly global hip-hop generation.
- Many of us are still grappling with the implications of the digital revolution in terms of people’s power to produce their own content and decide what to access. The digital world offers a totally different model of the public space and challenges our habitual linking of “production quality” to “social relevance” in public-interest content.
- Cultural organizing is an approach that strays across the boundaries (and transgresses foundation docket structures something rotten!) that, even for autonomous creative institutions like foundations, still seem

rather fundamental: boundaries like, “Is this art or social justice?” and “Is this culture or politics?” - boundaries that have the arts and culture staff saying to applicants, “Try the environmental division,” and the environmental division saying, “This looks to us like culture not ecology.” Above all this approach transgresses that miserable old fence between Art and Life. It discomforts us by giving culture a small “c” when there’s precious little funding even for culture with a big “C” beyond that for peak institutions in major urban centers.

- Support for the cultural end of social movements is also a little scary. It suggests an ambiguous or downright dangerous unleashing and deployment of power, and it doesn’t fit the current enthusiasm for “stakeholder” approaches and “win-win” partnerships. Stakeholder approaches have been popular because power and wealth has become so concentrated that managed reforms can yield results, even if these are not transformational. On the other hand, the kinds of cultural movements that we’re describing here - 1968 is a national and international reference point — are not manageable; they actually self-replicate without a grant report or a new proposal, and they ARE transformational but only when and if they take off. We know that this kind of funding won’t allow us to predict - let alone control - the product that will come out of it.
- Finally, it is problematic that the very processes that make this cultural organizing and these social movements powerful stem from their lack of central funding and guidance. Even when a foundation can glean an understanding of what is happening - and what might happen with funding - it is not at all clear how best to support the process.

In addition to his association with Roadside Theater and Appalshop, Dudley is a trustee of the Bush Foundation.

Dudley Cocke

Organizing, using culture or not, is about the process of learning, individually and collectively. The majority of foundations strike me as management organizations rather than “learning organizations.” Management organizations are more fixed in their culture, almost as if the solutions to increasingly complex, global problems are known and the instruments for their implementation are the objects of support. Learning organizations are more flexible, assuming that solutions are not necessarily known and the process of discovery should be supported. The former asks what strategies can deliver the solutions; the latter asks what strategies will support the active search for solutions.

Peter closes this piece and opens a continued dialogue.

Peter Pennekamp

Embracing discomfort and making a commitment

Art does not always benefit community organizing, but when it does, it is a powerful agent. For those who sit on boards of directors art can sometimes be too powerful when it invokes cultural democracy, not in rhetoric but in action. If conflicted, such board members should reconsider not their discomfort, for it is real, but their honest commitment to a democratic society. Democracy cannot exist without the discomfort of competing beliefs and priorities. Art, as practiced by the people in this article, is about discomfort, but it is also about communication beyond and beneath the shallow debates of our society. At a time when many worry about the strength of American democracy, art should be supported to enliven the body, spirit, and community of our nation.

Participants in the conference session and follow-up discussion included Amalia Anderson, Main Street Project <www.mainstreetproject.org>, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Caron Atlas, Center for Civic Participation <www.ccp.org>, Brooklyn, New York; Jeff Chang, hip-hop journalist <www.cantstopwontstop.com>, Berkeley, California; Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater/Appalshop <www.appalshop.org>, Whitesburg, Kentucky; Hugo Morales, Radio Bilingüe <www.radiobilingue.org>, Fresno, California; Peter Pennekamp, Humboldt Area Foundation <www.hafoundation.org>, Bayside, California; Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Third World Majority <www.cultureisaweapon.org>, Oakland, California; and Ken Wilson, Christensen Fund <www.christensenfund.org>, Palo Alto, California.

Notes

1. The activist/elders were said to have used this statement to greet social workers at the edge of their village.
2. Concientizacion is a process by which communities learn first about themselves and understand their strengths, and with this deeper knowledge are better able to recognize and understand the political, economic, and social conditions that surround them.
3. See www.mediajustice.org. The Media Justice Network is comprised of four core organizations: Fourth World Rising, Media Tank, Third World Majority, and Video Machete.
4. From “The Hip-Hop Generation and The Progressive Movement.”