



**BUILDING HEALTH EQUITY
ON THE BEDROCK OF TRADITIONAL
ARTS AND CULTURE**







SALUDARTE
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TRADITIONAL ARTS
AND CULTURE

Co-authored by George Lipsitz and
the Alliance for California Traditional Arts

Edited by Amy Kitchener, Betty Marín, and
Quetzal Flores

SaludArte: Building Health Equity on the Bedrock of Traditional Arts and Culture

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Sandino Gonzalez-Flores and Sophia Mena rehearse at the SaludArte health fair in Boyle Heights. Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2016.



Printing workshop led by Self Help Graphics at the SaludArte health fair in Boyle Heights. Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2016.

Summary of Tools of Traditional Arts Practice

“A voice that is oppositional and propositional involves an urgent voice of resistance to social injustices, an urgency to speak out, a collective vision, and a collaborative process and interpretation, thus expressing the central values of situated knowledge production, embodied theorizing, and community engagement.”

- Rina Benmayor, cultural studies scholar

The 9 R's

The aims and means of restorative cultural arts practice reside in the 9 R's. When participants agree to honor these imperatives, common ground can be established productively.

Acuerdos for Artistic Co-Creation

Building cultural meaning and setting a moral precedent by arriving at agreements (acuerdos) through democratic participation.

Traditional Arts Practice is...

A basic list of ways in which traditional arts have transformative impacts.

ACTA in Action: Fields of Endeavor

The traditional arts-based practice of ACTA in Boyle Heights has taken place in a variety of settings and covered a broad range of artistic media and genres.

A Building Healthy Communities Agenda for Social Change

Ways and spaces in which traditional arts practice augments the lexicon of social justice.

Restorative Cultural Arts Practice (Praxis):

Classroom activities, exercises, and facilitation.

Tools Deployed for a Day of Dialogue About Participatory Arts Engagement and Displacement

A mix of art activities and interventions engaging local community.

Explore these tools of traditional arts practice in more detail starting on page 110.



“El Puente” (the bridge), a collective mural created during SaludArte health fair led by Jose Ramirez. Photo: ACTA, 2016.

ACTA and Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights



Collective share back at the SaludArte health fair in Boyle Heights.

Photo: ACTA, 2016.

“Performance articulates a collective social location, while at the same time bearing the capacity to imagine a world beyond it.”

- Alex Chávez, author of “Sound of Crossing”

Our title, *SaludArte*, is inspired by one of the first large public events of the same name we held to further highlight, activate, and celebrate the cultural treasures documented in our Boyle Heights (Los Angeles) cultural asset map. It speaks to the publication's themes—*salud* as in health, and *arte* as in art—and the Spanish *saludarte*, or “to greet you,” a strong custom in the Latinx Boyle Heights community, denoting themes of connection and conviviality that undergird the traditional arts practices we highlight throughout this publication. The Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) is committed to promoting mutual respect, cultural pluralism, and cultural democracy among the diverse peoples of California. We view traditional arts practitioners as connectionists, a term invented by Doris Sommer, an arts activist, Harvard University professor of Romance Languages and Literatures, and creator of the pre-texts pedagogy that is deployed in schools throughout Latin America. In the work she does through her Cultural Agents Initiative and elsewhere, Sommer envisions connectionists as people who link up with others through creative practices that promote collective community development and empowerment. Artists working in traditional forms function as communicators of collective wisdom and as transmitters of shared experiences, aspirations, and values. From our perspective, art does more than merely illustrate or ornament the world. Art helps make the world. Creative arts activity carried out by bearers of tradition encourages people to look, listen, and feel in new ways. It draws on a past that has never gone away, to envision and enact a future that is not yet here. Art is not an ornament of collective life, but rather its essence.

Traditional art practices serve as storehouses for collective memory, as sites of moral instruction, and as ways of calling communities into being through practice and performance. Art making builds social solidarity and cohesion through collaboration. It creates conduits of connectivity and collectivity. Acts of co-creation can produce events, ideas, and actions of great value, while at the same time revealing the value that already exists in undervalued people and places.

On these pages we provide an inventory of health equity tools and tactics we have reintegrated and made visible again as core parts of re-envisioning our communities and society. These emerged out of our particular circumstances, but we believe that they have utility

for people imagining similar work in their own locations. For nearly a decade, ACTA has participated in the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) effort supported by The California Endowment. Like ACTA, BHC acknowledges that health equity is determined not only through access to health care, but through other social factors, like structural racism, poverty, and other conditions that impact our ability to lead healthy lives where we live, work, and play. Our work in the communities of Boyle Heights, Santa Ana, Merced, and the East Coachella Valley responded to this by integrating traditional arts into the BHC campaigns addressing these social determinants of health. This publication focuses on ACTA's work in Boyle Heights, adapted to local conditions. But the work in Boyle Heights has been enhanced and augmented at every step by lessons learned at ACTA sites in Santa Ana, Merced, and the Eastern Coachella Valley.



“El Puente,” a collective mural created during SaludArte health fair led by Jose Ramirez.

Photo: ACTA, 2016.

For us, the work began with a process designed to identify the culture bearers and traditional arts practitioners who were already part of the community, and had been working there for a period of time. We did this through a cultural asset mapping methodology that convened a local task force to support us in collecting questionnaires identifying the people, places, events, and organizations that were culturally significant to the identity of Boyle Heights. We call these “cultural treasures” to recognize the value prescribed by the community to artistic and cultural practice as an alternative value system and guide for life. Over 100 treasures were nominated, and from those, artists who had the cultural knowledge and sensibility working with this community rose to the surface. For almost a decade, ACTA provided these artists with the space, resources, and support to exercise the agency needed to experiment and explore within their practices and develop the methodologies we describe in the following chapters. In conjunction with Building Healthy Communities campaigns, these artists focused on building relationships and embodying the social and political goals being fought for around restorative justice, health-care access, youth leadership, and for equitable community development. We like to call this process “living into the work,” a way of operating that uplifts the values of the work in organizational, activist, and community spaces. In this publication, we share the particular practices present in this community, and invite you to engage in your own process to identify (1) the people and practices that have been holding and growing culture over time and (2) the current needs of the community, to guide the shape and direction of your work.

Organized around the premise that health happens with prevention, in schools, and in neighborhoods, the work of Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights has encompassed a wide range of activities. Students have campaigned to have their school cafeterias and vending machines provide only healthful foods to help promote better eating habits. While quilting and embroidering, people have discussed their lives, shared problems and solutions, and learned about no-cost health care programs and clinics available to individuals and families who cannot access health insurance. Street vendors treated as criminals by authorities in Los Angeles for trying to make a living have found support from musicians who have initiated collective songwriting workshops among and for them. These workshops

have created lyrics and songs that have gone on to be used in the successful campaign to decriminalize street vending. Collectively written lyrics note how street vendors offer fresh fruit and other healthful food options at affordable prices, enliven street culture, contribute to community cohesion and safety, and change eating habits for the better.

Participants instructed by master craftspeople affiliated with ACTA have also learned how to make altars to remember the dead and celebrate life. In the process, they have learned new ways to map their own bodies, identifying specific places where they feel pain or stress, and making a *milagro* (healing charm) for that part of the body to be placed on the altar. In addition, just as traditional art making is both an individual and collective practice, health projects using traditional arts methods have attempted to treat not only the illnesses within individual bodies, but the sicknesses of inequality and injustice that plague society, infecting what social scientists call the “body politic.”

Restorative justice projects have been organized in schools to address conflicts between students as well as between students and teachers, providing a more effective means of reducing school violence than suspensions and expulsions. Other campaigns have focused on equitable funding for neighborhood schools and combating



SaludArte health fair banner in Boyle Heights. Photo: ACTA, 2016.

displacement due to gentrification. These projects sought to recognize, address, and redress legacies of collective historical traumas of colonialism, racism, displacement, and labor exploitation, and also included “healing circle” discussions as a means of conflict resolution and building social cohesion to prevent future harm. Students trained in these methods launched a successful campaign in 2013 for a School Climate Bill of Rights that established policies designed to respect individual dignity and freedom, while encouraging young people to take responsibility for creating conditions of mutual recognition and respect in their everyday interactions.

The School Climate Bill of Rights elevates positive behavior interventions over punishment. It promotes restorative justice approaches to interpersonal conflict rather than suspensions and expulsions. It declares students will no longer be expelled or suspended for vague and subjective offenses like “willful defiance.” It calls for minimizing the presence, reach, and activity of law enforcement, probation officers, and other arms of the juvenile and criminal justice systems inside schools. Perhaps most important, the School Climate Bill of Rights creates a new democratic institution: a District School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Task Force that includes a teacher, student, administrator, and parent representative from each Educational Service Center as well as members from community organizations.

In Boyle Heights, mobilizing participation through traditional arts practices as a way of building healthy communities has strengthened community reliance and resourcefulness, deepened a collective capacity for democratic deliberation and decision-making, and enabled individuals to hone and refine their creativity and virtuosity as artists and activists. Participants have learned new skills, developed new interpersonal relations, and gained confidence about solving problems while constructing altars, participating in collective songwriting workshops, acting in theatre productions, writing a book about the cultural treasures in their neighborhood, or making murals, quilts, embroidered blouses, pillowcases, and aprons.

These arts-based projects produce significant products: a wide array of songs, stories, plays, art assemblages, and installations. Even

more important, however, is that they set in motion a broad range of processes that enact desires for healthy conditions and a supportive community that people routinely only envision. The making of objects requires creative actions. Collaborative acts of co-creation enable individuals and groups to diagnose problems, imagine solutions, envision new uses for familiar materials, exercise judgment, and make shifts in perspectives and practices that can lead to collective social change. Actively participating in designing and carrying out these processes creates new conversations and connections within and across genders, generations, languages, levels of literacy, citizenship statuses, sexual identities, differing degrees of affluence and poverty, and abilities and dis/abilities. New works of art and social imagination emerge from deliberative talk, face-to-face decision-making, casual conversation, collective stress relief, and artistic imagination and experimentation. The work done in these spaces offers participants opportunities to encounter difference without dominance and to replace frustration and fear with the dignity and excitement of co-creation. In this way, projects that routinely address health as the subject through particular works of art also promote the substance of healthful living and social relations through experiences of strong, respectful, mutually-affirming relationships.

In Boyle Heights, traditional arts practices are deeply rooted in what scholar activist Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, in her insightful writings on the music of Lydia Mendoza and the performances of El Teatro Campesino, calls the Mexican popular performance tradition. She explains that diverse forms of singing, sewing, drawing, dancing, orating, ornamenting, narrating, and naming have produced “an alternative interpretive system” which views social experience from a historically situated, Mexican working-class perspective. These works of art develop and deepen mutual recognition and respect. Dancers and singers learn to act collectively as they “read” other people’s head and body movements and listen carefully to pitch, timbre, speed, and rhythm. Through attentiveness to others, people anticipate and respond to the unexpected, promoting the sociality of accompaniment and advanced capacities for improvisation.

These artistic moves and skills have important social ramifications. They make up an archive of collective witness that registers and val-

idates shared, common experiences of social conditions of exploitation and oppression. They enable and encourage individual imagination and expression. At the same time, they promote a profound disposition toward collective, active witnessing, based on what might be called collective, active “with-ness.” They deepen collective capacity for democratic deliberation by providing opportunities to practice judgment and reach conclusions together among people held together by a linked fate shaped by who they are, where they live, and how they and their ancestors have been treated.

At its best, engagement with art can interrupt stale habits, help people develop enhanced capacities for discernment, judgment, and empathy, encourage them to resist simplistic and authoritarian solutions to complex social problems, and enable viewers and listeners to envision a common, egalitarian, and creative existence. Yet the ancestral experience and wisdom that pervades traditional art making does even more than that. It displays a collective intelligence honed over time through individual and group survival strategies, particularly useful when deployed anew in struggles for social justice. Traditional arts practice is embedded in the everyday life of communities and is propelled by constant creativity. It draws on traditions of apprenticeship and instruction that make people accountable to the present and the past, other artists, new audiences, and the alternative archives and academies not controlled by socially-validated experts and elites. Art making in this context creates a “we” in solidarity rather than a “me” in isolation. Cultural convenings promote a group consciousness grounded in the local and the particular that also encompasses the public and private spheres. They expand the temporality of the present by connecting it to the past. They expand the sphere of sociality by going beyond the household and the family. They broaden the sphere of politics by airing issues of common concern through art. They allow opportunities for the silenced to sing, shout, and speak, for the invisible to become visible, the inaudible to be heard, and the intangible to become tangible. Through acts of co-creation, people who are routinely devalued and discounted express untapped wellsprings of imagination, artistry, and mastery. Perhaps most importantly, traditional arts practice can help create social change. It establishes reservoirs of resourcefulness and self-reliance among people who may sometimes be experiencing challenges, but refuse

to be broken. For people facing injustices, it creates opportunities to respond from a position of strength. It enables people denied fair opportunities to address and respond to injustice in a new sphere of activity, forged by their commitments to strengthen their skills to do that work.

Traditional arts practitioners alone cannot wipe out injustice. But they do create different possibilities by provoking people into seeing “what can be,” so often hidden inside “what is.” They can move people from just “being” to “being more.” Participants can see that an agricultural worker who struggles to earn a subsistence living can also be a master of the craft of embroidery, that high school students weighed down by systems of constant surveillance and supervision can create innovative healing circles and other restorative justice practices, that undocumented immigrants struggling to survive and thrive in a hostile environment can be experts guiding others to access health care, and that elders too often treated as disposable can be bearers of valuable knowledge. Just as random pieces of cloth can be sewn together into a beautiful quilt, and everyday objects can be placed together strategically on an altar, undervalued community members can be of great value once traditional arts practices unleash the ability to create new configurations and conversations.

This guide is especially designed for the following groups and individuals:

Organizations, scholars, and groups working within community development, the social determinants of health, public policy, social work, community organizing, and community art who want to work with traditional arts practitioners that are committed to social justice work.

Artists who don’t identify as culture bearers or traditional artists but are interested in working with traditional artists in their community.

Self-identified traditional and community based artists who would like to intentionally open their practices to support transformation within social justice spaces.

We offer some examples of what can result when we support traditional artists to use and experiment with their practices to arrive at collective answers to the community's social and political needs. Many of these artists have been working in these communities their entire lives. Their work is an extension of the knowledge and experiences they have built over decades, carrying a generational lineage to combat the inter-generational trauma ever-present in these communities. We invite you to take the time to build a similar foundation for elevating traditional arts practices that disrupt and expand conventional ways of organizing, that center community knowledge and culture as the opening for transformation.



Why Traditional Arts Matter



Ofelia Esparza leading an arriving ceremony during the Theories of Change and Transformative Cultural Practice session led by ACTA at the REMAP LA conference. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.

“Southeastern indigenous phenomenologies understand the Middle World (the reality that we all inhabit) as a bridge between Upper and Lower Worlds of creation. When the boundaries between worlds break down and the distinctive characteristics of each world begin to collapse upon and bleed into the others, possibilities for rejuvenation and destruction emerge to transform this world radically. The goal is to find balance.”

- Jodi A. Byrd, indigenous scholar,
author of “The Transit of Empire”

Making works of traditional art may seem like a roundabout way of addressing the health needs of a community. The practice of art in Europe and North America has long been viewed as a realm separate from the practical problems of everyday life, as a semi-autonomous field of action devoted to purely aesthetic contemplation and creation. Yet in most of the world throughout history, art has been an endeavor closely connected to the practical problems of everyday life. Throughout Latin America and the southwestern U.S., *curanderas* and *curanderos* (healers) have long used the manipulation of roots, herbs, songs and objects as a means of finding remedies for physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual problems. In African-American communities, people denied access to trained physicians cultivated their own experts—healers following a series of prescribed procedures using available materials to cure ailments and infirmities. These practices required looking beyond surface appearances, discerning the hidden potential contained within minerals, animals, roots, herbs, flowers, and foods, as well as in objects made by humans. Manipulating these raw materials in the right ways constituted an art in itself, but it also trained practitioners to develop the insight and creativity needed for making art objects and developing arts practices. Thus, even beyond its potential healing powers, traditional arts making is a crucible for developing problem-solving strategies of the utmost importance to aggrieved communities.

Art is an exercise in exploration and error. Artists must learn to work in limited and sometimes socially negative spaces. They can experience failure and must learn to overcome it. But art can also be an antidote to solitude, a practice that is often conducted alone, but not always in isolation. As Doris Sommer explains in her book *The Work of Art in the World*, free-thinking people must rely on a collective capacity to make judgments in order to solve social problems. Art involves seeing and solving problems. Making choices about the lyrics and rhythms of songs, the colors and materials of visual art objects, the language, or mixture of languages, in a story, all depend on the ability to imagine and act, to make informed decisions, and to learn what moves listeners, viewers, and readers into deep participation. As a conduit of connection, collaboration, collectivity, and social cohesion, artmaking reflects the world, and, more importantly, reconstructs it.

Art offers glimpses of what it might be like to be fully alive and empowered.



Cuicani music collective with Quetzal Flores leading a Collective Songwriting workshop at Roosevelt High School during a Health Happens in Schools Assembly.

Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2016.

The Regeneration Cycle of Traditional Arts for Social Justice



Invest in Youth Rally, part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods, with Legacy LA organizers Ruby Rivera [L] and Lucy Herrera [R].
Photo: Erick Iñiguez/ACTA, 2019.

“The art has helped us to listen, to break those chains, and release some things we have been carrying for a long time.”

- Juana Mena, ACTA Artist Fellow
for Building Healthy Communities
Boyle Heights

The artistic creation, exhibition, and consumption centered in museums and conservatories, and written about in credentialed criticism, usually revolve around a created object: the painting, the symphony, the novel, etc. Traditional arts practice shares this respect for created objects to a degree, but it also emphasizes the importance of the creative act, of a whole series of imaginative actions by individuals and groups that bring art objects into the world and give them meaning. Every created object is the product of a series of ongoing acts that include invention, creation, exhibition, reception, and long-term impact. A culture is created around the object. Traditional arts practice illuminates the rich reserves of collective community knowledge and aesthetic judgment, dynamic networks of instruction and apprenticeship, and honorable histories of imbuing everyday, practical materials and objects with the power to imagine and create other worlds. Artistic co-creation practices the “imagining otherwise,” upon which social change depends. These processes promote resistance, resilience, different ways of knowing, and an urgent imperative to redefine and reshape the world.

Among members of social groups who have suffered from dispossession, displacement, racism, labor exploitation, police and vigilante violence, hunger, and housing insecurity, the creation of art can be part and parcel of the struggle for survival. People fight with the tools they have in the arenas that are open to them. Groups that do not control film studios, television networks, social media corporations, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, universities, museums, conservatories, or concert halls preserve their memories, voice their hopes, and tell their stories in dance, dress, and decoration. They sew, sing, and speak their truths. Through art, they turn humiliation into honor, make a tonic out of the toxic, and transform the hunger of a seemingly unlivable destiny into nourishment that enables them to not just survive but thrive.

ACTA provokes critical analysis of community cultural practices as sites of cooperation and the production of power through the spirit of *convivencia*. *Convivencia* literally means living together, but figuratively refers to deliberately being fully present with and for one another, rooted in traditions of collective wisdom. This seeks to break away from predictable cycles of political and artistic practice. In traditional

arts making and the survival struggles of everyday life, members of aggrieved communities reproduce patterns of resistance over and over again. Through the Restorative Cultural Arts Practices mural project, the staff of East Los Angeles Community Corporation (ELACC) has generated a theory showing a Cycle from Resistance to Regeneration that also demonstrates how ACTA’s work creates a different kind of space for individuals to reflect on their personal histories, connecting them to broader histories of the social justice struggles around them.

This Resistance Cycle always starts with the hurts of history—injuries that cannot be wished away or forgotten, the INJUSTICE that pervades the accumulated legacy of events, ideas, and actions from the past. In order to avoid being defeated by life, members of communities shaped by injustice respond with INTENTION, the determination to resist, to be resilient, to re-story the past, to restore dignity and hope. An intention ignored by the power structure leads to UPRISING, to political and cultural challenges to the status quo, to the forces that repress opposition and suppress struggles for self-determination. Uprising makes it possible for a PARADIGM SHIFT, a new common sense and expectation about the world and its order. This, in turn, has the potential to produce INNOVATION—new practices, processes, institutions, and social relations that author a new social charter, and new ways of knowing and being in the world. Yet innovation is like peeling an onion: once one layer of problems is removed, new ones appear. Challenges to innovation come from the press of events, from the urgent need to respond to and resist injustice, hence repeating the cycle.

Resistance can also leave individuals and groups trapped by the dynamics they oppose, resisting but unable or too exhausted to envision or enact proactive and regenerative processes. While frequently necessary, this resistance is largely reactive and can undermine the impact of innovation. Being against something bad does not magically create something good or produce new paradigms. Knowing what we are against does not necessarily lead us to what we are for. As musician and ACTA activist Quetzal Flores observes, drawing on the ideas of oral historian and Latina/o Studies and literature professor Rina Benmayor, ACTA promotes a voice that is not only oppositional but also propositional—opposing injustice in the present, but point-

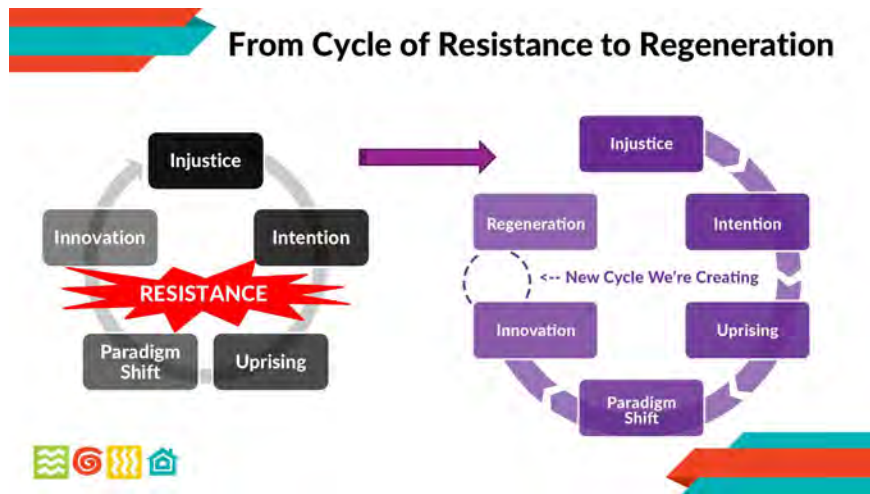
ing the way towards living more boldly, imaginatively, and freely in the future.

Innovation leads to the discovery of cultural resources that collectively reinforce REGENERACIÓN. The goal of *regeneración* is to move from opposition to proposition, to break free from the cycle of resistance and develop new regenerative strategies. For ACTA, traditional arts practices are the vehicles that afford people lateral and outward mobility into spaces where they can think clearly and plant seeds of transformation that interconnect in new, mutually beneficial systems. Art and culture are inseparable and mutually nurturing resources that inhabit the crossroads of community vitality and transformation.

The traditional Resistance Cycle and ACTA’s attempt to break away from it are represented in this figure below:



Participants in Juana Mena’s restorative justice workshop at Roosevelt High School. Photo: Shweta Saraswat/ACTA, 2019.



East LA Community Corporation Cycle from Resistance to Regeneration. 2018.



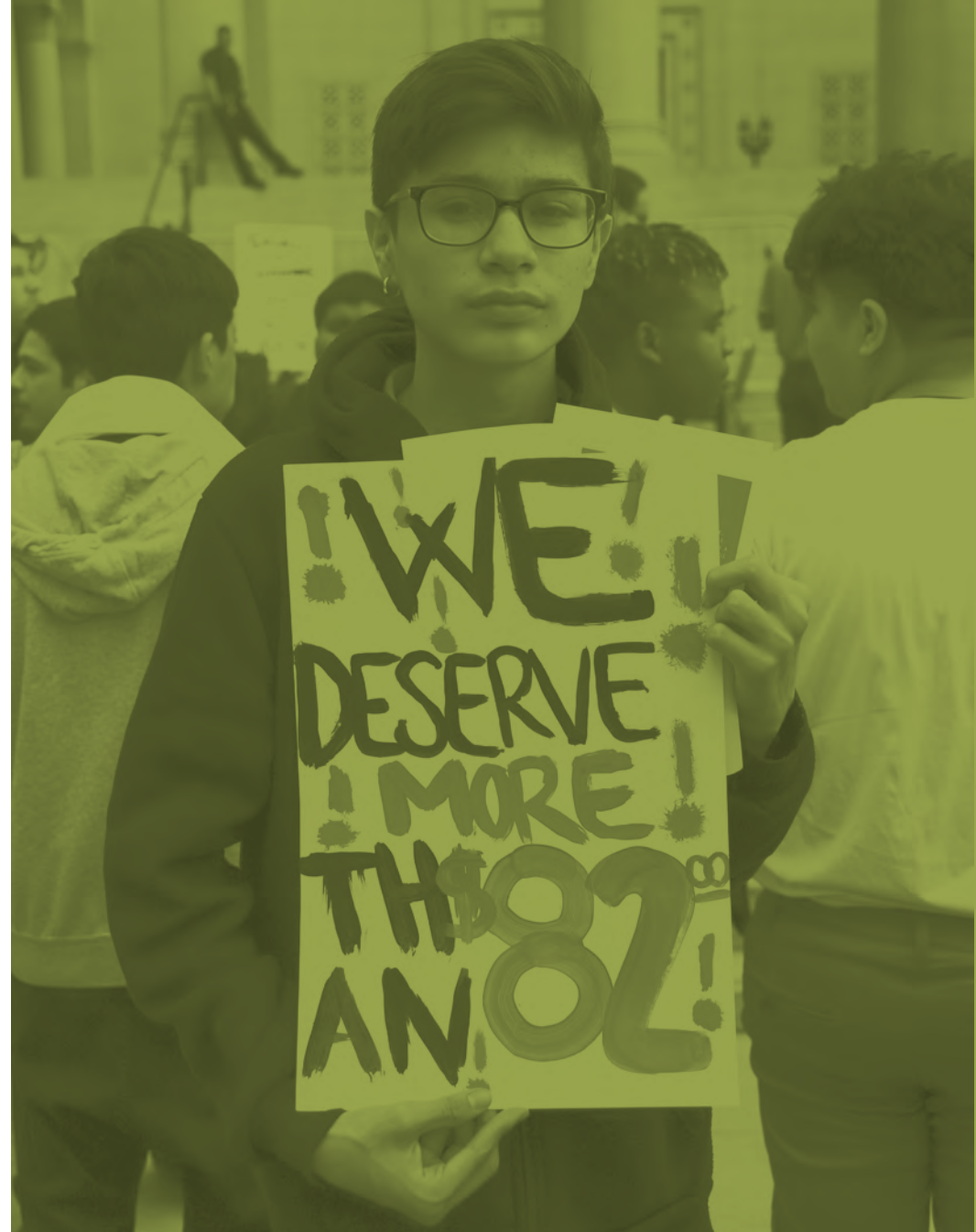
Invest in Youth Rally, part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Erick Iñiguez/ACTA. May 21, 2019.



Altar by Ofelia Esparza at Tonalli Studio. Photo: Betty Marín/ACTA, 2018.



Martha Gonzalez and Juan Perez at Iluminarte event, a Health Happens in Schools assembly at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Omar Torres/Weingart East Los Angeles YMCA Youth Institute, 2015.



Invest in Youth Rally at City Hall, a part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Erick Iñiguez/ACTA, 2019.

Participatory Asset Mapping



Community leaders Loretta Spencer [R] and Jerome Rasberry [L] performing at an ACTA Convening. Photo: ACTA, 2015.

“...anything in Boyle Heights can be your community—it can be a person, place, or thing—as long as it means a lot to you and you treasure it very deeply.”

- Edson Hernandez,
student-author
Roosevelt High School

A key component of the collaborative work of Building Healthy Communities (BHC) and the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) has been the Activating Cultural Assets Pilot Project, an endeavor dedicated to creating a shared vision of community well-being by identifying and mobilizing community cultural resources. Residents of areas denied outside investment and state-funded services and amenities have to find ways to recognize and build on the value of what they already have. Places that lack material resources are often rich in people who have learned how to be resourceful: critical thinkers, creative problem solvers, and courageous defenders of their own dignity. Their artistry and virtuosity, their determination and imagination, can be of great value to solving community problems.

The participatory cultural asset mapping project that started in 2011 revealed that art is deeply embedded in community life in Boyle Heights, Eastern Coachella Valley, Merced, and Santa Ana. The project created task forces in these areas delegated with surveying what their communities are proud of, identifying specific assets and creating an inventory of individual and collective skills, competencies, traditions, customs, and knowledge systems that can serve as sources for transformational social change. These assets included places, people, stories, songs, customs, and traditions. Communities following the invitation from ACTA to look inward for “cultural treasures” among “the people, groups, places and events that reflect cultural expressions that are identified and valued by the community” revealed profound appreciation for local artists and artworks. They recognized them as individuals with great gifts, but also as bearers of collective ancestral knowledge, teachers passing on their wisdom to new generations as performers and creators whose art constitutes a community resource. Respondents also recognized that shared social conditions created cultural treasures held in common. For example, they expressed appreciation for the Hmong language in Merced and the Spanish language in Santa Ana as things of great value. The natural environment was prized as well: respondents saluted the sunsets in Boyle Heights and the warm days in Eastern Coachella.

One product of the Activating Cultural Assets Pilot Project was *La Vida Diferente: Celebrating Boyle Heights Community Treasures*, a book written by students in Ms. Lisa Alva’s and Mr. Jorge Lopez’s classes at

Roosevelt High School. Created in the school’s College of New Media and Technology in association with 826LA, the book blends descriptions, interviews, biographies, poems, and opinion pieces about the world that surrounds Boyle Heights students. Graced with a foreword written by distinguished historian George J. Sánchez, chapters written by students honor the wide range of people they encounter and respect in their everyday surroundings. These include a music producer, a mural artist, a favorite teacher, a store owner who extends credit to his customers, and the many economically struggling, immigrant, single mothers whose determination sets an honorable example for others. These individuals are hailed as cultural treasures. Yet the students find more to like about their neighborhood than its personalities. They honor the street sounds, colors and images of murals on building walls, and the smells of cooking food that serve as signs, sounds, and symbols of a common dignity and destiny.

The process of creating this book led the students to work together collaboratively, to venture out into the community to engage in interviews and conversations with elders from many different walks of life, and to work closely with college student volunteers from the departments of history and education at California State University, Los Angeles. The student-written chapters address many topics, but they coalesce consistently around the great value that resides in the undervalued people and places of their neighborhood.

Many of the entries in *La Vida Diferente* honor people the students find admirable, especially their parents, caretaker relatives, teachers, and a wide array of store clerks and street vendors, singers, spoken word artists, artists, athletes, and actors. They express special appreciation and admiration for the actor Josefina López and the singer/MC will.i.am who both grew up in the neighborhood and went on to career success, but now give back to Boyle Heights through López’s Casa 0101 community theatre and will.i.am’s College Track mentoring program. The student writers savor the city’s sounds: the recorded music that blasts from stereo speakers in cars and apartments, as well as the live music made by mariachi bands and son jarocho ensembles. But they also detect musical qualities in the bells and whistles on the carts of street vendors, in the din of traffic noise and car horns, and in the pitches, tones, and rhythms of conversations conducted in

both Spanish and English.

In a neighborhood that outsiders may imagine to be shaped largely by conflict and crime, the students identify a treasure trove of dignity and power. They savor the smells and tastes of tacos, freshly roasted corn, piping hot chocolate drinks, and an array of sweet breads and desserts. The Boyle Heights honored in *La Vida Diferente* is equally rich with visual stimulation. The inside of a store that sells clothing, posters, and music reminds one student author of a bag of Skittles candy “because it has dark, light, and mixed colors that are part of our community . . .” The store’s owner displays his own paintings on the establishment’s walls. One of these resembles a dollar bill, but replaces the portrait of George Washington with a drawing of a masked Mexican lucha libre wrestler. Stickers for sale in the store depict images of Boyle Heights and Mexican history and culture. An image of Mickey Mouse blends with Aztec drawings to critique colonialism. Outside, in the larger community, big, colorful murals on building walls are works of art that belong to the whole community and cannot be bought or sold, offering monumental representations of a shared fate. One student writer appreciates how murals of the United Farm Workers union’s struggles for social justice make “you feel how hard they worked and how hard they fought for their rights to get paid.” Murals painted by Raul Gonzalez, John Carlos de Luna, Omar Ramirez, Nuke, Willie Herron, and East Los Streetscapers win specific praise from the student writers, but equally important is the artistic process they discern in people dedicated to creating their own lives. The artists embody a way of being that pervades Boyle Heights—a firm and ferocious insistence on making a way in the world, even when there seems to be no way.

The student writers hail the artists for their willingness to stand up, speak up, and do meaningful work in the world. They view visual artists as similar to other cultural treasures celebrated in *La Vida Diferente*, like Carmen Sotelo, a healer who uses herbs and prayers to help people get well; like Father Greg Boyle who helps gang members and returning ex-offenders find gainful employment; and Xela (Cihuatl Ce), who co-founded Ovarian Psycos, a “womyn of color” bicycle club that reclaims the streets for women through mass rides that also stop for drum circle ceremonies and snacks. The ways artists imag-

ine, plan, design, and implement art echo the survival strategies and triumphs of many other neighborhood residents. One student writer hailed the owners of the La Princesita meat market because their employees are friendly to customers, offer credit to people in need, have on occasion helped a customer’s family pay funeral expenses, and, most of all, because their market is the realization of dreams. “There are some dreams that come true and dreams that are just fantasies that people wish to come true,” writes one student author. This small meat market is important, he maintains, because it fulfilled its founders’ dream “to have money to pay bills on time and have food for their kids.”

In the process of authoring *La Vida Diferente* and many other writing projects, the students at Roosevelt High School transformed themselves and their world. Young people can see from the condition of their neighborhoods, the buses they ride, the resources in the schools they have to attend, and the images of their community that appear in movies, music videos, and news broadcasts that their well-being is a low priority in this society. Yet through writing this book, they transformed themselves into writers, interviewers, historians, poets, and intellectuals. The punitive police practices they encounter in their neighborhoods and schools are based on the premise that young people are merely troublemakers who need to be viewed with suspicion and treated with contempt. Yet through their writing—and the activism that emerges from it—they position themselves as defenders of their community, as campaigners for healthful conditions today and a healthy life tomorrow, and as authors committed to authorizing new social relations. Writing their book required them to emulate traditional arts practice skills: looking carefully at their surroundings, listening closely for hidden meanings, asking lots of questions, and rearranging compositions constantly and creatively.



Caridad Vasquez at Street Vendor Summit in Boyle Heights. Photo: ACTA, 2013.



Abraham Medina, a community organizer at a campaign rally, calling for the Santa Ana Police to end its collaboration with ICE. Photo: ACTA, 2013.



Mila Perezchica, dressed for Day of the Dead, is a community activist who focuses on improving the school system in the Eastern Coachella Valley. Photo: ACTA, 2014.



Purepecha master artist Natividad Gonzalez leading a clay sculpture workshop in the Eastern Coachella Valley. Photo: Quetzal Flores/ACTA, 2014.



Cesar Castro leading a son jarocho workshop with youth in Boyle Heights.
 Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2015.



Celebration of Hmong New Year in Merced with contestants for Miss Hmong Central Valley in traditional dress.
 Photo: ACTA, 2013.



Eastern part of Shady Lane Mural in Cochella, CA, representing important historical events as depicted by different artists. Photo: Akira Boch/ACTA, 2014.

Collective Songwriting



Martha Gonzalez and Quetzal Flores lead a Collective Songwriting workshop at the SaludArte health fair in Boyle Heights. Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2015.

“Music touches people in different ways, nobody is left out.”

- Vaneza Calderón, ACTA Artist Fellow
for Building Healthy Communities Boyle Heights

Musicians have played an important role in the Building Healthy Communities project. Collective songwriting workshops create dialogues where everyone has a voice, through the collaborative composition and performance of songs that express the ideas, feelings, and aspirations of the group. Even more important than the products created by collective songwriting workshops are the processes they permit, where collective art making develops a collective vision that leads to collective action. The goal of collective songwriting is not merely to describe our oppressively unjust world with songs that oppose injustice, but to help build a narrative of ideas and visions capable of transforming a materialist, thing-oriented society into a moral, democratic, and humane, people-oriented society.

The collective songwriting activities associated with Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights emerge from forms of collaborative political participation pioneered by the EZLN (Mayan Zapatista) movement in Mexico. In 1997, activists from East Los Angeles and throughout Southern California known as the Big Frente Zapatista (including ACTA artists Martha Gonzalez, Omar Ramirez, and Quetzal Flores) organized for a year in order to host a gathering—the Encuentro Cultural Chican@/Indígena Por La Humanidad y Contra El Neoliberalismo (the Chican@/Indigenous Gathering for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism)—with Zapatista organizers from the Chiapas village community of Oventic. Oventic is one of the Zapatista projects then known as “Aguascalientes” now known as “Caracoles”—protected sites where decisions are made in a collective manner. At this encuentro, the California-based Chicanx activists and Mayan participants committed to collaborative songwriting as a form of art-based community dialogue and music making. Principal drivers of collective songwriting are *convivencia*, the deliberate action of being present with and for one another; *testimonio*, “a voice that is oppositional and propositional, involves an urgent voice of resistance to social injustices, an urgency to speak out, a collective vision, and a collaborative process and interpretation, thus, expressing the central values of situated knowledge production, embodied theorizing, and community engagement” (Rina Benmayor); and active witnessing, “‘de-self-actualizing’ or undoing what we have become to instead become ‘human as process’” (bell hooks/Chela Sandoval).

A songwriting workshop begins with community dialogue, where key phrases are jotted down as a kind of stream of consciousness brainstorming session. Participants provide phrases and sentences that the group collectively organizes into poetic song lyrics through improvisation and experimentation. The song develops word by word, line by line, and verse by verse. Musicians from the collective and more experienced participants listen and begin to harness varying sounds or rhythms to accompany the lyrics. As people at first recite the lyrics and play instruments together, they feel the vibrations of their own voices and those of others. There will often be ongoing discussions of altering lyrics—why one word over another? Why the “I” and not the “we?” There may be decisions to “stay positive” instead of allowing negative sentiments in the lyrics, or sometimes “let’s be angry!” The dialogue that ensues is always fruitful, for it often spirals into another level of analysis. As hearts beat, fingers snap, and hands clap, the ensemble creates something together that no individual could create alone. As the song gets longer and verses get repeated, participants grow confident and begin to suggest melodies and meter. When the group has finished composing and performs its creation, the end product belongs to everyone. The song remains as an archive and the process impacts on multiple fronts.

Adapting the collective songwriting form to address prevailing conditions in Boyle Heights, musicians conducted a ten-week workshop on son jarocho music. Son jarocho is a traditional music from southern Veracruz, Mexico that centers around the participatory, communal, ritual celebration known as the fandango. Since the early 2000s, musicians and artists from Veracruz, East Los Angeles, and Southern California have been engaged in a translocal dialogue called Fandango sin Fronteras. One of the artists from Veracruz is César Castro, a master maker of stringed instruments and leader of the son jarocho band Cambalache (a word that means exchange in Spanish), and former member of Mono Blanco, a seminal son jarocho group. Castro led the workshop series, in which participants developed a collective composition and performance of “El Colas Medical,” a song with lyrics focused on the struggle for health care among people whose incomes or immigration statuses place health insurance out of reach. Workshop sessions combined discussions facilitated by the Building Healthy Communities Health Happens with Prevention workshop

about health problems and solutions with collective songwriting and performance. Highly skilled and experienced composers, singers, and instrumentalists worked together with novices just starting to encounter the forms and practices of son jarocho music. Some of the participants had absolutely no previous musical training or experience. Others were professional, highly-skilled virtuosos. The workshop compelled them to take stock of each other, adapt, and create together. The testimonies of participants about their health care needs became the basis for song lyrics, airing the concerns of people whose voices are rarely heard in this society—for example, low-wage workers whose backs ache from their labor, but who, along with their friends and loved ones, have no access to preventive or remedial health treatments. “They call me a troublemaker when I raise my voice saying that health care is a right, not a business,” one lyric line proclaimed, while the chorus repeated the need to fight side-by-side to win access to healthcare. Castro noticed that people actually felt better mentally and physically when they sang the verses they had helped compose. They found joy when accompanied by dancers beating out a rhythm on the *tarima* (a wooden dance platform) and playing along on stringed instruments. Another artist participating in the workshops, Quetzal Flores (ACTA Program Manager and founder of the band Quetzal), related this work to the wisdom of African American music maker and freedom fighter Bernice Johnson Reagon, who contends that you cannot run the words and sounds of a song through your body without changing your condition.

Another collective songwriting workshop focused on the need for equitable educational funding of programs for Boyle Heights youth. This led to the composition and performance of the song, “Lights On.” The video made about the songwriting process starts with a young woman standing behind a poster featuring a lightbulb with the words honesty and truth inside it, and the hashtag #schoolme. Later in the video, another poster displays a lightbulb with the words “students matter,” “love,” and “safe and healthy communities.” Quetzal band member, Martha Gonzalez (who has previously facilitated collective songwriting workshops) leads the group, now clapping their hands to the beat as she sings verses written by the community, asking, where does all the money (spent on education) go? Criticizing education spending as “an illusion, “a mirage,” and a “sleight-of-hand trick,” the

lyrics proclaim it is time to turn the lights on and recognize that “you have to deal with us, our collective dreams for our children.” This song and video played a central role in campaigns to make sure Boyle Heights students received their fair share of expenditures authorized by the State of California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

Collective songwriting also helped fuel a campaign for justice on behalf of street vendors. Some fifty thousand vendors sell their wares on the streets of Los Angeles, supplying inexpensive and often healthy food that they dispense from colorful carts, shouting out creative sales pitches that enliven life on the streets. Yet historically, city officials treated vending as a crime. They compelled police officers to confiscate carts and write tickets leading to fines that vendors could not afford. Misdemeanor convictions like these can have disastrous collateral consequences because they impede access to public services and benefits, and can even lead to deportation.

Son jarocho workshops with street vendors and community participants produced songs supporting the Legalize Street Vending campaign. Song lyrics explained the need to decriminalize vending and set up a process for obtaining legal permits. These lyrics repositioned vendors as community assets rather than annoyances, as providers of needed goods and services whose presence helps create a vibrant street culture and contributes to the fabric and feeling of belonging in the neighborhood, all the while adding to the availability of healthful food options. At one collective songwriting workshop, participants crafted a line that testified to the pleasures provided by the offerings of vendors, “that *raspado* (shaved and flavored ice) and that *tamal* (corn dough or masa filled with a sweet or savory filling, wrapped in a corn husk) has the taste of my homeland.”

Lyrics crafted at one workshop framed the street vendor struggle in accessible language. They honored the vendor Caridad Vasquez by calling out her name, saying “We see you,” in the night time with your quesadillas and flor con huitlacoche and “now the memory comes to me of my grandmother singing as she sold tamales after school.” The lyrics then addressed President Trump and all those who belittle the hard work performed by immigrants. They warned him that it is not a crime to want to work, “it is part of the dream and part of our lives,

you are not the boss.” They informed the President and “your friend” the mayor to proceed with care because the people are united. This is the song that emerged from the work of co-creation at the workshop:

Señora Caridad nos vemos por la noche para las quesadillas de flor con huitlacoche	<i>[English language translation]</i> <i>Señora Caridad</i> <i>I'll see you this evening</i> <i>for the squash flower and</i> <i>huitlacoche quesadillas</i>
Ahora me viene el recuerdo de lo que hacía mi abuela cantando vendía tamales a la vuelta de la escuela	<i>I'm now reminded</i> <i>of what my grandmother did</i> <i>singing as she sold tamales</i> <i>just around the corner from the school</i>
Señor presidente le vengo a avisar que no es un delito querer trabajar	<i>Mr. President</i> <i>I've come to inform you</i> <i>that it's not a crime</i> <i>to want to work</i>
Querer trabajar es parte del sueño y de nuestras vidas usted no es el dueño	<i>The desire to work</i> <i>is part of the dream</i> <i>and of our lives</i> <i>you are not the owner</i>
Señor presidente y el alcalde su amigo anden con cuidado que el pueblo es un nido (unido)	<i>Mr. President</i> <i>and your friend the mayor</i> <i>be careful</i> <i>the people are a nest (united)</i>

César Castro observed how participation in son jarocho music enabled vendors and their supporters to grow close, like siblings. Vendor Caridad Vasquez found the singing and dancing exhilarating, noting that it gave her a form of recognition she had not had before, in the perhaps unlikely space of performance, “where I began to value myself as a human being.” In 2017, the Los Angeles City Council modified the laws against vending, retaining citations and fines, but stopping short of the kinds of criminal charges that could lead to incarceration and deportation. Grassroots pressure and a change in state law in 2018 led the Los Angeles City Council to move toward legalizing street vending and setting up a process for vendors to get permits and conduct business legally.

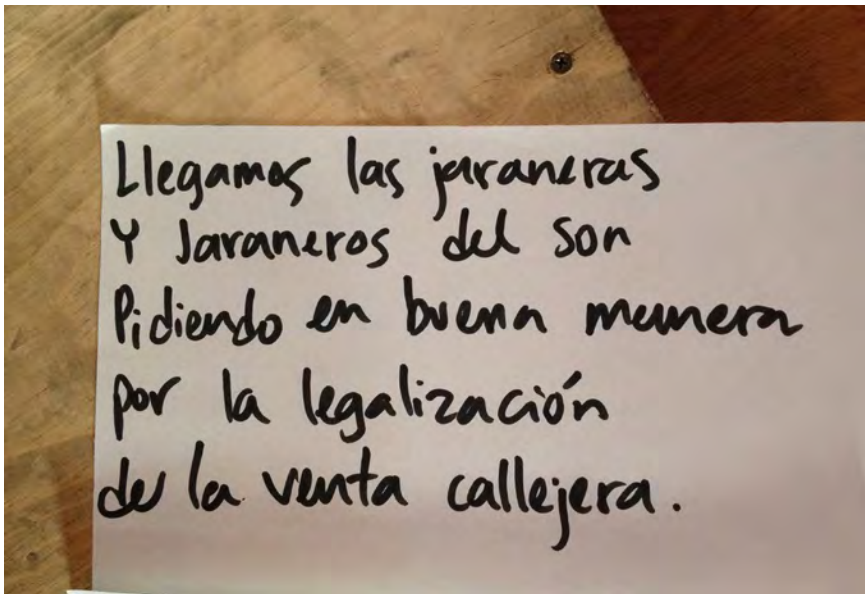
Experienced and expert son jarocho musicians involved in the collective songwriting workshops had to surrender some control over aspects of composition and performance in ways that well-trained

and highly-skilled musicians have rarely done. In return, however, they became part of a musical event with profound social meaning. Quetzal Flores notes that people invariably rise to the challenge that songwriting presents, offering phrases to be used as lyrics, and singing and playing along with fervor and commitment. Frequently, these performances reveal previously hidden talents. The collective performance format enables people to play and sing in public who would not have done so previously. Some display extraordinary virtuosity as musicians and singers. Flores reports that he routinely sees some people start in the back of the room, wary of what they will be asked to do and doubtful about their ability to contribute. By the end, however, these people are often at the front of the room, in the center of the songwriting, singing, playing, and dancing. By respecting and drawing on the community’s traditional musical forms, but deploying them in new ways, the artists get an opportunity to experience new forms of equality, democracy, and collective caretaking. As the participants in a recent workshop expressed in a collectively authored song lyric, collective songwriting gives them an opportunity to *romper* (break) y *soltar* (and let go of, cast off) *las cadenas* (the chains) that hold us down.



Collective songwriting workshop with Quetzal Flores and Cuicani at a Health Happens in Schools assembly at Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights.

Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2016.



Lyrics developed through Collective Songwriting workshops led by Cesar Castro supporting a campaign to legalize street vending at Casa Del Mexicano, Boyle Heights. Photo: Quetzal Flores/ACTA, 2012.

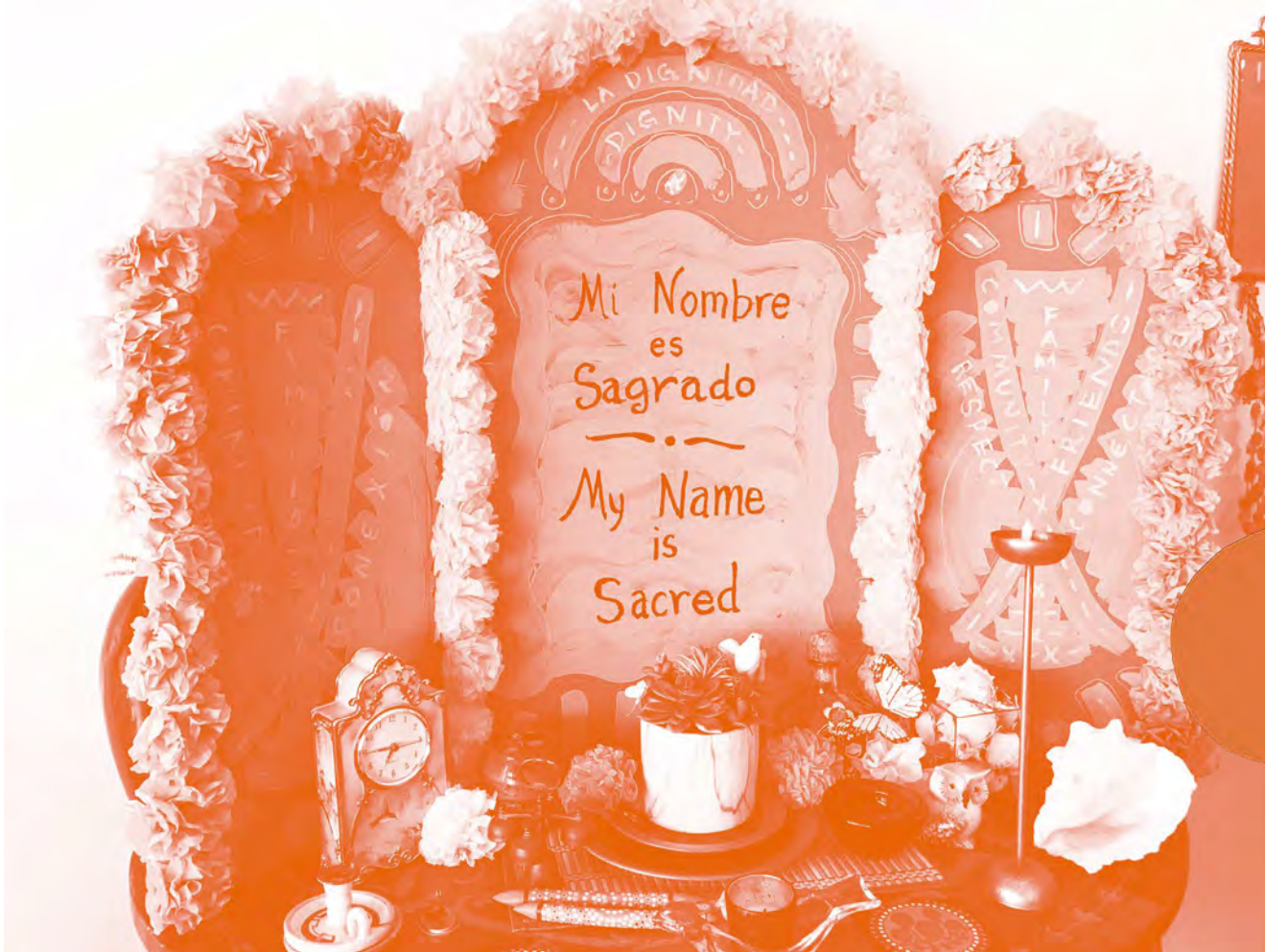


Son jarocho workshops led by Cesar Castro at ACTA Cultural Treasures celebration at Self Help Graphics in Boyle Heights. Photo: Amy Kitchener/ACTA, 2012.



Quetzal Flores leads a Collective Songwriting workshop at a Health Happens in Schools youth convivio in Boyle Heights. Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2015.

Making Altars



“Mi Nombre es Sagrado” altar made for a workshop at a Health Happens with Prevention assembly at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Betty Marín/ACTA, 2018.

“The space of the altar-installation might thus be seen as a heterotopia—it constructs a sacred environment which simultaneously forbids and invites entrance.”

- Jennifer Gonzalez, scholar at UC Santa Cruz

Altars, also known as *ofrendas* or offerings, are collections of arranged objects, flowers, and food that honor the dead in order to celebrate life. Altar makers assemble items such as natural flowers or handmade facsimiles, photos, food, significant family artifacts, and found objects to promote a different understanding of the meaning of life, life's course, and relations across generations. Making altars in cooperation with other people creates an intimate space for conversation and creativity. Furthermore, altars are a familiar practice in many homes across racial groups. The collaboration between ACTA and Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights (BHC-BH) promotes altar making as an especially innovative and effective deployment of traditional arts in service of health justice. Initially, the Building Healthy Communities project envisioned people building altars together as mainly an organizing instrument, as an enjoyable way for participants to receive and share information about the services available through the Affordable Care Act. Yet, as guided by the *artistas* affiliated with ACTA, collectively constructing altars became a healing practice in itself, promoting health consciousness for individuals on a personal level, as the BHC-BH initiative intended, but also setting in motion larger processes of individual and collective discovery and self-affirmation that bolstered community cohesion.

An altar invokes a memory or story about places and people, about the past, present, and future. It helps people think about their life journeys, what has made it possible for them to exist, where they have been, where they are going, and about their connections to ancestral cultural traditions and ways of knowing. The Spanish language rhyme “*la cultura cura*” (culture cures) expresses the link between altar making as a form of artistic creativity and as a mechanism for healing. This reveals the links between identifying ills and infirmities of individual bodies and addressing the poisons of oppression, suppression, and repression that pervade the collective civic body. Designing an altar starts with a desire, with recognizing a need to be filled, a problem to be solved, a wound to be salved, or a harm that needs healing.

Ofelia Esparza, distinguished altarista, East Los Angeles community treasure, and National Endowment for the Arts Fellow (2018), works under the auspices of ACTA with her daughters Rosanna Ahrens and

Elena Esparza to develop a uniquely innovative means of deploying traditional arts for promoting health, building community cohesion, and advancing social justice. They instruct apprentice altar makers to map their own bodies, identify the places where they feel pain or stress, and then make a *milagro* (a healing charm) for that part of the body and place it on the altar. Constructing *ofrendas* teaches people that they already have what they need to heal themselves. It causes them to look around their environment and assemble what they find in ways that promote their health. “There needs to be a door that opens to everybody and where everybody is welcome,” Elena Esparza says, emphasizing also that, “there needs to be resources to make those connections with each person.” Going far beyond the modest initial intention of having the collective work of making altars provide people with access to information about using the Affordable Care Act, altar making engages participants in restoring their souls and psyches by re-storying their lives. The stories serve as sources of sustenance for individuals and groups. The altar-making process permits participants to acknowledge losses, injuries, and disappointments they experience in life, yet, at the same time, cultivate a determined resolve to honor ancestors and ancestral traditions, imbue ordinary objects with value by arranging them creatively, displaying them personally or publicly, and to care for one's own wellness as both a personal and political obligation.

The *artistas* charged by ACTA with teaching people how to make altars developed an innovative way of teaching, healing, and organizing grounded in being fully present and engaged in the “here and now” without losing sight of the past. Making altars requires connecting, listening, and staying in the community. “The connecting part has everything to do with listening, listening with hospitality,” Rosanna Ahrens explains. The qualities of connecting, listening, and staying in community cannot simply be found, they have to be forged through attention, alertness, and awareness. Ahrens devised an extraordinary four-part process that informs the activities of altar making. Her formula calls for 1) arriving with full awareness of ourselves, our ancestors, and the powers of the natural world; 2) connecting fully with the natural and human world; 3) making agreements for collective conduct; and 4) affirming the possibilities produced by our collective practice.

Arriving is marked by standing in a circle and breathing deeply, taking in the properties of the natural world, remembering ancestors and inviting them into the circle, burning sacred herbs to create a cleansing smoke that wafts over bodies, opening hearts, and welcoming the work to be done. Connecting is achieved by talking and listening, being in community and fully engaging in it. The purpose of convening is to reach agreements rather than to compete, command, or conquer. Agreements make it possible to find affirmations, which are ideas and insights that guide individual and collective action in the future.

Altar making proves to be an especially effective organizing practice because it is already deeply embedded in community life—known and respected as a site where big questions about the meaning of life have long been aired. It enables participants to counter the seeming smallness of the injuries and aggravations of everyday life with the bigness of history. Any one life is a fraction of larger reality, just as one part of a river is shaped by what is upstream and downstream. Within each life, it is important to trace the flow of the river, to identify the obstructions that interrupt its flow.

All lives are shaped by the inevitability of death, the absence of lost loved ones, and the traces that remain of our ancestors. Altar making places death in perspective. Ofelia Esparza explains that everyone experiences three deaths: 1) the day of drawing the last breath, 2) the day of being buried, and 3) the day of being forgotten. The first two deaths are unavoidable, but the third is preventable. Remembering, honoring, and summoning the deceased expands the present by connecting it with the past. It invites the souls of the departed to come visit, powered by the energy that the altar exudes. It sews together what has been ripped apart by death, family disintegration, migration, and ways the overwhelming concerns of the present can occlude the past. It recognizes the beauty, wisdom, and dignity of ancestors and elders, many of whose remains lie in graves as unmarked as their place in history.

By honoring the past, the ofrenda changes the present. Ofelia Esparza explains that making an altar is not only an act of remembering, but a personal and spiritual way of connecting, both with the deceased person(s) being honored and with those viewing the altar. Like

all forms of artistic practice, in making an altar, “you put part of yourself there and you want people to connect and recognize themselves in the altar,” explains Esparza. People who arrive properly, connect appropriately, and agree productively can affirm commitments that guide individual and collective activity in the future.



Arriving ceremony led by Ofelia Esparza and Rosanna Esparza Ahrens during the Theories of Change and Transformative Cultural Practice session organized by ACTA at the REMAP LA conference. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Participant in arriving ceremony led by Ofelia Esparza and Rosanna Esparza Ahrens during the Theories of Change and Transformative Cultural Practice session organized by ACTA at the REMAP LA conference. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Ceremony led by Ofelia Esparza and daughter Elena Esparza during event ActivArte: Detouring Displacement. Photo: ACTA, 2014.



Ceremony led by Ofelia Esparza and daughter Elena Esparza during the event ActivArte: Detouring Displacement. Photo: ACTA, 2014.



Rosanna Esparza Ahrens [C] leading a flower-making workshop at ACTA Cultural Treasures convening at Self Help Graphics in Boyle Heights. Photo: Amy Kitchener/ACTA, 2012.



Altar created in honor of Aretha Franklin by Denise Esparza.
Photo: Betty Marín/ACTA, 2018.



“La salud mental es un derecho humano” public altar at Wyverwood apartments in Boyle Heights created by Ofelia Esparza and daughter Rosanna Esparza with BHC mentee Luz Marlene Cordero. Photo: Rosanna Esparza Ahrens/ACTA, 2018.



“Los jóvenes sí importan” walking altar by Ofelia Esparza and daughter Rosanna Esparza Ahrens created for the Invest in Youth Rally, as part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Rosanna Esparza Ahrens/ACTA, 2018.

Restorative Cultural Arts Practice (Praxis)



Restorative Justice Through Artmaking workshop led by BHC Artist Fellow Juana Mena at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.

“Restorative justice and art come from a space of healing. If we support and collaborate with other people, there will be a transformation.”

- Omar G. Ramirez, ACTA Artist Fellow
for Building Healthy Communities
Boyle Heights

An important feature of the “health happens” agenda of Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights (BHC-BH) concerns the idea that health happens in schools. As part of that commitment, teachers and students at Roosevelt High have done work grounded in Restorative Cultural Arts Practice (RCAP), sometimes described as Restorative Cultural Arts Praxis, a term that highlights the ways practical activities can be informed by theory and how theories can emerge from practical work in the world. The RCAP emerged as a theory developed by artist and teacher Omar G. Ramirez. In this work, art and culture are joined as a tool for many different kinds of “restoring”: bringing decency and dignity back to interpersonal relations, returning the work of handling disputes to community members rather than outsourcing it to the punitive arms of government, and repairing and renovating the damaged senses of self produced by exploitation and oppression. The art practice promoted by RCAP is not about creating art objects for sale or winning individual recognition for artists, but instead producing a process that addresses social and emotional needs in order to build collective wellness.

The RCAP process at Roosevelt High School developed as an effort to change the entire culture of the school. It embraced restorative justice as a way to replace the culture of punishment that revolves around suspensions, expulsions, and other forms of disciplinary control, with student-led healing circles, committed to transforming individual shame and guilt into collective responsibility and accountability. Yet unlike many other less-successful, school-centered projects that isolate the classroom from the wider world students come from and return to, RCAP addresses the whole life of the student in the community, with parents and caretakers, as well as the intergenerational transmission of injury and injustice. RCAP projects involve adults as well as young people, and transform relationships both outside and inside of schools.

During this process, Ramirez communicated his ideas for Restorative Cultural Arts Practice to the BHC-BH collaborative group, and to teachers and community residents working with young people at Roosevelt High School. “Restorative justice and art come from a space of healing,” Ramirez explains, adding, “if we support and collaborate with other people, there will be a transformation.” In this way of

thinking, artists and organizers need to connect with the community.

A key innovation in this vision has been the appointment of quilt-maker Juana Mena as an ACTA artist fellow. After her own experience of being listened to and her expertise respected, she accepted the role because artists working with ACTA “had that great quality to listen to my story.” Once she felt she had been genuinely listened to, Mena initiated a process where others could also be heard. “The art has helped us to listen, to break those chains, and release some things we have been carrying for a long time,” she observed. Just as quilts are made by sewing together previously separate pieces of cloth, listening to the things women say to each other offers a way to weave a group together. “By listening to people’s stories,” Mena maintains, “you go directly to their hearts.” Collective quilt making in this setting produces particular art products that tell stories of trauma, but as a process it produces a personal and community zone where participants develop new identities and understandings. It creates a convivial space for conversation in the midst of shared working and crafting. Like the *tamalada*, an event where people come together to make tamales, shared practical activity puts people at ease, and their *platicando* (chit-chatting) can lead to discussions of serious personal and public issues.

Ramirez remembers that Mena attracted his admiration and attention because “she had voice. She was interested not just in her health, but the health of the community.” Her skills in quilting made her especially suited to work as an artist-fellow because it has long been a means for people to tell their stories. Mena recognized that quilting workshops offered ideal opportunities for women who had important things to say but had not been listened to, to speak in a supportive setting. “Quilting is part of one’s self, of the needs that we have,” Mena contends. It is made up of discarded pieces of clothes that can no longer be worn and might seem useless, but find new life when sewn together. She notes that a quilt gives warmth and a sense of security; it protects the body from the cold and sun.

Making art in the context of collective quilting workshops enabled Mena to grow as an individual. “I have learned not to be silent, to express what I feel, what I think, as an artist,” she relates, “because

art allows us to express feelings: laughter, happiness, anger, sadness, frustration, lament, everything.” She saw that just as having her own story heard helped her to heal, offering other women a similar opportunity could help heal the entire community. “If in every group there are thirteen people, and if only one person changes just like I did,” Mena posits, “imagine how much change [in society] could happen.” The women who participate in Mena’s workshops include eyewitnesses to displacement, dispossession, and deportation, as well as survivors of partner violence, police violence, criminal violence, and the violence of hunger and housing insecurity. As low-wage immigrant women workers, they experience economic marginality, yet they are assigned domestic centrality as mothers raising children. This combination takes a toll on their time and energy, burdening them with seemingly endless responsibilities. Inside the quilting circle, however, they can talk freely with other women about the many different aspects of their lives—including the frivolous, the frowned upon, and the forbidden. They come to understand the degree to which their individual problems stem from collective, cumulative, and continuing forms of group-based discrimination. When asked what the “restorative” in restorative cultural arts practice meant to her, one survivor of sexual violence in the quilting group reported that participating in the group was “restorative” because it restored her sense of self-worth and dignity, and restored her sense that she was valued and loved.

In creating the position of “artist fellow,” Ramirez and ACTA have envisioned and enacted a new social role. The community member or “grassroots participant” is often desired by social change and arts organizations, but mainly as a follower, spectator, or example on display, not as a full and equal participant. Organization leaders, administrators, and other gatekeepers use the credentials they have secured from formal education and political influence to justify dominating decision-making. Juana Mena felt these exclusionary practices directly. Born in Guadalajara, Mexico, she came to Los Angeles when she was in her twenties, out of economic necessity. She worked as a caretaker for the sick and as a housekeeper, sending as much as fifty percent of her earnings to support her younger siblings back in Mexico. She had two daughters. One died in infancy, and Mena struggled with depression and other health issues as she worked low-wage jobs

to support herself and her remaining daughter. When she attended meetings of community organizations, she felt like an outsider discouraged from participating fully. But when she started attending meetings of Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights, she experienced a different reception. She found people who saw potential in her. She became a member of the Steering Committee and eventually its coordinator for community engagement.

In 2017, Mena designed and led an eight-week series on quilt making as part of the Health Happens in Schools work group. Participants developed their talents as quilters, but also found themselves engaged in discussions about education issues in the city. Mena worked with representatives of seven different community-based organizations who brought their concerns to the group. Many of the women who participated in the quilting workshop then became members of the Health Happens in Schools work group. They joined the campaigns for equitable investment in youth programs and the School Climate Bill of Rights.

The activities of Restorative Cultural Arts Practice attempt to repair harm, promote dignity, and prevent future damage by addressing the root causes of injury and aggression. They start with a critique of social oppression that views embedded systems of white privilege and white supremacy as producers of intergenerational trauma. They turn to the arts as a way of accessing traditional knowledges and practices honed over centuries in struggles against unjust power. They seek pathways toward social, economic, and environmental justice by redefining and restructuring education and reclaiming spaces for transformative social change. Their arts practices range widely, encompassing the creation of murals, radio broadcasts, books, songs, quilts, and other works of art through a humane and interpersonal process that deepens participants’ capacities for deliberative talk and democratic decision-making. A focus on artistic processes rather than products defuses expectations of monetary gain and promotes the sharing and transferring of ideas and information across generations and cultures.

Restorative Cultural Arts Practice is a collaborative endeavor that addresses the social and emotional needs of participants. It builds

on a long and distinguished history of artistic and cultural practices, processes, ideas, and institutions. Through RCAP, individuals learn to rely on each other, guided by agreed-upon principles of group obligation and accountability. At any given moment one individual might occupy a central space and guide the work more than others, but over time the work is to be shared. Participants need to learn to distinguish between responsibility and reactionary behavior, notice when harm happens, and deal with it by reaffirming group obligations and agreements. Art practices and art products have their most significant effects in these activities by promoting respect, reciprocity, and healthy relationships.

The RCAP framework emerges from and contributes to a growing body of practice that coheres around the ideal of “community scholarship.” Ramirez has led efforts to inculcate this approach within many different projects, including the Youth Leadership Program of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory’s instruction and mentorship of young people preparing for careers in film, television, broadcasting, and digital media. RCAP principles pervade the traditional arts workshops run under the auspices of the ACTA’s Arts In Corrections program. By linking restorative justice and traditional arts, Ramirez has helped create a process that enables young people to feel they are being heard, understood, and respected. Inclusive and transparent decision-making processes help participants to imagine a transformed existence. A viable group will welcome new members, practice radical openness, prioritize group wellness, hold space for everyone’s needs, and build connections to larger communities, yet maintain militant opposition to ineffective and misguided diversity and inclusion projects that ignore dynamics of unequal power and their consequences. Ramirez’s vision of RCAP has some resemblance to art therapy, but goes beyond it to center cultural knowledge and art practice as ways of addressing the root causes of intergenerational trauma, rather than merely the symptoms, forging a collective path to healing.

Conventional arts instruction has often been organized to privilege the art form over the art maker. It begins with a commitment to painting, sculpture, photography, filmmaking, drama, dance, music, etc. In contrast, RCAP selects the manner of the art to be produced on

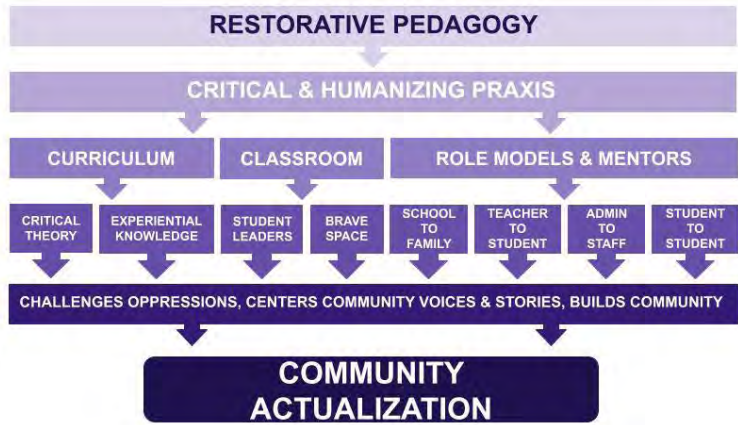
the basis of the matter it addresses, the materials that are available for creating it, and the mentality and morale of the people making the art. Young people just beginning to create art might find assemblage, collage, and other forms of mixed media art more accessible as points of entry than forms that require specialized skills like painting or sculpture. Drawing a self-portrait has a very different meaning for a person battling to maintain a positive sense of self in a continuation school or prison than for a student paying high fees to be trained at an expensive and selective art school. Rather than developing individuals recognized for technical mastery in one art medium, the RCAP process cultivates a collective capacity to roam across different art forms, genres, and media to make art-based interventions into the life of the community. Murals painted on the walls outside Roosevelt High School transform barriers designed to keep the school separate from the community into a shared space that displays respect for the dignity, intelligence, and legacy of collective struggle. RCAP students learn how to produce works of art, not as ends in themselves, but as a way of honing and refining their aptitude for what Ramirez terms “relentless interrogation” and “willful defiance” of the systems that have been set up against them.”

Raising questions about restorative justice in schools led to the founding of the Restorative Justice Radio Project. During the 2013-2014 school year, fifteen students from high schools in Boyle Heights (Mendez, Roosevelt, and the YouthBuild Charter School) worked together to create four, ten-minute radio shows on “College Prep Not Prison Prep,” advocating for the full implementation of restorative justice principles in schools. The students learned to master handheld recording devices and editing software. They conducted interviews and made recordings that were then aired on the Radio Sombra community station. The group met twice a week for seven months to explore restorative justice ideas and ideals. They became determined to go beyond the confines of the school environment to change broader community dynamics by inculcating restorative justice principles in families, businesses, organizations, and institutions. Guests interviewed included staff members from groups campaigning for social justice including the Labor Community Strategy Center, Homeboy Industries, InnerCity Struggle, and the California Conference for Equality and Justice. Conducting this research and

creating radio programs based on it promoted deep commitments to restorative justice among the participants. They came to view restorative justice as a way of giving people tools for defusing and moving past conflicts instead of letting anger and resentment mount. They wished to see the trust and understanding they developed in school through restorative justice practices extended throughout the whole community. Like many other initiatives sparked by RCAP, the radio project enabled young people to develop an advanced capacity for what Latina/o Studies professor Jeff Duncan-Andrade terms “critical hope,” an expectation for the future based not on finding a wishbone but on developing some backbone (to echo civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph).

The following figures were created by Artist Omar G. Ramirez to summarize some of the elements and concepts within Restorative Cultural Arts Practice and restorative justice.





Restorative Justice workshop led by Artist fellows Omar Ramirez and Juana Mena during Theories of Change and Transformative Cultural Practice session organized by ACTA at the REMAP LA conference. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Juana Mena (R) leads a restorative justice quilting workshop with parents at Roosevelt High. Photo: Omar Ramirez, 2019.



Restorative Justice Through Artmaking workshop led by BHC Artist Fellow Juana Mena at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Restorative Justice Through Art Making workshop led by BHC Artist Fellow Juana Mena at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Restorative Justice Through Art Making workshop led by BHC Artist Fellow Juana Mena at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Restorative Justice Through Art Making workshop led by BHC Artist Fellow Juana Mena at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Collaborative quilt created through Restorative Justice Through Quilting workshop series led by BHC Artist Fellow Juana Mena at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights. Photo: Jennifer Jameson/ACTA, 2019.



Zine-making workshop led Artist Fellow Omar Ramirez, part of the Reclaim, Remain, Rebuild Exhibit at Self Help Graphics.
Photo: ACTA, 2018.



Restorative Justice Through Art Making workshop led by BHC Artist Fellow Juana Mena at the Wellness Center in Boyle Heights.
Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.

Collective Corrido Writing and Theatre



BHC Health Happens in Neighborhoods Youth Convivio.
Artist Fellow Vaneza Calderon leading collective corrido writing
workshop at Legacy LA, Boyle Heights.
Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2016.

“My sense of this land can only ripple through my veins
Like the chant of an epic corrido.
I come from a long line of eloquent illiterates
Whose history reveals what words don’t say.”

-Lorna Dee Cervantes, Chicana poet and activist

Acts of co-creation within struggles for social change do more than bring forth new art objects and performances. They place people in fundamentally new roles, new social positions and relations. Artists can become educators and organizers. Audience members can become songwriters and singers. Parents can become active participants in their children's schools. Students can become stewards of a system of mutual accountability and responsibility. These processes enable participants to inhabit new identities and develop new ideas. Fusing art and social justice activism galvanizes people to express parts of their personalities that would not otherwise have found an outlet for expression. Perhaps even more important, changing the nature of political participation alters what people think of as politics.

Rather than a formal process guided by credentialed leaders, politics becomes face-to-face democratic deliberation and decision making through traditional arts practice. Rather than selling a prefabricated political message to a target audience assumed to be in need of enlightenment, traditional arts practice for social justice seeks to draw on the stories people already have, placing them in dynamic, unpredictable situations of collective improvisation. This facilitates bottom-up approaches to identifying and solving community problems.

As conceived and implemented by ACTA, traditional arts practice has been an important mechanism for identifying resourceful people in places that seem to lack resources. Arts activism helps them find out what they can do. It places them in positions where they can impact and influence others. A particularly important part of this process is the recruitment of amateur and professional artists to serve as community fellows for ACTA and BHCBH, through which they learn to use their artistic talents to engage people in discussions about the community's future, and promote the artistic imaginations and ambitions of individuals who may never have considered themselves to be art makers or problem solvers.

Artists skilled at writing and performing songs, designing and crafting quilts, or performing on a theatrical stage face a new challenge when asked to use their art to set in motion a process that empowers people to participate meaningfully in making key decisions that affect

their lives. The art objects these virtuosos have become accustomed to making are no longer ends in themselves but mechanisms for unleashing creativity and developing creative problem-solving skills.

Vaneza Calderón is a talented singer, composer, and guitar-rón player, a member of the mariachi-inspired project La Victoria, co-founded with guitarist Mary Alfaro, a fellow ACTA Arts in Corrections teacher. Calderón has a history of working with young people and their parents, including as a Clerk in the Compensatory Education program at South El Monte High, but before engaging with ACTA, she had no experience in community organizing. Calderón was awarded an ACTA apprenticeship in 2014 to study the art of string making from master craftsman Jacob Hernandez. Her subsequent work with ACTA has entailed conducting a wide range of songwriting workshops at diverse locations. Her skills as a musician, rapport with audiences, and fluency in both English and Spanish perfectly suit her to play many different roles within ACTA, but she is especially adept leading workshops where participants address social issues by collectively composing traditional Mexican ballads known as corridos. At these sessions, Calderón sings, plays, and composes music, teaches participants, and coordinates their discussions. She is a supremely gifted entertainer, but at these workshops the goal is to break down the distinction between active performer and passive audience—to produce new work that informs, educates, and motivates people to pursue profound and transformative social change.

On a cold Monday in December 2018, some thirty-five people made their way through the front doors of the Self-Help Graphics and Art community center in Boyle Heights. They had been convened by Invertir En La Juventud/Invest in Youth (IELJ/IIY), in conjunction with the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) and Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights (BHCBH). The purpose of the meeting was to advance the IELJ/IIY campaign to increase the share of the Los Angeles City budget allocated to positive programs for young people and to adequately fund projects that provide assistance, encouragement, and opportunities. This seemingly modest demand is a radical one in a city that treats its young people primarily as potential criminals who need to be surveilled and suppressed. The municipal budget allocates enormous sums for stopping, searching, arresting, and

incarcerating young people—most of the time for petty and nonviolent small offenses—but the city expends next to nothing, compared to similarly-sized municipalities, to meet the needs of young people for safe and affordable housing, adequate nutrition, day care, health services, recreation, and the arts.

The political purpose of this meeting came attached to an unconventional process. The sponsoring organizations asked those attending to work together to write and perform a song designed to express the aims and ideals of the campaign. Led by Vaneza Calderón, the event was described by the organizers as a corrido workshop. The corrido is a traditional Mexican art form, a song that follows a formal pattern to tell a story. The corrido is usually collectively authored over time. As it is picked up by successive singers, old verses are changed and new verses added to meet the needs and interests of differently-situated singers and audiences. Gradually, one version becomes repeated over and over again and becomes the baseline upon which future improvisations can be made. The corrido has often been topical; it has sometimes been described as a singing newspaper. Yet as the conveners of the workshop in Boyle Heights were fully aware, sometimes the corrido does not just record history but helps make it.

At the corrido songwriting workshop, participants spoke the language they were most comfortable with, most choosing Spanish, but a few English, with headphones provided for simultaneous interpretation offered by skilled bilingual interpreters. The evening began with a song played on the guitarrón by Vaneza Calderón as people settled into their seats. This brief introduction set the stage for many different forms of interactive collaboration. Calderón conducted an exercise to introduce the group to the collective process, asking everyone in the room to think of one image that expresses what the City of Los Angeles is like. Food metaphors came to the fore immediately, as participants described the metropolis as a sweet mango, a watermelon with pits, a potato with roots that stretch underground, a sour lemon that can be made into sweet lemonade, a pomegranate—hard on the outside, soft on the inside, with sweet berries and sour seeds—and a pizza with many different ingredients that blend together in surprising ways. Others described Los Angeles as cactus plant with

dangerous thorns on the outside, but complemented by ingredients on the inside that could be either food or medicine. One participant described the city as a fountain with a constant flow of water to drink. Each metaphor highlighted a different aspect of life in the city—its sweetness and diversity, but also the pits and thorns that need to be negotiated warily, and the municipality’s sometimes surprising sourness and capacity to harm.

Organizers from *Invertir En La Juventud/Invest in Youth* stepped up to make a brief PowerPoint presentation about the need to increase funding for youth programs. Their presentation revealed that the \$60 million Los Angeles spends per year on youth programs is much less than New York (\$812 million) or San Francisco (\$213 million). The expenditure in Los Angeles amounted to \$75 per year, per youth. The speakers asked the audience to consider how little can be bought for seventy-five dollars. They presented a pie chart with expenditures marked in different colors that dramatically demonstrated that more than half the money in the municipal budget is allocated to the police department, while another tenth is expended on firefighting. There was no direct spending on youth in the budget, although small amounts within the allocations for public works and other government functions were expended on young people. The presentation concluded with a statement about the many problems young people face and an explanation of the impact of adverse early-life experiences on young people’s subsequent development.

The presentation was followed by an invitation to participate in a group activity. Paper and colored markers were passed out to everyone in the room. Participants were asked to make their own pie chart signaling where city funds should go in the future. Calderón sang another song as circles were drawn and segments inside them marked to designate percentages to be rearranged, and colorful new wedges were added and labeled: Healing and Restorative Justice Circles, Health Care, After-School Programs, and Affordable Housing. This exercise asked each individual in the room to imagine a People’s Budget based on their own values and judgments about what might lead to better life outcomes for young people. The conveners selected individuals seemingly at random to come to the front to display and

describe their desired budget. Some made jokes about their lack of drawing skills. Others uttered gasps of admiration for their beautifully-drawn, colorful charts. Each speaker got the opportunity to express a vision that was taken seriously by others in the room. Heads nodded and voices murmured in agreement when the charts revealed desires to shift funds away from policing and toward social services, and when one identified a useful program to be funded that had not yet been mentioned. No presenter was given more deference or attention than any other. The collaborative process built a feeling of mutual recognition and respect. It demonstrated the value of hearing and seeing the diverse ideas and experiences represented in the room.

Calderón continued this part of the meeting by outlining the evening's work plan. She explained the goal was to channel the group's concerns about the budget into a corrido that the group would compose together, noting that this work would build on the practice of collaborative co-creation pioneered by El Teatro Campesino's acting workshops for the United Farm Workers labor union in the 1970s. Her observation linked the corrido as an art form to the profoundly influential, ongoing tradition of Mexican performance as a popular medium, played out over centuries in songs, plays, religious ceremonies, tent shows, and films. César Chávez once observed that without El Teatro Campesino there would not have been a United Farm Workers, because the comic performances of farmworker actors like Felipe Cantú delivered a universally-accessible image of their predicament in a way that no pamphlet or speech could do. Chicana studies professor Yvonne Broyles-González notes the importance of laughter in the work of El Teatro Campesino and all Mexican performance, asserting that, for the oppressed, laughter functions as a rehearsal of freedom.

As Calderón described the contours of the corrido, she noted it must have a when, where, who, what, and a concluding moral or message. These conformed to the standard structure of a corrido, but also advanced important ends for the success of a social movement organization. As the group went on to compose a song, the required structure compelled them to do through art what social movement organizations do in politics—locate their work in time and place, affirm a collective identity that addresses a specific problem from a par-

ticular point of view, and make demands that deepen future capacity for democratic deliberation, debate, and decision-making.

Calderón sees the corrido as perfectly suited for drawing on the profound wisdom that the community possesses. It is a well-known type of song in the community; its forms and lyrical conventions are familiar to most people. A corrido fashioned on behalf of the youth budget is not a pure expression of Mexican folk tradition or a reflection of the preoccupations with drugs, guns, and money that pervade the commercially popular narco-corrido. Instead, it is the product of newly empowered people—señoras who have very few other creative opportunities in their lives, people who would be reluctant to voice their thoughts in any conventional political meeting, people who might be turned off by thinking of serious social problems only in terms of numbers in a budget. “Music touches people in different ways,” Calderón observes, and in the corrido workshop, “nobody is left out.”

The corrido was composed line by line, with verses identifying the “when” as Monday afternoon and the “where” as the City of Los Angeles. The “who” of the song was parents, uncles, aunts, and neighbors concerned with the problems facing young people. The “what” was expressed as the act of looking over the budget and finding that most of it is expended unwisely, that it ignores the everyday needs of young people in Los Angeles. The moral of the song was to increase funding for programs that serve the youth. The lyrics affirmed Los Angeles as a city of great opportunity, but also as a place where young people find their goals unattainable. The lyrics proclaimed, when “our” voices are united, “we” can make change and win victories. The song ended with a note of hope for the funding of services that invest in youth and make changes for children.

This is the song that emerged from the work of co-creation at the corrido workshop:

Lunes, buenas tardes
Una tarde maravillosa
Pudimos ver y discutimos
Que el presupuesto no era equitativo
La comunidad se reunió
Padres, abuelos y los tíos
Tias, abuelas también
Hasta uno que otro vecino
El City Budget revisamos
Y la verdad no es justo
La mayor parte del dinero
Se gasta en lo injusto
Los jóvenes necesitan
Atención oportuna
Porque si no pueden llegar muy pronto a la tumba

Los Ángeles es la ciudad de grandes oportunidades
Deben poder realizar
Esas metas inalcanzables
El poder está en nuestras voces
Si es que estamos todos unidos
De esa forma éxito en los Estados Unidos

Con esta nota me despido
Con esperanza de otros servicios
Invest in youth [Invertir en la juventud]
Es lo que pido
Para hacer el cambio en nuestros niños

[Translation into English]

*Monday, good evening
A marvelous evening
We could see and we discussed
That the budget was not equitable
The community met
Parents, grandparents, and uncles
Aunts, grandmothers, as well
Even one or two neighbors
We reviewed the City Budget
And truthfully it is not just
The majority of the money
Is spent unjustly
The youth need
Opportune attention
Because if not, they may arrive too early to their tomb*

*Los Angeles is a city of great opportunity
The [youth] should be able to accomplish
Those unreachable goals
The power is in our voices
If we are all united
We'll have success in the United States*

*With this note I bid farewell
With hope of other services
Invest in youth
Is what I ask
To make a change in our children*

Political campaigns often follow predictable patterns. Organizers and leaders usually select the key issues, devise guiding strategies, publicize carefully-vetted positions, and recruit specific followers. Activists attracted to the cause attend meetings, listen to speeches, read pamphlets, and carry out the group's strategic plan. People participating in a campaign may write letters, circulate petitions, and join marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of direct action protest. A consistent feature of political work is "the meeting," the gathering of a group where strategies are discussed, votes are taken, and work assignments parceled out. The meeting usually revolves around talking, a focus that can unwittingly allocate power almost exclusively to those most comfortable with speaking in public, to those who are the most eloquent and persuasive. In many meetings, a few people speak and the rest only listen. A small number of participants become decisive actors while the majority of people in the room become passive reactors.

These kinds of traditional campaigns and meetings have a long and honorable history. They have often been effective in creating social change. Yet they have a less than honorable history as well. The opinions of those who speak up can obscure the opinions of those who remain silent. At these meetings, the inequalities and hierarchies of dominant society can be reinforced rather than repudiated. In traditional political organizing in the United States, there has been a privileging of the ideas, opinions, and interests of men over women, light-skinned people over dark, English speakers over those conversant in other languages, normative sex and gender identities over those considered non-normative, professionals over workers, citizens over non-citizens, the able-bodied over the dis/abled, and participants with advanced education over those with less-formal schooling. These hierarchies are unjust, unfair, and unnecessary, but even worse, they harm the group and its projects by drawing on too small a sample of experiences, insights, talents, and abilities. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly insisted, bringing justice to an unjust society requires the full and active participation of the widest possible constituency, of the whole population.

The corrido workshop deploys traditional arts as an organizing framework for social justice. It opens up a path toward building a popular and democratic social movement that relies on the full participation of the people, and deepens the collective capacity for democratic self-determination. Developing the aims and ideals of political campaigns through a collaborative art project like the corrido workshop disrupts the established patterns of campaigns and meetings. Instead of having leaders recruit followers for a political project, deploying traditional arts practices in social movement work mobilizes the entire group to participate as equals. It requires mutual recognition and respect. Translating political ideas into songs, stories, quilts, or altars brings previously unnoticed aspects of political issues to the fore. Slogans and phrases that resonate with the pulse of the people can have a greater appeal than slogans and phrases crafted by experts.

It is not unusual for a political meeting to include a musical performance as a small part of the event, an opening gesture of welcome, closing moment of inspiration, or as a breather to lighten the mood in the middle of deliberation and debate. It is quite unusual, however, to stage an event like the corrido workshop where songwriting comprises the core activity of a political meeting. It is easy to understand why this is so. Deploying traditional arts practice for social movement mobilization is not without perils. There are risks involved in reducing complex political analyses and positions into the lyrics of a song. Because of time demands in the lives of participants, there are dangers in devoting the precious minutes and hours of a meeting to the labor-intensive and time-consuming work of finding the right chords, notes, and rhythms, of crafting sing-able lyrics that rhyme. Yet collective songwriting as a political project has some advantages as well. The unfamiliar terrain of songwriting disrupts the established hierarchies that too often allow the most talkative (or simply the loudest) participants to dominate a meeting. Translating the facts and figures of an issue like youth disempowerment and inadequate funding of youth programs into song lyrics can highlight unexpected but important dimensions of the situation. In addition, the active work of composing a song can provoke deeper identification with a political issue and others championing it than simply listening to speeches, hearing proposals, voting, and carrying out practical tasks.

The corrido workshop is only one example of how traditional arts practice can be mobilized in the struggle for social justice. The skills honed by a wide range of visual artists, dancers, singers, and actors have informed ACTA's work with Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights (BHCBH). The talents that Vaneza Calderón possesses as a musician provided a starting point for her to become a community educator and facilitator. Similarly, as artist Raquel Salinas pursues her career in theater as a professional actor, playwright, and director, she engages adults and young people in discussions sponsored by ACTA and BHC-BH about the many different health issues that affect them. She creates performances, productions, acting exercises, and theater games that enable participants to learn how to acquire insurance and access medical care. These theatrical events help participants process their responses to domestic abuse and violence, learn how to get help for depression or thoughts about suicide, deal with drug and alcohol abuse, and cope with the emotional, physical, and financial burdens of caring for loved ones who are sick.

Salinas sees theatre as uniquely suited to bringing forth “the voices that are seldom heard,” voices such as those of women, low-wage workers, the undocumented, and young people living in fraught circumstances. Her interactive performances allow audience members to talk back to the art presented to them and discuss its relevance to their lives. Theatre events at the East Los Angeles Women's Center assist that organization in its mission to guarantee that all women, girls, and their families live in places of health and personal well-being, safe from violence and abuse, with equal access to necessary health services and social support. Performances and workshops for a labor union representing custodians enable Salinas to advance demands for economic justice that resonate with her, in part because of her railroad worker grandfather, a union activist who was killed in retaliation for his organizing efforts. Salinas attributes her “warrior spirit” to his example and to the examples set by her aunts and mother.

Not all of the theatrical work that Salinas does with ACTA takes place on stage. In small, closed workshops, theater games encourage people to begin speaking about personal problems in a safe and supportive environment. These sessions start with games that promote participation and build group cohesion, then move on to opportu-

nities for those she describes as “seldom heard” to speak out about their lives, problems, and hopes.

Taking time from her theater career to use drama as a means of educating, organizing, and accompanying the community in Boyle Heights may make it less likely that Salinas will become famous in Hollywood. But she views her life as “so full and so beautiful” and “so blessed,” precisely because of the path she has chosen. After a recent performance, an audience member came up to Salinas, noting that the actor received a standing ovation, and told her that their response was not to stand and applaud, but to make the decision to leave an abusive relationship in which she had been trapped for fifteen years. This kind of transformative moment is not an isolated incident, but something Salinas has become accustomed to experiencing.

It does not take Salinas completely by surprise that theater can have this degree of impact on people. She recalls that her own participation in theater saved her “from the streets.” Learning about and participating in the traditions of radical Chicanx theater took her from just “hanging with the homies” to a path pursuing purposeful creative work. The formal stages where plays are produced, films shot, and solo performances presented are only a small part of the theatrical world in which she works. In art galleries, community centers, and other spaces of improvisation, Salinas deploys performance as essence rather than ornament, as a site where healing happens and social connection and cohesion are constructed.



Health Happens in Neighborhoods Artist Fellow Vaneza Calderón with mentee Marcos Macias led a collective corrido writing workshop, as part of the Invest in Youth Campaign in Pacoima. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Participants in a collective corrido writing workshop led by Artist Fellow Vaneza Calderón with mentee Marcos Macias for the Invest in Youth Campaign in Pacoima, a part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Participants in a collective corrido writing workshop and silkscreen workshop led by Artist Fellow Vaneza Calderón, mentee Marcos Macias, and Self Help Graphics artists, as part of the Health Happens in Neighborhoods Invest in Youth Campaign in Pacoima. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Performance of collectively written corridos at the Invest in Youth Rally at City Hall, part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Erick Iñiguez/ACTA, 2019.



Invest in Youth Rally at City Hall, a part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Erick Iñiguez/ACTA, 2019.



Performance of collectively written corridos at the Invest in Youth Rally at City Hall, part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Erick Iñiguez/ACTA, 2019.



Collective corrido writing workshop led by Gabriel Gonzalez [R], Mary Alfaro, and Vaneza Calderón at SaludArte Health Fair. Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2016.



BHC Health Happens in Neighborhoods Artist Fellow Vaneza Calderón with mentee Marcos Macias in a collective corrido writing workshop, a part of the Invest in Youth Campaign in Pacoima. Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.



Invest in Youth Rally at City Hall, a part of Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Photo: Erick Iñiguez/ACTA, 2019.

Beyond Boyle Heights: Embroidery in Eastern Coachella Valley



Rebozo making by Silvia Santiago at the Synergy Fest in
Dateland Park in Coachella, CA. Photo: Akira Boch/ACTA, 2014.

“Within the collective dignity, love, and respect of all people exist
the wisdom and resources for a beautiful and harmonious tomor-
row.”

-Jerry Tello, Co-founder of the
National Compadres Network

In the Eastern Coachella Valley, Las Mujeres de los Tejidas Purépecha [The Women of Purépecha Embroidery] are a woman's sewing group engaged in embroidery, cross stitching, knitting, crocheting, and other crafts. They are steeped in indigenous aesthetics and social traditions. Although sewing is their point of entry, their many different acts of collaborative co-creation lead to a wide range of new artistic, activist, and social experiences. Las Mujeres meet to share ideas and materials, pass on skills, and do work that is both practical and poetic. In their circle, a farmworker is respected as a master craftswoman and recognized cultural treasure. As they sew, women who feel exhausted at the end of a day of arduous, poorly-paid labor take charge of the purpose, pace, and nature of their work. Their excursion into the aesthetic is also therapeutic. "Sometimes I am so tired at work," one craftswoman relates, "but then I get here and I can relax and de-stress." In the act of decorating blouses, pillowcases, and aprons, they decorate their way to another existence. In embroidery, small actions build on one another. In life, no less than in traditional art making, many different small actions can add up to something of great value.

In a communique, Las Mujeres honor their teacher and affirm their identity. Translated from the original Spanish, they proclaim:

We are women who are learning and enjoying the teachings of Natividad Gonzalez, of her delicious dishes, her beautiful embroidery, and her hospitality. We are Hispanic women of different cultures who come together for our love of art. We are women who are proud of our cultures and who are learning from each other as we rescue our traditions. We are taking initiative in making changes, and we are workers, friends, *compañeras*, daughters, mothers, and professionals. We are strong women who want to change our community and help our children excel in their education in order to reach college and have a better future to obtain better options outside of the fields.

We come together because we like to learn and share with one another. In this space we can get to know each other more. Through our conversations, our worries come out, and while we share our experiences we learn how to support [each other] and resolve some

[of these] problems. In coming together, we have formed a women's support group for the women of the North Shore and its surrounding areas, including Thermal, Mecca, Oasis, Coachella, Indio, and Cathedral City. Even though we are tired after a week of work, we come together to de-stress while we share and enjoy a delicious meal and a pleasant chat.

Our intentions in participating in this workshop are to learn Purépecha embroidery that is part of our ancestral knowledge. Many of us have seen this type of embroidery but did not know this art form. In participating, we learned how to embroider and started to fall in love with the art form. Our curiosity to learn this embroidery called *aguja maravillosa* (marvelous needle) opened the door to learning Purépecha words and learn more about the culture through this art form.

We learned to embroider and to share our knowledge based on our experiences as *compañeras* in this space. We savored Concepción Pozar's and Natividad Gonzalez's different dishes, who bring their recipes from Ocumicho, Michoacan. We learned about the different ethnic groups that make up a part of our cultural treasures. As we learned to embroider, we also shared our own knowledge. Through this learning process, we also realized that we have similar needs and experiences, especially challenging experiences, which, as strong and courageous women, we've been able to overcome. We continue to be strong, with a firm heart and desire to uplift our families without leaving behind our roots, which represent us.

We wish to continue learning more about cultural art forms, especially delicious dishes from the Purépecha tradition, and continue teaching what our grandmothers have passed down to us. We want to continue learning about the education system and the different programs that form a part of our children's education, and in this way guide and orient ourselves with this information to be able to advocate for our children. We want to improve our English and basic computer skills in order to be able to help our children with their studies. Additionally, we want to continue investing in our learning about

how to cook traditional dishes, cross stitching, knitting, crocheting, and openwork. We formed this space to share with each other and to de-stress from the daily responsibilities. This space is not only a support group for all of us, but also a space to create new ideas and hopes for our communities. We should continue to meet with the goal of continuing our friendships and learn more things from our compañeras, like the cuisine from Ocumicho, Michoacán and how we can improve education in our community for our children.

We want to remain united to continue advocating for everything we want in our communities and to demand improvements for our families. We want to be able to attend our school and community meetings. We need transportation and accessible schedules so that everyone has the opportunity to attend. It's been several years that they have not begun construction of the school in North Shore and it is urgent that they begin now. We need resources and our community's support to have these services in the community, such as better street lighting and more transportation for our schools and community. We also want to have more opportunities to enrich our lives with art workshops, folk dance, stores that offer fresh fruits and vegetables at accessible prices, and to strengthen our community with a clinic in North Shore. As a community we must not remain silent. Our power grows when we unite to demand what we deserve.

We propose to achieve our goals with active and dedicated participation. Hard work, responsibility, perseverance, and dedication are all necessary for us to reach our goals. All of the women who have joined together to write and share this communique are field workers who harvest grapes, limes, oranges, chilies, green beans, dates, onions, tomatoes, strawberries, corn, figs, lettuce, sweet anise, watermelon, cantaloupe, garlic, squash, and many more. Not only do we work the fields during the harvest, we also prepare the lands so that they can bear fruit, all without setting aside our responsibilities to our families and homes.

Even so, we arrive with energy and dedication to [work on] the embroidery. We, the women, are the strength that enriches and uplifts the Coachella Valley.



Natividad Gonzalez and Conchita Posar leading a Purepecha Embroidery workshop at the Synergy Fest in Dateland Park in Coachella, CA. Photo: Akira Boch/ACTA, 2014.



Example of traditional purepecha embroidery at the Synergy Fest in Dateland Park in Coachella, CA. Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2015.

Conclusion: New Ways of Creating, Relating, Seeing, and Being



“Mi Barrio, the place where dreams are born” altar for SaludArte health fair created by Ofelia Esparza and Rosanna Esparza Ahrens. Photo: Sara Aguilar/ACTA, 2016.

“...the art should not have only entertainment value within the movement but have a legitimate place as a centerpiece of the movement.”

-Quetzal Flores,
ACTA Program Manager

In mobilizing traditional arts to promote health awareness and social justice in Boyle Heights, the Alliance for California Traditional Arts deepens capacities for mutual respect, cultural pluralism, and cultural democracy among the diverse peoples of California. The wide range of musicians, visual artists, actors, craftspeople, writers, radio broadcasters, poets, and spoken word performers who participate in the Building Healthy Communities initiative serve as connectionists—people linking up with others to promote collective community development and empowerment. As traditional arts practitioners, they communicate collective wisdom and transmit shared experiences, aspirations, and values. As creative problem solvers, they help bolster community resistance, resilience, resourcefulness, and self-reliance. In the process of co-creating quilts, songs, altars, and books, the stories that emerge help people break and cast off the chains that hold them down by building a collective capacity for democratic deliberation and decision-making.

The altar makers guiding people to restore their souls and psyches by re-storying their lives offer a method that informs many other artistic projects connected to Building Healthy Communities in Boyle Heights. They teach us “to arrive”—to begin work with full awareness of ourselves, our ancestors, and the powers of the natural world. Upon arrival, it is necessary to connect fully with the people and powers of the universe, to let down barriers, diminish resistance, open hearts, and open minds. Arriving and connecting sets the stage for making agreements, rather than establishing rules and regulations. These agreements concern both the manner and the matter of collaborative work. They include listening and looking carefully, not jumping to rash judgments, and focusing on what is generative, productive, and life-affirming among the people in the room. Making these agreements discourages over-investment in and over-identification with strongly-held positions, opinions, and conclusions in order to “convert” others. Instead, a spirit of openness seeks to convene and converse with others rather than to convert or conquer them. Agreeing to leave room for others to speak, listen to them carefully, and respond respectfully makes it possible for participants to reclaim history, rethink their places in it, and reimagine the future in better ways. This path of arriving, connecting, and agreeing leads to the

affirmation of common desires and the crafting of a collective destiny.

Making art together builds social solidarity and cohesion through collaboration. It helps people living in places deprived of resources to find new ways to be resourceful. It encourages people to experience difference without dominance, to replace hate, hurt, frustration, and fear with the dignity and excitement of co-creation. Mobilizing traditional arts practices for social change motivates those who have been devalued and discounted all their lives to deepen their capacities for imagination, artistry, and mastery. The reservoirs of resourcefulness and self-reliance that traditional art making cultivates provide individuals and communities with skills, dispositions, and new social relations that can be vital for making meaningful social change. As a community creates together, it finds new ways to relate together. People move from just wanting to have more to wanting to “be more.” As an antidote to solitude, arts practice leads people to think in terms of “we,” to discern that our personal problems have common causes that require collective and collaborative responses.



Restorative Justice workshop led by Artist Fellows Omar Ramirez and Juana Mena at REMAP: LA.
Photo: Timo Saarelma/ACTA, 2019.

The 9 R's of Restorative Cultural Arts Practice for Social Justice

The aims and means of restorative cultural arts practice reside in the 9 R's. When participants agree to honor these imperatives, common ground can be established productively.

- Reclaiming History
- Resisting Unjust Conditions
- Restoring Social Connections
- Re-Storying the Past and Present
- Respecting Differences Without Domination
- Relating in New Ways
- Reacting to Problems Responsibly
- Reimagining the Future
- Redefining Our Place in the World

Acuerdos for Artistic Co-Creation: Being Contributive, Not Competitive

In a society that constantly pits people against each other in relentless competition, it is sometimes difficult to work together, to think in terms of “we” instead of “me.” Yet collaborative art making and struggles for social justice presume that we know more and can do more together as a group. Collaborative art making brings into existence a glimpse of what the world would be like if everybody could contribute and be counted, a world where the silenced can speak, where the shunned and segregated are welcomed, where the value in undervalued places and undervalued people are firmly recognized. The key to this collaborative work is the *acuerdo*, the agreement, rather than the rule, the regulation, the demand, or the command. Working in agreement proceeds from a few key principles. They are:

Withhold judgment. Learning to listen and to look requires patience. Our first task is to hear and to see, to fully absorb what is in front of us. Moving too quickly to decide whether we like or dislike something, or whether we agree or oppose what we hear from others, can inhibit our ability to recognize exactly what is in front of us and why it is there.

Find common ground. Rather than focusing first on other people's difficulties and deficiencies, start with what is generative, productive, and life-affirming. Finding out what we can build on together is more difficult—but ultimately more rewarding—than moving too quickly to address the things that divide us. We can work through differences and difficulties eventually after we have confirmed our common investment in each other and our recognition of each other's dignity.

Don't over-invest in—or over-identify with—positions, opinions, and conclusions. Collaboration is a process that requires a practice of conversation rather than conversion.

Listen carefully and look closely for the “I” that speaks and recognize its struggles.

Notice and address the things that silence voices, suppress feelings, harm relationships, and perpetrate violence and exclusion.

Listen from the heart. Don't plan what you are going to say next while someone else is speaking. Think about how you can help someone else solve their problems rather than how you appear to others.

Speak from the heart. Feel the pulse of the people and contribute to it.

Leave room for others to speak, listen carefully to their speech, and respond to it. Build together by being together.

Throw glitter, not shade. Learn to appreciate, acknowledge, and amplify the value in other people.

Reclaim history and rethink our places in it.

Reimagine the future and our roles in it.

Traditional Arts Practice Is...

- Participatory
- Creative
- Collective
- Imaginative
- Convivial
- Egalitarian
- Open-Ended
- Proactive
- Performative
- Transformative

ACTA in Action: Fields of Endeavor

The art-based practice of the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) in Boyle Heights has taken place in a variety of settings and covered a broad range of artistic media and genres. These include:

Cultural Asset Mapping

In communities constantly reminded of their deficits and liabilities, it can be important to identify and acknowledge assets. Cultural asset mapping has been a crucial practice for ACTA. It assumes that each community already contains tremendous assets and that awareness of them can create new social connections and creations.

Collective Songwriting

Songwriting workshops are exercises in imagination and improvisation. They produce something new every time in response to the concerns and aspirations of the participants. They level distinctions between experts and novices, leaders and followers, performers and spectators, to co-create and experience a song that comes from—and belongs to—everyone present.

Altar Making

Identifying and organizing objects together in order to honor both the dead and the living builds bridges across time, place, and social conditions. Simultaneously addressing the hurts of history and the personal aches and illnesses of individual bodies, altar making is an active practice that allows people to locate themselves within larger histories and attend to their most pressing immediate and personal needs.

Restorative Cultural Arts Practice (Praxis)

Restorative Cultural Arts Practice (or Praxis) appears in many different forms. Codex projects enable young people to create personal visual and literary histories that speak back to their experiences of erasure in the dominant culture. Radio broadcasts, mural art, and silkscreen posters become venues for airing personal and community concerns. Healing circles seek to replace suspensions, expulsions, police surveillance, and punishment in schools with interactive processes of collective responsibility and accountability to resolve disputes. These seemingly diffuse practices cohere around a common commitment to restore mutual respect, return responsibility to the community, repair damaged senses of self, and regenerate mutuality and solidarity.

Quiltmaking and Embroidery

Quiltmaking sutures separate pieces of cloth to reveal new patterns and new possibilities. Decorating blouses, pillowcases, and aprons with embroidery displays a determination to make a mark on the world using the ability to discern the “what can be” latent inside the “what is.” The process of making quilts and embroidering material is made of small steps that add up to big differences. As participants create together, they engage in conversation about personal and public issues. These sites have been especially important venues for women to speak with one another frankly and freely, constructing common strategies for solving the problems they face.

Theater

Actor, playwright, and director Raquel Salinas worked with young people under the auspices of ACTA to create and perform autobiographical narratives. The Casa 0101 Theatre, started by Josefina López and identified as a cultural treasure in Boyle Heights in the Mapping Cultural Assets initiative, participated in the 2014 SaludArte health fair in Hollenbeck Park. Theatre games and performances provide opportunities for

what Salinas identifies as the voices that are seldom heard.

Visual Art

The work of ACTA has encompassed photography, posters, prints, and mural art. A typically innovative project was the Writing Wrongs art exhibit displayed at Espacio 1839 in Boyle Heights, which featured screen prints created by students depicting examples of hurtful and belittling words that they remembered being hurled at them by teachers and family members. ACTA's Arts in Corrections program offers mural art and illustration classes in carceral institutions. A key part of the Day of Dialogue about gentrification in 2014 was a photo booth which displayed photos of people holding a dry erase board on which they identified a Boyle Heights cultural treasure or expressed a hope for the area.

Radio Production

Under the supervision of Omar G. Ramirez, students at local high schools created Restorative Justice Radio, a series of four, ten-minute programs about the need to replace suspensions, expulsions, and incarceration with restorative justice methods of collective responsibility and accountability.

A Building Healthy Communities Agenda for Social Change

- Access to Healthful Surroundings
- Access to Healthcare
- Immigrant Rights
- Violence Prevention
- Safe and Nurturing Schools
- Food Justice
- Freedom of Gender Expression
- Reclamation of Space
- Development Without Displacement
- Thinking and Acting Decoloniality

Restorative Cultural Arts Practice (Praxis): Classroom Activities, Exercises, and Facilitation

Approaches and Processes

“I am from” poem takes inventory of local realities, problems, and possibilities by asking students to locate themselves in place and time.

Letter to imagined grandchildren positions authors as successes in the future, looking back on the path that led them to victory.

Historical person impersonation that places the author in the shoes and life circumstances of someone in history and speaks from that perspective.

Tree of Life Project, a “draw your world” picture that displays the roots, trunk, leaves, branches and blossoms of life as it has come into being and been lived so far. This drawing documents growth and the things that make it possible.

Holding Space by creating agendas that ground, clarify, educate, and initiate reflection.

Embracing “willful defiance” in organizing spaces. Taking energy and imagination that school discipline structures fear and cultivating them as a healthy defense of the community.

Counter-storytelling by making use of digital media to document personal histories that challenge dominant narratives.

Restorative Justice Radio was a youth radio project involving students to speak up and speak out about important community issues.

Hope Mural Project used art to make the walls of Roosevelt High part of the community rather than a barrier against it.

Defining Restorative Justice principles and practices in a local context and cultural arts practice.

Cultivating Critical Hope with a “Rose That Grew From Concrete” activity, making use of Tupac Shakur’s poem and Jeff Duncan-Andrade’s distinction between false hope and critical hope in communities and schools.

Codex projects to create personal visual and literary histories to resist erasure.

“The person in these shoes...” exercise as a way to “check in” by having people say something about themselves that others may not know.

Tools Deployed for a Day of Dialogue and Participatory Arts Engagement About Displacement, September 17, 2014

Community dialogue on the meaning of gentrification and displacement. A discussion among young people, adults, community representatives, and Latinx MacArthur Fellows (Macarturos) on the causes, consequences, and potential cures for gentrification in Boyle Heights.

Outdoor altar making guided by Ofelia Esparza, Elena Esparza, and Rosanna Ahrens Esparza. A collaborative spiritual and art project to mark a place of profound historical meaning.

Photo Booth where people were asked to write on a dry erase board one word that describes Boyle Heights, or something they like about the neighborhood and its culture. People are then photographed with their sign and the photographs posted to create a visual community dialogue and display.

Community Chalkboard as a space where residents are given chalk and invited to draw and write about ideas and concerns for the future of Boyle Heights.

Library of Memories designed by Imix Books owner, Elisa Garcia. Chairs, tables, and free books provided for a collective reading of *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, and a discussion of how the book relates to issues facing residents of Boyle Heights.

¡Testimoniar! Lawn signs about place and identity were created and displayed by *MacArturxs* (Latinx MacArthur Fellows) Ruth Behar and Pepon Osorio to bear witness to and give testimony about place and identity in Boyle Heights.

Silkscreen-Making Workshop led by Omar G. Ramirez presenting visual narratives of displacement.

Closing Ceremony around the collectively constructed altar affirming a common commitment to Boyle Heights and its future.



View the SaludArte documentary at actaonline.org

The Alliance for California Traditional Arts
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