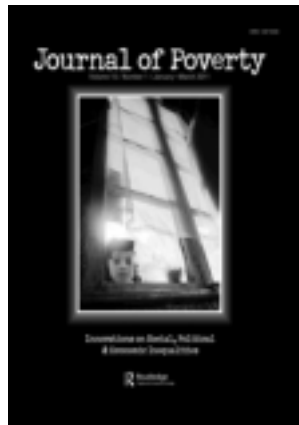


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### Cultural Organizing as Critical Praxis: Tamejavi Builds Immigrant Voice, Belonging, and Power

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## **Cultural Organizing as Critical Praxis: Tamejavi Builds Immigrant Voice, Belonging, and Power**

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*Established in 1998, the American Friends Service Committee's Pan Valley Institute (PVI) is a popular education center located in Fresno, California. Since its inception, PVI has placed a high value on what immigrants bring with them to this country—their experiences, abilities, and cultural practices, which are often informed by prolonged and daily struggles against economic and social injustice. This article profiles PVI's "cultural organizing" work that supports immigrant cultural leaders representing the Valley's diverse populations. In conclusion, three contributions are highlighted that the Tamejavi approach brings to academic conversations about art as social practice.*

**KEYWORDS** *immigrants, cultural heritage, ethnicity, popular education, participatory action research, poverty*

On May 18, 2013, a Zapoteco Mexican folkloric group entered the historic Tower Theater in Fresno, California, dancing to the rhythms of traditional banda music. Also that weekend at the Tower Theater an enthusiastic audience was delighted by the santur music by Mr. Faez, a local Iranian musician.

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On the same stage indigenous P'urépecha women shared cultural experiences from the state of Michoacán, tossing traditional homemade bread to the audience as they danced. A group of Punjabi girls from the City of Livingston lifted spirits as they performed their magnificent dances. Joined by other indigenous, Mexican, Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, Indian, and Iranian immigrants to California's Central Valley, these performances marked the culmination of a year-long Cultural Organizing Fellowship organized by the Pan Valley Institute (PVI). With support and performances by other cultural organizers such as The Urban Bush Women, ShadoKat (Adam Bowser), and filmmaker Maureen Gosling, this Grande Finale was not staged by one organization or production company but was rather the collective effort of an entire community concerned with the cultural pride and strength of the region's diverse immigrants. It was for some the first time they saw their cultural heritage appreciated in public, beyond their own community. For others it was the first time they shared the stage with fellow immigrants from different homelands.

In recognition of the long histories of cultural oppression experienced by immigrants to California's Central Valley and the power of culture and the arts in building community, the American Friends Service Committee's PVI has spent the past decade supporting the rich cultural heritage and leadership capacity of the region's immigrants and refugees. The Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP) is PVI's most recent development in this journey. Representing the Central Valley's diverse immigrant and refugee populations, the first cohort of TCOFP fellows are helping their communities find a sense of belonging and are together building broader immigrant participation in public life across the region. They all believe that the arts, creative expression, and traditional cultural practices compose the lifeblood of indigenous and immigrant cultures and hold the key to positive social integration and change.

Commonly arriving to the Central Valley as political refugees or as agricultural field workers seeking a better life for their families, many immigrants work multiple jobs in sometimes harsh and isolated conditions. In a region where the largest industrial agriculture industry in the world has produced entrenched poverty and inequality (Martin, 2003; Walker, 2004), immigrants hold with them memories of historical exclusion, oppression, and even violence. Some memories linger from the not so distant past, as families struggle with seasonal below-living wage jobs in constant fear of deportation<sup>1</sup>—holding onto the smells, colors, sounds, cultural values, and practices of their homeland as a means of emotional survival.

Within this context, and amid often inhospitable mainstream local political arenas, many immigrants long to be seen and heard as *seres pensantes* (thinking beings) beyond the physical labor and histories of political and economic exile that brought them to the region. In recognition of the damage done by deep cultural oppression and the power and joy of cultural

celebration within immigrant communities, PVI launched a public cultural exchange festival to bring the voices, cultures, practices, and artistic expressions of the diverse Valley immigrant communities to the public stage. In 2002, with support from The James Irvine Foundation, the Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship, and many Valley organizations the Tamejavi Cultural Exchange Festival was born.

The word *Tamejavi*, inspired by the creative antics of poet Juan Felipe Herrera, a member of the festival's diverse immigrant advisory committee, brings together syllabus from the Hmong, Spanish, and Mixteco words for marketplace, **TA**j laj Tshav Puam. . . (Hmong), **ME**rcado. . . (Spanish), nun**JAVI**. . . (Mixteco). The combined syllables spell Tamejavi, representing a public place for the Central Valley's diverse immigrant and refugee communities to gather and engage in cultural sharing. Tamejavi became a biannual festival unearthing a wellspring of cultural leadership. This enthusiastic cultural leadership that came together across ethnic lines through five Tamejavi Festivals inspired PVI to launch the TCOFP to support Valley immigrants organizing creative spaces, cultural practices, and heritage education programs beyond the annual festival, within and across their own communities.

This article tells the story of Tamejavi and the immigrant cultural organizers who call California's Central Valley home. We begin this article with the story of the birth of Tamejavi and discuss its main principles and strategies. The following section shares short vignettes featuring Tamejavi cultural organizers and their work to build voice, community, and connection for Central Valley immigrants. A final section proposes that the Tamejavi approach has much to offer to academic conversations about art as social practice and community-based arts, specifically in its recognition that the arts are not only brought into poor and marginalized communities from the outside but rather emerge from within as a very means of place making, political organization, and survival. We believe that when recognized, nurtured, and resourced indigenous cultural practices can move from a means of support and survival to a central force for social change. In fact we propose that real and sustained change cannot happen without it.

## THE TAMEJAVI CULTURAL ORGANIZING FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM: HISTORY, PRINCIPLES, AND METHOD

### History and Central Valley Context

Founded in 1998 as a project of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the PVI creates a safe place for immigrants and refugees to learn from one another and build community. Inspired by the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee, which served as an important training base for the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, the PVI brings a

diverse range of grassroots immigrant leaders together in cultural gatherings, leadership trainings, thematic workshops, fellowship programs, and residential retreats to increase immigrant participation and power across California's Center Valley.

Like the Highlander Center, PVI's work is guided by the principles of popular education (Freire, 2000; Horton, 1998). *Popular education* is defined by its commitment to the social transformation of poor and working-class people through collective study and transformation of the world. The term *popular education* is derived from the Spanish translation of *educación popular* and emerged in Latin America in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Motta & Cole, 2013). Although Myles Horton (1998) of the Highlander Center did not initially use the term *popular education*, it became closely associated with Highlander's grassroots adult education work in Appalachia and with Brazilian scholar-educator Paulo Freire, a close friend of Horton. In keeping with the Highlander tradition, we strongly believe that enduring inequities can only be changed when the voices and actions of those directly affected are included in the process of designing solutions to the problems they experience. With this belief, we create learning environments for immigrants and refugees to engage in dialogue, reflection, and critical analysis of the issues they face in their daily lives. Our pedagogy is characterized by what Paulo Freire (2000) calls *conscientization*, or critical consciousness. Often termed *praxis*, popular education involves reflection and action upon the world to transform it.

The geographical context in which we work is California's Central Valley, home to the wealthiest agricultural producers in the world and the poorest people living in the United States (Berube, 2008).<sup>2</sup> The Central Valley agricultural industry has for decades attracted workers from as far away as Armenia, India, China, Mexico, and other parts of Latin America (Fujimoto & Sandoval, 2013). The Valley is also home to many immigrants from Southeast Asia and Central America seeking refuge from wars, political conflicts, and economic insecurity. Many immigrants first found their way to the region with the promise of finding a better life, working on Valley farms and saving enough to support their families both here and abroad. Yet, since before the California Gold Rush racist immigration, land ownership and labor policies and practices prevented immigrants from owning land, marrying, educating their children, and participating in political life (Holmes, 2013; Walker, 2004). These practices and patterns shape a social landscape of stark inequality.

The agriculture industry's increasing reliance on low-wage undocumented migrant workers during the 1970s, and the immigration reform and refugee resettlement policies introduced in the 1980s, contributed to significant demographic changes across the region. The Valley also experienced a significant increase in the migration of people of indigenous descent, primarily from Mexico (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Holmes, 2013). The ethnically and linguistically diverse indigenous migrants arriving to the Valley are now

doing so with the intention of settling down and building a home for their families, instead of coming on a temporary basis, as was the case for the Mexican male migrants coming as part of guest worker “Bracero” treaties of the late-20th century.

These demographic changes represent a rapid ethnic diversification of California’s Central Valley. This diversification might be seen as an asset, considering the many contributions immigrant and refugee families make to the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the Valley (Fujimoto & Sandoval, 2013). Unfortunately, for many conservative and mainstream policy makers and pundits this diversity has been seen as a detriment (Hanson, 2007; Huntington, 1996). At best new policies have offered a “safety” net for economically struggling immigrants. At worst the implementation of policies that criminalize immigrants such as Secure Communities<sup>3</sup> keep newcomers in the margins of society on the basis of their legal status and race—depriving many residents of their basic human right to become active members of the places where they live, work and raise families.<sup>4</sup> Both responses underestimate immigrants as important social, cultural, and civic actors and reinforce negative stereotypes of immigrants as dangerous, dependent, and untrustworthy visitors in this country.

Since 9/11 and in the context of ongoing national immigration reform debates, we are now more than ever in need of reframing the narrative about immigrants living in the United States. Alongside a growing immigrant rights movement we believe that immigrant communities themselves can make a significant contribution to this new narrative (Sen & Mamdouh, 2008). Through cultural festivals, workshops, fellowship programs, and residential gatherings we are together weaving a new story of the contributions, strengths, and challenging journeys of immigrants. It is our hope that the process of recognizing, celebrating, and activating immigrants’ cultural rights counters systems of patronage and policing, and recognizes immigrants as productive agents of social change.

At the Pan Valley Institute we believe in the wisdom, knowledge, and cultural strengths that migrants bring to this country. However we did not originally see the struggle for cultural rights and cultural expression as a central issue or cultural organizing as a key strategy of our work. It was in our residential gatherings (focusing primarily on civic and political participation, and leadership development) that issues of cultural discrimination and cultural loss became a recurrent theme. Over and over again we witnessed immigrants and refugees finding common ground through telling their stories of uncertainty and distress upon arriving in a new land—constantly under scrutiny for who they are, for the way they dress, for speaking their own languages, for “resisting assimilation,” and for simply “being here.” Indigenous migrants in particular understand the experience of cultural oppression from painful histories of colonization in their homelands (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). Perhaps because of this history many indigenous migrants to the



Valley opt to stay out of the public sphere, in fear of facing social alienation and cultural denial. At our popular education gatherings we also witnessed a diverse array of immigrant participants finding great joy and discovering common cultural practices across ethnic and national origins through the sharing of songs, instruments, poems, recipes, crafts, and stories from their homelands.<sup>5</sup>

In response to our realization of the centrality of cultural oppression and the power of cultural celebration we decided to launch a public cultural exchange festival.<sup>6</sup> The biannual Tamejavi Festival has become a popular Central Valley celebration, bringing diverse communities together through a variety of events, performances, workshops, and exhibits.<sup>7</sup> Through Tamejavi we witnessed how cultural festivals are a means by which immigrants tell their stories and bring new narratives about their own journeys and contributions to public life. We also saw through the participating performers, craftspeople, teachers, and cultural leaders how culture and the arts are embedded within immigrant life and are deeply central to what it means to be human. This reaffirmed our belief that supporting diverse forms of public expression is essential in building a sense of belonging among marginalized people, and in motivating civic and political engagement. Beyond public engagement we came to see the arts and culture as an already existing social change strategy for immigrant communities. Ultimately, cultural work is more than an organizing strategy. It is a human right that challenges histories of invisibility, marginalization, and inequality.

After several years of devoting time and resources to organizing the Tamejavi Festival, we decided to focus our attention beyond the frame of a biannual festival and toward supporting immigrant cultural keepers, oral-tradition masters, leaders, and organizers in their own communities. In keeping with our popular education values we decided to support and catalyze what already exists in immigrant communities instead of attempting to scale up our own cultural organizing through the festival. This ambition was realized through the TCOFP, launched in Fall 2011. Ten fellows, representing a diversity of immigrant and refugee communities, were selected for the inaugural year of the TCOFP.<sup>8</sup> Although the first cohort spans a wide range of approaches to cultural organizing, they are all committed to helping their community find a sense of belonging and build broader civic and political participation in Valley life. They all believe that the arts, creative expression, and traditional practices compose the lifeblood of indigenous and immigrant cultures and has an important role to play in catalyzing broader political participation and power.

Through the TCOFP fellows learn the basic principles of popular education, participatory action research, and cultural organizing (further described below). They are also provided with resources to host cultural exchanges within and beyond their own communities. Each inaugural fellow initially formed a local working team to conduct a community assessment and



cultural inventory to gain a better understanding of pressing concerns, collective cultural assets, and the impact of migration and displacement on individuals, families, and cultures in their community. Based on the findings of this collaborative community assessment, fellows and working teams designed public cultural projects to mobilize local cultural capacities and address common concerns.

### Values and Principles: Our Approach to Cultural Organizing

Before sharing a few stories from the TCOFP fellows and reflecting upon what our work brings to the field of arts as social practice and community based arts, we share the foundational values and principles that inform our approach to cultural organizing. A growing number of organizations use the term *cultural organizing*.<sup>9</sup> Our specific approach to cultural organizing is an extension of the fundamental values and principles of popular education and participatory action research. In fact, these principles are more important to our approach than any particular arts or culture based methodology.

Popular education is a community education effort aimed at empowering adults through cooperative study and action directed toward achieving a more just and equitable society. As its priority, popular education principles are aimed toward poor, oppressed, and marginalized people whose understandings of the world are often excluded from the production of expert and scientific knowledge. The colonial histories of the world have taught us that these very exclusions and silences play a central role in the oppression and control of poor and marginalized peoples. In practice, popular education processes bring people together, build confidence and trust, foster a sense of group identity and solidarity, and engage oppressed people in dialogue and critical analysis of the issues that most concern them (Boggs, 2012; Freire, 2000; Horton, 1998). To do this work, one must embrace the belief that all people are active subjects, not objects, of their own lives. Practitioners must also truly embrace the belief that people learn through collective dialogue and analysis rather than in isolation and not solely through information handed down by experts.

Similar to popular education, participatory action research (PAR) is a process of collectively generating information and knowledge to change a problem or situation in one's community. Instead of being studied by outside expert researchers, a community or group of people control the research process themselves by determining what issues they want to address, what they need to find out to address the issue, where they will find the answers, and ultimately what they will do with the information uncovered. PAR confronts the elite monopoly on research and information about poor, marginalized, an often overstudied people by proposing a process of generating collective knowledge, of the people for the people, to change a specific social condition impacting the most marginalized members of society (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1998; Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Following from the values and guiding principles of popular education and participatory action research, our conception of cultural organizing is a community-building process in which people share cultural traditions and artistic expression with one another to build stronger, more active communities. Following our central belief that the world is not static, that it is open to change, and that poor and oppressed people have an active role to play in creating a better future, we know that acts of creativity, self-expression and identity formation are central to activating this change. Like the teachers and students fighting to preserve Chicano/Latino studies in Arizona<sup>10</sup> we ask, if you are not valued for who you are, and are prohibited from acting as a creative and cultural being, how are you to understand your own agency and ability to analyze and change the problems you experience in your life?

Thus denial of culture is not simply the denial of certain forms of artistic expression, but the rejection of individuals and groups as creative and purposeful human beings. First and foremost we see culture, and cultural organizing, as a human right. In agreement with international human rights law, we consider cultural organizing as rights-based work. Based on our years of experience we know that cultural expression and tradition is not a choice but rather when denied can have life-and-death consequences. High suicide rates among refugee, immigrant, and indigenous youth experiencing historic trauma and cultural loss bears out this tragic reality (Leong & Leach, 2007).<sup>11</sup> We believe that when cultural organizing engages elders and youth it helps generations heal the divides that often emerge as immigrants arrive in fast-paced and often alienating worlds. We embrace cultural organizing as a holistic practice that seeks to honor the struggles and hard work of our ancestors while finding ways to create a better world for future generations.

Second, we also know that cultural organizing is an important strategy for claiming public space, and building a sense of belonging for immigrants in new places that are often unwelcoming. The process of cultural organizing creates opportunities for immigrants and under-represented cultures to practice and transmit their cultural knowledge to one another. Public cultural expression also combats the common immigrant experiences of isolation and invisibility through claiming of the public stage. Organizing immigrants around cultural connections and assets instead of problems also fosters a sense of self-generated belonging, which is often not the case for immigrants working with social service agencies or direct action organizing (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Our approach to cultural organizing is deeply “place-based” recognizing that our various geographic locations and identities inform who we are, how we act, our thinking, and our relationships.

Thirdly, we believe that cultural organizing is an important way to build cross-cultural relationships and civic engagement. For example, the Tamejavi Festival and the TCOFP confront isolation and marginalization by engaging in cross-cultural events in the public sphere; building new relationships, and support from key organizations, local authorities, and individuals; claiming

public space to present cultural pride and identity; building a broader sense of community through exchange between diverse cultures; redefining the value of art beyond traditional recognition of “high art” to include diverse cultural forms of expression; bringing new resources to enrich cultural vitality and creative expression in poor communities; and building civic capacity in key areas such as leadership development, media communications, volunteer engagement, event planning, public speaking, networking, and more.

### Tamejavi Cultural Organizers

The following vignettes provide a small window into the power of the PVI approach to cultural organizing. The featured cultural organizers are leaders in their own communities and recently completed the TCOFP.

Pov M. Xyooj was born in Long Beach, California. His parents are Hmong refugees who were sponsored to come to the United States from a Thai refugee camp through his mother’s father. He is the first in his family to be born in the United States and became the first to graduate from a 4-year university when he earned a BS in physics and a minor in Asian American studies from the University of California, Los Angeles. While in college he was involved in several Asian student organizations, including Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and Hmong associations. Pov moved to Fresno, where his parents live, after college and immediately started building connections with local Asian student organizations and community leaders. He currently works part-time at a Hmong TV network in Fresno, California, and volunteers with several local community organizations. Through this work, Pov is not only reconnecting with his cultural roots and immersing himself in the Hmong community, but also is taking action to redefine his identity by composing and performing bilingual hip-hop music, and reclaiming his original Hmong family name. According to Pov:

One way in which I am promoting an aspect of the Hmong culture is my name. My legal name is Pao M. Xiong but I have recently been going by the name my parents and grandmother gave me. In the Romanized Popular Alphabet it’s spelled and reads as Pov M. Xyooj. Going by this name is promoting my culture because it promotes the usage of saying my name in the Hmong language and emphasizes that I am from the Xyooj clan, which is and has been important to point out when meeting an individual.

Through the TCOFP Pov gained a broad skillset that makes him a more effective cultural organizer. In the process of collaboratively conducting the community assessment and cultural inventory, Pov became aware of unspoken concerns within his community such as severe intergenerational tensions and a deep sense of being “outsiders” in the Valley. This shared “outsider”

identity make his people believe that they do not have the right to engage in the civic sphere, much less the right to contest the status quo. These findings inspired Pov to create a space where members of his community could openly speak about their shared concerns while simultaneously promoting a sense of belonging.

For his public project at the Tamejavi Culture and Art Series, Pov curated an interactive photography exhibition that illustrated important places of resettlement among the Hmong community in Fresno. Along with the exhibition he organized a panel discussion featuring members of the Hmong community from three generations (first, first and a half, and second) who shared their personal journeys of finding belonging in this country. Pov's own mother participated on the panel, representing the first generation Hmong experience in the Valley, and spoke of her work as a small farmer. This was the first time that Pov's mother had the opportunity to publicly discuss the steps she took to fight discrimination to become a successful woman farmer, overcoming barriers faced by most immigrants. Organizing this event reaffirmed Pov's own confidence in being Hmong while helping others in his community see the value of their stories and the contributions they make to the Valley.

Silvia Rojas is a native of Santiago Tiño Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico, who came to the United States in 1992 when she was age 17. Silvia speaks her native Mixteco, Spanish, and understands some English. Like many other women from low-income immigrant families, Silvia assumed major social responsibilities from a very young age including running her hometown medical clinic at age 13. Since moving to the United States Silvia has worked in agriculture, harvesting onions, garlic, and strawberries among other products. Now married and the mother of five children, two boys and three girls, Sylvia no longer works in the fields and dedicates much of her time to community work. Besides her commitment to motherhood and community organizing Silvia loves dancing and has participated in a traditional dance group Se'e Savi, in Madera, California. As her commitment to the dance group's community work grew, she became a member of Se'e Savi's organizing committee. In 2006, Silvia was invited to participate in a project called *Naaxini* (leader) where she learned to be a health leader to help the indigenous immigrant community.

In recognition of her community and cultural work and her passion for promoting collective artistic and cultural endeavors, Silvia was nominated for a TCOFP fellowship. She has a unique leadership style, tending to lead from behind the scenes. Silvia is aware that women in her culture, like in many others, are not often visible, front-stage leaders. However, she is working with other women determined to change this gender-discriminatory organizational hierarchy and to find her own way. One key element of Silvia's approach is promoting culture because it builds trust and strong connections within and beyond her community.

For her final TCOFP project Silvia and her team decided to join with other women around the world in celebration of International Women's Day. She recreated a traditional Plaza Oaxaqueña at the Courthouse Park in Madera, inviting families to gather to listen to music, dance, and share traditional foods, and celebrate women. Other communities from across the Valley also joined in the celebration. Silvia is continually inspired by the many indigenous farmworkers who she has worked alongside in the agricultural fields that are musicians, dancers, and artisans that have been forced to abandon their art practice to survive. Determined to provide a platform for showcasing the work of these local indigenous artists, Silvia embarked in a search of local talent to present at the successful International Women's Day celebration.

The first cohort of TCOFP fellows produced events in the Tamejavi Cultural and Art Series, held in four cities across California's Central Valley more than 3 months in early 2013.<sup>12</sup> The series culminated in the Grand Finale at the Tower Theater, a visual testimony of the 18-month learning journey of the TCOFP fellows. A printed program booklet featured images of the many activities that the fellows participated in and was produced with the intention of sharing new knowledge and building informal networks to join in the quest to make the Valley a place where a diversity of civic, artistic, and cultural expressions flourish. Through the TCOFP journey Tamejavi fellows shared stories and experiences of migration, displacement, and isolation. Most importantly they learned from each other's organizing experiences. Each fellow's unique perspective, knowledge, and passion made the first round of the TCOFP an extraordinary experience. We are excited about the future cohorts whom will begin their cultural organizing in the forthcoming years.

### TAMEJAVI'S LESSONS FOR THE FIELD OF SOCIAL PRACTICE AND COMMUNITY-BASED ARTS

We believe that the Tamejavi approach to cultural organizing brings three specific contributions to the scholarly conversations about socially engaged arts practice. Our concluding remarks place Tamejavi within the context of others who investigate the power of arts and culture as a transformative social change practice. In the academic literature terms such as *socially engaged art*, *social practice*, art and *social cooperation*, arts as *civic engagement*, and *community-based arts* have been used to describe creative practice for social change (Finkelpearl, 2013; Helguera, 2011; Jackson, 2011). We compare these terms to what we call "cultural organizing" and highlight three contributions that the Tamejavi project brings to these conversations.

Our first contribution is an unsettling of the assumption that artists are inevitably individual agents (or professional collectives) that enter into a

community or spatially defined area from the outside with the hopes of engaging relative strangers in social change work. Since the 1980s, art historians, curators, and other fine arts practitioners have addressed the capacity for social engagement within art projects. This practice gained greater visibility and acceptance in the art world and in academic literature with Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) now iconic essay *Relational Aesthetics*, which provides a theoretical framework for art as social practice. Bourriaud (2002) theorized that, "art is the place that produces a specific sociability" because "it tightens the space of social relations unlike TV" (p. 16). This concept was born of observing 1990s socially driven artwork such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's ongoing interactive soup kitchen project in gallery spaces, and Turkish collective Oda Pojesti's community participation picnics. Bourriaud calls relational art a new "social interstice" that forms the ground for collaboration in "an attempt to create relationships between people over and above institutionalized relational forms" (p. 14).

Yet Bourriaud (2002) focused solely on art projects undertaken by artists that invite group participation but do not necessarily engage with preexisting communities. Building upon Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, today the study of art making as social practice has come to focus on exactly this type of collaboration between artists and community groups motivated by political action. The nature of the scholarly conversation has also shifted from a "relational" association with arts practice to a "durational" commitment to a community and place through an extended period of time. This shift in perspective has given rise to the field of social practice, or socially engaged art, artist Suzanne Lacy popularized the term *social practice* based on her experience with happenings and political activism that engaged elders, youth, and urban communities in large-scale public art and performance-based projects. In his handbook for artists about socially engaged art, Pablo Helguera (2011) established a formal framework with which to think about art as social practice. For Helguera socially engaged art is characterized by its "dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence." According to Helguera these projects are dependent on community for their existence and are even community-building mechanisms in their inherently social process (pp. 2–4, 9).

Scholars of social practice or socially engaged art often describe this work through case studies of professional artists and arts organizations that attempt to creative positive change in local communities and society at large (Jackson, 2008; Stern & Seifert, 2010). For example, Creative Time has been holding an annual summit in New York organized by Nato Thompson to explore the intersection of art and social justice since 2009.<sup>13</sup>

Community-based arts is often described as a collaboration between arts and nonarts organizations that enable cultural participation among groups with less access to the formal arts sector (Stern & Seifert, 2007). The cases featured in these sorts of studies are thought to have the "ability to create



spheres of intellectual and radical reflection on contemporary life and our shared experience.” Through local partnerships with diverse institutions they are described as cultivating civic engagement and participation, shifting citizens away from alienation and apathy (Kester, 2011; Kocache, 2011). Grant Kester (2011) suggests that artists themselves are drawn to working with community groups through a desire to respond to the complex, cultural, political, and geopolitical forces of our time.

Although the academic discussions of art as social practice and community-based arts have much to offer, documentation of specific art projects and collaborations mostly involve professional artists and arts organizations serving or facilitating the creative practice. Most artists featured also come from outside of the local community project site, which some critics argue reflects the desire of an artist to achieve art world recognition and financial gain (Wright 2004; Yudice, 2003). To George Yudice (2003) such projects often have similar intentions as *maquiladora* factories established by big corporations in free-trade zones of Mexico. The Tamejavi experience on the other hand features arts and culture producers and leaders from within a community who organize art-based platforms for social change.

By showing how what we call “indigenous artists” and “culture keepers” themselves cultivate civic engagement and a sense of belonging we bring nuance and a locally owned dimension to conversations about community-based arts and social practice. This recognition of the inherent cultural engagement of a group of people with shared experiences and connection to place reflects the concept *natural cultural districts* (Stern & Seifert, 2007). Alongside fellow practitioners who emphasize the social change capacity of local, community art projects such as the Arts and Democracy Project<sup>14</sup> and Animating Democracy<sup>15</sup> Tamejavi’s expanded notion of cultural organizing recognizes the power within local cultures at the center of social change strategies.

We agree with practitioners such as Roadside Theater, Project Hip-Hop, Urban Bush Women, The Highlander Research and Education Center, and public scholars like Pia Moriarty and Arlene Goldbard that cultural organizing is not just about outside artists engaging communities but is rather, “about drawing collectively on the cultural resources of our communities and using the tools and language of culture—art, ritual, story—to build power and shift the ideologies that maintain systems of injustice and oppression” (Benavente, 2012). Furthermore, we know that this work is not new and has existed for many generations within the context of local and indigenous struggles involving many artists and groups such as Chilean singers Violeta Para and Victor Jara, writer and activist Amiri Baraka of the Black Power Movement, the muralista movement, Teatro Campesino, and the many artists of the Chicano movements.

The second contribution we make is a blurring of the lines of the currently disconnected conversations of art for social action and cultural



heritage work. We see them as deeply connected. Even the emerging network of practitioners mentioned above who engage in discussions about community driven cultural organizing seems to often leave out heritage-based work from conversations about social change and political activism. When discussing the political outcomes of socially engaged art, or what we call cultural organizing, most scholars conceive of politics and social action in the formal sense—neglecting the influential tenets of cultural heritage including local cultural knowledge and the importance of tradition, language, and indigenous expression in building political power.

In the academic literature, for example, according to art historian Maria Lind, the first decade of the 21st century saw social practice in contemporary art associated with the desire of artists to engage in activism surrounding concurrent political and social events. Lind cites the use of artistic practice as political practice in the context of large-scale social protests such as the 1999 World Trade Organization (protests in Seattle or the early 1990s Reclaim the Streets in London (Lind, 2007, p. 19). Focusing on the ability of individual artists to creatively respond to social issues often identify artists as first responders to contested political sites. In cases such as the Depression era Works Progress Administration, artists have been encouraged to develop creative methods to address the economic struggles of the times. Another example is artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* in which she personally cleaned public spaces as a part of the 1970s feminist movement's pursuit of the mission "the personal is political." Ukeles has since become the permanent artist in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation (Finkelpearl, 2013).

The artists involved in the recent Occupy Wall Street Movement, such as Theater of the Oppressed New York, are a more recent example of popular conceptions of art and culture as political practice. Institutions of all sizes, from the established New Museum to nascent artist organizing group Occupy Museums, identified aligned political action with models of art practice (Charlesworth, 2011). The sociopolitical bent of the third annual Creative Time Summit in September 2011 was immediately heightened, and programs at their concurrent exhibition of socially engaged art veered towards participating in Occupy. Since then, conversations have continued in the cultural community around how artists and cultural workers can help shape alternative economies, envision new conceptions of community, and leverage their work toward equality for all people.

Although timely and important, few discussions about the political and social impact of culture and arts today address the role of heritage and traditional cultural practices. In fact discussions about art and culture as heritage work are contained within an entirely different scholarly field, often within the disciplines of anthropology and oral history. In keeping with our popular education focus Tamejavi shows how maintaining cultural heritage and providing public spaces to recognize and celebrate immigrant cultural practices

and art forms is itself a political act—especially in the face of long histories of cultural exclusion and marginalization from mainstream politics in places like the Central Valley.

The third contribution of the Tamejavi approach to cultural organizing is its specific focus on place making. Many recent studies conducted by researchers trained as urban planners attempt to measure the impact of arts organizations on communities in local places, comparing regional economic and social impact spatially (Currid & Williams, 2010; Grodach, 2011). Similarly, others emphasize the role of small, informal arts organizations in community development and revitalization (Grodach, 2011). In making a case for enabling “culture-based revitalization” Mark Stern and Susan Seifert have developed an arts ecosystem model that identifies key elements including relationships and structural holes. The model serves as a reconstruction of the role of the arts for planners involved in developing the ecosystem of a region or city (Stern & Seifert, 2007, pp. 56–57).

Art historian Miwon Kwon (2002) takes this concept of place-driven social art practice and recontextualizes the concept of site-specificity as a “cipher of art and spatial politics” that considers the sociopolitical implications of place-based creative work. It also broadens the conception of place to include people, organizations, and structures already in existence locally and encourages collaboration and involvement of diverse stakeholders (Kwon, 2002). Kwon proposes that the intersubjective space of “community artistic praxis” in which divergent groups successfully come together to complete a project is the focus of artistic practice and should structure critical evaluation of a work as well. In her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, art historian Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) analyzes the interdisciplinary field of the urban-aesthetic or spatial-cultural discourse. She positions art in the public sphere as having the power to mediate among economic and political organizations to reveal those that “suppress (es) contradictions within urban processes” (Deutsche, 1996, p. 56). Thus art is a site and has a stake in place-based sites of struggle.

Even as Miwon Kwon (2002) and Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) expand the place-based analysis of socially engaged art beyond basic measures of economic development with their art historical analyses, these studies tend to focus primarily on organizations and formal artists as their unit of analysis and do not address the roles of indigenous local cultural leadership in creating safe spaces and a sense of belonging for marginalized community members. Meanwhile, community-driven and local culture-focused initiatives such as Tamejavi are becoming more prevalent including the community development corporation Project Row Houses in Houston, artist and urban planner Theaster Gates’ Rebuild Foundation in Chicago, and artist Judy Baca’s historic and ongoing work with the Social and Public Art Resource Center in Los Angeles.

This growing confluence of initiatives embedded in local communities suggests new possibilities for scholarship that considers cultural organizing

beyond the contributions of formal and often temporary artistic partnerships with communities. As we proposed at the start of this article, our unique approach to cultural organizing suggests that enduring inequities can only be changed when the voices and actions of those directly affected are included in the process of designing solutions to the problems they experience. With this belief, we create learning environments, cultural exchange fellowships, and festivals for immigrants and refugees to engage in dialogue, reflection, and critical analysis of the issues they face in their daily lives. Through this process participants discover the power of their own lived wisdom, voice, unique cultural traditions and skills, and collective power to act upon the world.

## CONCLUSION

Through Tamejavi cultural organizing immigrants are claiming public spaces, keeping alive their cultural heritage, and continuing to evolve through new forms of artistic expressions and cultural exchange. In this article we hope that we have provided a small glimpse of the beauty and vibrancy of the Central Valley's diverse immigrants and the power of cultural organizing. Behind the cultural organizers' stories of pride, celebration, and cultural self-determination are lingering memories of artistic and cultural oppression, perhaps most prominently for the indigenous communities that have suffered many losses due to colonial histories that stretch across generations and national boundaries. A vivid example from the recent festival is the Zapoteco youth who relied on cultural memories of their elders as they recreated a Fandango Zapoteco theater performance of the indigenous rituals of engagement and marriage—a tradition they desire to share. Like the Fandango, Tamejavi cultural organizing is not simply about skilled choreography but is rather an enactment of cultural memory, restoration, political reclamation, and public place making.

For the TCOFP fellows, acts as simple as being able to claim your indigenous name and language are political acts. Within contexts of deep poverty and enduring social and political marginalization, maintaining pride in and enacting one's artistic expressions and cultural practices can be a struggle. Such is the challenge that cultural organizer Juan Santiago has dedicated himself to. We close with his words,

The most visible and important of our artistic work is certainly the palm weaving of *petates* and *tenates*. Art has enabled the Zapoteco community to engage in dialogues across generations. Our native language is also important. Language to me represents my identity and is a very powerful cultural practice . . . . Culture means many things for my community, but above all we believe that culture connects and supports us as indigenous people, and our cultural practices distinguish us from the mainstream

society. Culture has a tremendous direct and indirect impact in the lives of the Zapoteco community . . . for hundreds of years Indian heritage and cultural practices have not been praised by Mexican society, and even today Mexican indigenous suffer from discrimination that denies indigenous access to formal education. One of the reasons is that indigenous are unaware of their constitutional rights, allowing unscrupulous individuals to exploit them. This experience has led members of my community to believe that learning Spanish (and English) is far more important than conserving Zapoteco languages. Language is only one sign of how the Zapoteco community has a tendency to not worry about ensuring our cultural practices are preserved. Instead the belief is that assimilating to the mainstream will avoid exploitation and discrimination.

As the TCOFP fellows, and generation upon generation of cultural organizers, have shown us—with cultural pride comes power.

## NOTES

1. Deportation rates have reached historic heights under the Obama administration. For a recent discussion see Lennard (2013).

2. “California is the nation’s most productive agricultural state, and is home to a \$35 billion agricultural industry. Of the ten most productive agricultural counties in the United States, nine are in California, and the San Joaquin Valley is the single richest agricultural region in the world. It is the nation’s sole producer of a dozen crops, including almonds, artichokes, olives, raisins, and walnuts, and is the leading producer of five dozen more. The state employs 27 percent of the nation’s farm workers, and produces nearly half domestically grown fruits, nuts, and vegetables” (United States Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.). For more data on Central Valley agricultural production visit: <http://www.cdffa.ca.gov/>.

3. Secure Communities is a federal program through which local police departments have cooperative agreements with the Department of Homeland Security, whereby local police offer to share information with Immigration and Customs Enforcement about any undocumented person they stop.

4. See Seth Holmes’ (2013) important new work on indigenous migrant farmworkers as one example of the struggles of Central Valley immigrants.

5. Doing this deep cross-cultural work requires specific resources including multilingual simultaneous translation equipment and services, and access to residential retreat space away from the stressors of work and family.

6. In our work we use the terms *cultural tradition* and *cultural expression*. By *cultural tradition* we mean people’s mythical and/or religious beliefs, ways of seeing and interpreting the world, popular knowledge, and informal social and political practices that constitute a community. Traditions are sustained by the practices of language, funeral rites, marriage rituals, food, art, and other creative practices. *Cultural expression* means claiming one’s cultural practices and creativities in public. This includes opportunities for community building and creating new practices and identities that emerge through the migration process and through “intercultural learning” in a diverse society.

7. For more information about the Tamejavi Festival and performances see: <http://www.tamejavi.org/home.php> and for a blog featuring stories from the TCOFP participants go to [www.tamejavifellow.wordpress.com](http://www.tamejavifellow.wordpress.com)

8. The TCOFP fellows include Ruben Lucero, of Indigenous Otomi Mexican decent; Juan Santiago Ramirez, an indigenous Zapoteco; Sokha Serey, a Cambodian and Buddhist American; Tahereh Taherian, an immigrant from Iran; Bee Yang, Hmong political refugee; Salvador Ramos Romero, an immigrant from the P’urphepecha indigenous community in Michoacán, Mexico; Dolly Solomon, an immigrant from India; and Pov M. Xyonj, a Hmong refugee whose parents came to the Central Valley by way of a refugee camp in Thailand.

9. Organizations that use “cultural organizing” or similar words to describe their programming and/or advocacy work include: the Arts & Democracy Project, Roadside Theater, Urban Bush Women, Animating Democracy, Ultra-red, and the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Other organizations support this type work that engages art and social justice such as a blade of grass (a New York-based foundation), and Prospect New Orleans (an international art biennial).

10. See Cintli (2012).

11. One example of how the mainstream denial of immigrant culture can have seriously negative effects on human beings can be found in a series published in the Fresno Bee in 2002. The 2002 series titled “Lost in America” documents the stories of eight Hmong teenagers who committed suicide between September 1998 and May 2000 (Ellis, 2002). These young teens, the first generation to be raised in America, struggled to reconcile the pressures of dating, doing well in school, and maintaining traditional practices that were often at odds with mainstream norms and institutions. Through a recent action research project, PVI also found that immigrant youth struggle with the challenges for expressing their own cultural traditions while adopting new mainstream cultural practices. In a context where conservative Anglo stakeholders dominate public institutions such as Central Valley high schools, indigenous cultural practices are commonly excluded and the choice between worlds becomes a painful one for young people in the midst of the stressors of teenage identity formation. For another example also see a recent project led by Oaxacan youth in California’s Central Coast region: “The ‘exploited of the exploited’ carve own path among disparate cultures” (Brown, 2013).

12. Salvador Ramos, an immigrant from the P’urhepecha indigenous community of Michoacán, Mexico, organized the first event. The *Encuentro P’urhepecha* provided a space for P’urhepechas living in the San Joaquin Valley and across California to congregate, present their history in their own language, and re-create art forms and traditional celebrations from their hometowns in Mexico. Punjabi immigrant Dolly Solomon organized The Color of India to showcase the art and diversity of Indian people living in the Central Valley. The following weekend Ruben Lucero, of Indigenous Otomí Mexican heritage, organized a panel discussion on Otomí Art. The series continued with Juan Santiago Ramirez, an indigenous Zapoteco, leading a group of young Zapotecos in an experimental theatrical project that resulted in a new play about a traditional wedding ceremony. Cambodian and Buddhist American Sokha Serey shared the history of the Legacy of Angkor through a multimedia showcase. Iranian immigrant Tahereh Taherian produced a concert by Persian singer and storyteller Ziba Shirazi who shared stories of mixed identities formed through migration journeys. Political refugee Bee Yang closed the series with an event at Arte Americas, a Latino Art center in Fresno that in presenting Yang’s event opened its door to its first non-Latino featured program.

13. Organized by Nato Thompson, the Living as Form online archive documents more 100 socially engaged art projects from 1991 through 2011. The Creative Time Living as Form online archive is available at <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/index.htm>

14. According to the organization’s website “The Arts & Democracy Project builds the momentum of a growing movement that links arts and culture, participatory democracy, and social justice. We support cultural organizing and cross-sector collaborations, raise the visibility of transformative work, cross-pollinate cultural practitioners with activists, organizers, and policymakers, and create spaces for reflection” (Arts & Democracy, n.d.).

15. According to the organization’s website “Animating Democracy inspires, informs, promotes, and connects arts and culture as potent contributors to community, civic, and social change” (Animating Democracy, n.d.).

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