Remapping the Americas

A transnational engagement with creative tensions of community arts

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How can transnational feminist praxis inform social struggles not necessarily focused explicitly on women's issues nor limited to woman participants? What tensions and challenges does it share with transnational education, activism and art? The conversation with other contributors to this book has created a space for me and fellow collaborators in the VIVA! Project to probe the deeper historical and epistemological underpinnings of both our subject – community arts and popular education in the Americas – and our methodology – participatory action research and arts-based research methods.[i] Both our content and process connect to central issues of transnational feminist praxis such as an intersectional analysis of power in cross-border collaborations, an honouring of multiple ways of knowing and embodied practices, and a dynamic relationship between collective reflection and political action.

A border-crossing project

The VIVA! Project[ii] involves eight partners, NGOs and progressive pockets of universities in Panama, Nicaragua, Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. The NGO partners in Central America – the Mexican Institute for Community Development and the Panamanian Social Education and Action Centre – are the key popular education centres in their respective countries, with more than four decades of engagement in local, regional, and transnational social movements.[iii] My collaboration with them began in the early 1980s, when we all were part of an internationalist contingent in the historic popular education experiment within the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. A hemispheric cross-fertilization of popular education practices began during that fertile period, sparking the establishment of the Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action in Toronto in 1985 and, in 1997, its successor, the Catalyst Centre, one of the northern NGO partners in the VIVA! Project, which also includes Jumblies Theatre.

The university partnerships are built both on institutional links (Toronto-based York University, my base, offered a MA for faculty of URACCAN, a new community-oriented university central to the autonomous movement on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua) and on personal contacts: a muralist working with the Zapatistas and based at the National Autonomous University (UAM) in Mexico City, a teacher of activist art at UCLA's School of Art and Architecture, an instructor of community arts at York University in Canada. It should be understood, too, that my home Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES), also at York University, where the project is based, offers a crack within the hegemonic practices of academic knowledge production by allowing (if not encouraging) interdisciplinary, community-based, praxis-oriented participatory research utilizing alternative ways of knowing, including arts-based inquiry.[iv]

Figure 1. VIVA! partner organizations and community arts projects. (map in box — I will try to improve this image!)

Personal Legacy Project
(Montreal, Toronto,
Vancouver)

Jumblies Theatre (Toronto)
Bridge of One Hair

Catalyst Centre (Toronto)
Telling Our Stories

UCLA (USA):
Artsbridge Program

EIGHT VIVA!
PARTNERS AND PROJECTS

IMDEC (Mexico):
Tianguis Cultural Marketplace

UAM (Mexico):
Community-Based Mural Production

URRACAN (Nicaragua):
BilwiVision Community Television

CEASPA (Panama):
Kuna Children's Art Project

Our common ground? A commitment to social justice, a history of practice in and theorizing about Freirean-based popular education, a belief in the power of community-based art-making to tap deep cultural histories, to engage peoples' hearts and minds

through transformative processes, and to build more democratic and human community organizations and social movements.[v]

In 2003, six of us developed a proposal for collaborative research articulating an emerging framework of creative tensions of community arts and popular education in social movements. After securing a three-year grant from the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in 2004, we met in Toronto to craft two major objectives of the project:

A local objective (a case study by partners in their own context[vi])
Using participatory action research, to recover, promote, and create diverse cultural and artistic practices integrated into processes of popular education and community organization; and
A transnational objective (to be achieved through our interchange)
Through gatherings, workshops, videos and books, to organize exchanges of practices and theories, promoting a critical and self-critical perspective and strengthening multicultural and transnational solidarity.

In what ways does this initiative enter into a dialogue on transnational feminist praxis? While my previous work on women workers in the NAFTA food chain was more explicitly feminist in content, the VIVA! Project is more explicitly feminist in process.[vii] It has been primarily informed by certain feminist epistemological questions and methodological practices:

- Adopting an intersecting analysis of power;
- Honouring local and historically contingent practices but within a context of globalizing processes;
- Focusing on situated knowledges and collaborative knowledge production;
- Promoting self-reflexivity about the internal power dynamics of the project;
- Using arts-based research methods to examine arts-based educational practices, that challenge body/mind and reason/emotion dichotomies;
- Developing an ecological and feminist analysis of interconnectedness towards a more holistic popular education;
- Countering top-down imposition of structures and processes, remaining open to emergent and unexpected questions and insights;
- Advocating praxis both in a theory/practice dialectic of research and in a commitment to political action emerging from the community arts and popular education processes.

Still, this brief description of the project begs a broader contextualization and a deeper probing of intent.
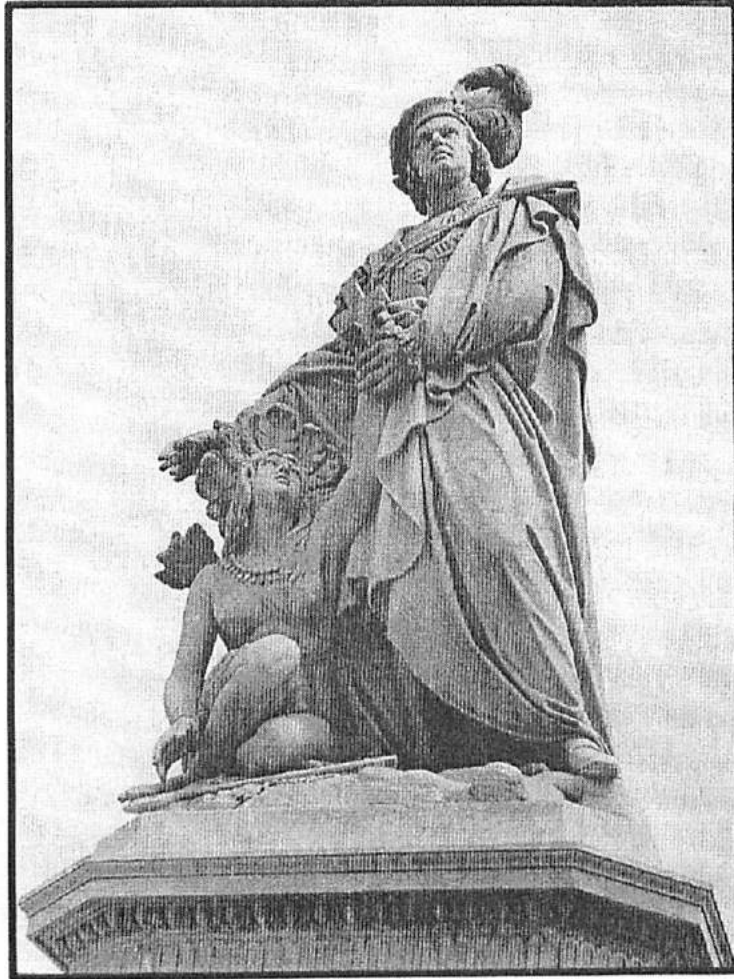
Figure 2. Statue of Christopher Columbus and Indigneous woman in Lima, Peru.

The geopolitical frame is the Americas, and the historical reach goes back to the naming of this hemisphere after an Italian map-maker who never set foot on the so-called 'new world.' This statue of Christopher Columbus *(figure 2)* offers one representation of the colonial history and the postcolonial theoretical framework of the VIVA! Project. On the one hand, we can critically assess it as public art by a European sculptor commissioned in 1867 to erect a monument to the "conquest" in Lima, Peru (though it could be anywhere in the hemisphere or Spain, for that matter), immortalizing the white male European "discoverer" who brought "civilization" - epitomized by opulent clothing, a cross and an upward gaze - to the "savages/heathens", here a naked Indian maiden. The military struggle involved in the subjugation is erased from this rendition, only hinted at by her

arrow tossed to the side. Whenever I use the photo as a catalyst to generate discussion about hegemony in classes or workshops, people inevitably see their own lives within the persistent (carved in stone?) and intersecting power relations: sexism, heterosexism, classism, militarism, religious evangelization, racism.[viii] Both its content and its form say something about Eurocentric ways of knowing and artistic expression. Yet, as Ania Loomba reminds us, there is a danger in reproducing the binary opposites represented in the figures of the colonizer and colonized, even as we attempt to expose how they have functioned historically to construct the European self and the other.[ix]

As the VIVA! project has evolved, it has become clearer that we are engaged in a process of decolonization: of education, of research, of art, and of community. Examining any one of these practices/constructs inevitably implicates the others; that is, in attempting to decolonize them, we are reclaiming their inseparability. The Spanish invaders used an Arawack word *areitos* to describe "a collective act involving singing, dancing, celebration, and worship that claimed aesthetic as well as sociopolitical and religious legitimacy"....reflecting that the cultural expressions of the Indigenous communities "exceed the compartmentalization, either by genre, by participant-actors, or by intended effect...that ground Western cultural thought." [x]

The Haida in British Columbia have no word for art, yet their elaborate masks and powerful totem poles were exquisite handiworks that passed on ancestral knowledge in the context of community ceremonies. Santa Clara Pueblo educator Gregory Cajete sees "the process of art making and the realization of the visioning process as part of the (tribal) educative process."[xi] Concomitant with the ravaging of the natural resources of the Americas, the colonizers ravaged the cultural and epistemological landscape of the First Nations. A major weapon was Enlightenment philosophy (in its very name a racist project), based on Greek dichotomies and Cartesian dualisms that separated body/mind, nature/culture, human/non-human, male/female, emotion/reason.

Our minds are still colonized by Eurocentric ways of thinking, though there are various intellectual and political challenges of the dualisms. The VIVA! Project (ontologically) critiques the materialistic and mechanistic world view driving global imperialism, (epistemologically) identifies with postcolonial notions of knowledge and power, and (methodologically) adopts a feminist poststructural stance that honours the subjective, emotional, aesthetic and natural.[xii] We ally with feminists, Indigenous scholars, critical race theorists, and environmentalists in countering notions of knowledge as static, positivist and commodified, and in arguing for an epistemology of multiple perspectives, an understanding of power/knowledge as historically contingent, and an emphasis on the processes rather than the products of research, education and art.

We have adopted participatory action research (PAR) and a related Central American practice of *sistematización* as methods for exploring community arts projects in each of the eight contexts, all of which engage Indigenous and/or diasporic populations. While PAR is problematic in its origins, which often trap it within a western development paradigm so that it perpetuates colonial relations,[xiii] its intent is congruent with our commitment to promote critical and collective self-reflection within popular education

and community arts processes aimed at stimulating collective action for social change. Participatory research in fact originated within popular education networks, and is understood to be integral to the three-pronged process of research, education, and action associated with Freirean-shaped popular education[xiv].

Feminists such as Colleen Reid[xv] and Patricia Maguire[xvi] have interrogated PAR with a feminist lens, integrating gender concerns into the process, in terms of the composition of the team, the issues investigated, and the emerging analysis. A gender analysis of the VIVA! project's transnational exchange itself was brought into the December 2006 meeting of the team in Chiapas, Mexico; we noted, for example, that the major organizing for our annual gatherings was carried out by women participants, even in cases where the hosts were male collaborators. Two local projects, in particular, were queried around gender dynamics: a northern project which was dominated by white women artists and a southern project which appeared to exclude women from decision-making.

While PAR offered a common language and practice for all VIVA! collaborators, our southern partners adopted a related practice of *sistematización*, developed in Central America, and more suited to situations where outside facilitators are not involved; this process engages participants in a program or project in a focused reflection on some aspect of their shared experience for the purpose of understanding it more deeply, potentially impacting on their subsequent actions.[xvii] A VIVA! intern working with our Panamanian partner was asked to facilitate a process of systematización with the Kuna children's art project participants, and grappled with the contradictions of taking on such a role as an outsider to the context, project, and process.[xviii]

While some would see our poststructural stance (promoting self-reflexivity and questioning any imposed political agenda) as incongruent with the project's transformative impulses (based on critical social theory and an underlying political commitment to social justice), we choose to live with this tension by embracing the local histories from below as sources of critical reflection and deepening agency while simultaneously analyzing them in relation to a global political economic analysis. This insistence on integrating the local and global, the capacity to question and to act, resonates with other co-authors and feminist theorists.[xix]

Framework of creative tensions

In conceiving the VIVA! Project in 2003, we collaboratively elaborated our own theoretical framework of "creative tensions of community arts and popular education," naming five tensions that we have observed in this work: process/product, aesthetics/ethics, cultural reclamation/cultural reinvention, spiritual/political, and body/earth. We see these tensions not as dichotomous, but rather as dialectical in the Gramscian sense, and not to be resolved (as in hierarchical tensions where one wins over the other) but rather to be acknowledged and engaged creatively.

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Process/product

In contrast with the banking education Paulo Freire so eloquently challenged, and the elitist, individualized, and commodified art promoted by Enlightenment thought and its extension, corporate globalization, popular education and community art both foreground the processes of collective knowledge production and art-making. This does not deny the importance of an end product, which may then generate other processes when shared in a broader community. This process orientation resonates with feminist pedagogy[xx] as well as feminist art movements, such as performance and public art emerging out of second wave feminism in the 1970s.[xxi]

The process/product tension is a creative one being explored in several VIVA! projects. Toronto's Catalyst Centre trained young artists in the *Telling Our Stories* project to facilitate community art-making with "at-risk" youth, breaking out of the dominant mode of their individual productions to lead processes that help young people develop self-confidence, break silences, and build community. Nonetheless, a culminating event in Toronto's Lula Lounge provided the impetus to finish some products – and perform them – from break dancing to spoken word.[xxii] The performances, or products, were also important to the process of publicly affirming the youth and their forms of self-expression.

Aesthetics/ethics

"Art and politics don't mix, they (westerners) always say." Postcolonial theorist Robert Young mocks this notion of aesthetics based on a dualistic and patriarchal mentality, and suggests our choice is either "to collude with the aestheticized structure that enforces apartness, or to contest it, by turning theatre into a site of resistance, for example."[xxiii] In the diasporic contexts of most VIVA! projects, diverse cultural aesthetics collide, and, ethical issues inevitably emerge, related to social justice goals and an emphasis on collective process.

One poignant example is the *Pintar Obediciendo (Painting by Listening)* project, the community-based mural production approach developed by Mexican muralist Checo Valdez. Whether working with street youth in Mexico City or with Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas to create murals celebrating their own histories, Valdez refuses to impose any of his own ideas or aesthetic values. His position is that Indigenous groups have too long been represented by outside artists, and that given the opportunity, their own aesthetic will emerge. This is one end of the spectrum of positions that artists take in their myriad forms of collaborating on community-based productions. Toronto-based Jumblies Theatre, in contrast, insists that their community process is led by art-making, not politics, and professional artists contribute even as they nurture the creativity of community residents. As animators, the artists must also engage divergent cultural aesthetics in multicultural neighbourhoods, a dynamic reflected in the next tension.

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Cultural reclamation/cultural reinvention

As community arts is often identified with marginalized groups and communities, processes of participatory research and collective art-making involve what Central American popular educators call *recuperación historica-cultural* or cultural reclamation. Tuhiwai Smith suggests that "coming to know the past"[xxiv] is central to a critical pedagogy of decolonization, especially for communities whose ways of knowing have been driven underground or destroyed by institutions such as the residential schools in Canada. For Indigenous communities like the Kuna Yala in Panama, art is a tool in this process of historical and cultural reclamation; the Kuna Children's Art Project in the late 1990s used storytelling, drawing, mask-making, theatre, song, and dance to recover Kuna cultural values and to promote ecological awareness.

But such recovery projects do not unearth static notions or practices; cultures and their representations are constantly being recreated. Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Baines and colleagues at La Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco, for example, reinvented the Mexican tradition of family altars, reframing them as public forms of "memory-making and history-making" while fusing them with Day of the Dead celebrations.[xxv] In the case of the Kuna in Panama, the children who participated in the art project are now adolescents living in Panama City, where they are reinventing themselves in a new context and creating new forms of self-expression built on and moving beyond traditional practices. The postcolonial notion of hybridity is useful here, as it "involves processes of interaction that create new social spaces to which new meanings are given." [xxvi]

Spiritual/political

The powerful voices of a growing number of feminist diasporic and Indigenous scholars and activists have challenged the spiritual/political dichotomy in the thought and practice of activists, ideologues and even orthodox feminists, lamenting that in western materialist culture, as co-contributor Jacquie Alexander deplores, "the secular has been divested of the sacred and the spiritual of the political.[xxvii] Again, we must excavate the roots of this schism. Tuhiwai Smith sees Indigenous concepts of spirituality, which Christianity tried to destroy, as critical sites of resistance, "one of the few parts of ourselves which the West cannot decipher, cannot understand, and cannot control...yet." [xxviii]

Ecofeminist perspectives, though western in origin, have also challenged the spiritual/political dichotomy, as well as nature/culture and mind/body dualisms. In Latin America, one strand of ecofeminism has emerged out of liberation theology, regrounding the spirit in the body – of both humans and the earth - while critiquing the patriarchal and anthropocentric framings by mainly male liberation theologians.[xxix] Most VIVA! projects resonate more with a socialist ecofeminism than a cultural ecofeminism, eschewing the notion that women are biologically closer to nature, and focusing rather on the intersections of capitalism, sexism, racism and environmental degradation.

Community arts can provide spaces for the recognition and contribution of various spiritualities; the ritual dimensions of community art-making processes themselves are

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often imbued with spiritual meaning. VIVA! Project collaborators have both created rituals and explored them in our annual gatherings; the first meeting in Toronto in late October 2004 culminated in a cultural evening, "Beyond Halloween: Celebrating Life and Death," allowing us to share stories from Anishnawbe and Kuna, Mexican and European traditions that honour the dead, and reveal, in fact, very distinct world views of the processes of living and dying. Our storytelling was followed the next evening by a community event in Toronto, Night of Dread, which has appropriated the Day of the Dead to involve a downtown neighbourhood in parading their fears (ranging from SARS to George Bush) with large puppets and masks, then burning them in a ritualistic bonfire.

Body/earth

Contrasting notions of life and death actually reveal another deep western dualism, the separation of human and non-human nature, body and earth (rooted in classical Greek philosophy). The Mohawk people in Ontario describe their world as All Our Relations, and thank all elements, plants and animals as well as human kin in their prayers. Mohawk writer Beth Brant emphasizes this equality quite simply: "We do not worship nature. We are part of it." [xxx] Indigenous peoples, of course, are not homogenous nor do they escape the influence of western dualisms or fusions of western and non-western frames.[xxxi]

Central American popular educators have developed the concept of *integralidad,* or holism, to emphasize a pedagogical practice which embraces embodied and analytical knowing, theory and practice, and affirms the interconnectedness of all living entities. Our Panamanian hosts of the second project meeting in August, 2005, deliberately located our five-day gathering in an ecological centre in the midst of the jungle, where we could be daily reminded through the sounds, smells, heat and humidity that we are part of a vibrant biocentric community. At the Chiapas meeting in December 2006, an opening ritual honoured the four elements: air, water, earth and fire, and our relationship with them as sources of both material and cultural survival. Such a holistic vision has also been central to the world views of deep ecologists and ecofeminists.

Zooming in: Three cross-cutting tensions

The five tensions introduced above have served as starting points for collective analysis of local projects, where VIVA! partners have also identified their own different specific tensions. Our annual transnational conversations have named other salient tensions that cut across projects. Six of the North American collaborators (all women),[xxxii] in preparation for a conference on arts-based research in Vancouver in 2006, identified tensions we saw operating both within and across projects in our transnational collaborative exchange. These included: 1) the dominance of white women in community arts, raising issues of gender, race, and class; 2) the tension between our conscious honouring of embodied knowing/practice in community arts and our incessant use of new (disembodied) technologies to document and discuss this practice, and 3) the insider/outsider dynamics present both in local and transnational collaborations.

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White women and community arts

Self-reflexivity, subjectivity and power are central concerns of a feminist poststructural methodology, yet, while we are challenging hegemonic power relations in the content and process of the VIVA! project, we also reproduce them in ways that we must constantly confront. Certain inherent structural contradictions in the project are easy to identify: it was initiated in the north, by me, a white female university researcher, seasoned popular educator and community artist, who secured the funding from a Canadian academic research body and who administers the grant. Shaped by my middle-class NGO past and contacts in the south, the project also reflects an alternative stream of progressive research, education and art, one that is dominated by women. Ironically, the people I first contacted in the southern NGOs were women, but partner organizations sent only men to the first meeting. The gender balance has now shifted, with core partners including four North American women, four men and two women from Latin America.[xxxiii]

Certain structural inequalities are reinforced by the project funder, SSHRC: while the national funding body increasingly employs a rhetoric promoting international, collaborative, and university-community partnerships, the criteria of eligible expenses privilege the principal researcher (Canadian), northern graduate student research assistants, and travel to conferences and meetings. We have tried to be flexible in budget allocations, with a goal of decentralizing and disseminating the funds;[xxxiv] nonetheless, there are moments when "privilege slaps us in the face,"[xxxv] and we must reconsider the impact of every decision, aiming for a strategic use of privilege.

During our transnational meeting in Panama in 2005, there was a "sticky moment"[xxxvi] during a discussion of the work of a Canadian community theatre project, where most of the community artists are white women, while most of the participants from the community in question are people of "colour". Diane Roberts, the sole woman of "colour" in the Canadian delegation, jokingly tagged this dynamic in the project as 'the white ladies syndrome." Most Latin American partners resisted a discussion of racism in their work, revealing, on the one hand, different social constructions of race and gender.[xxxvii] The Canadian white women, on the other hand, adopted the term to highlight what we saw as a key issue to be addressed in the VIVA! project, a domination by white women not only in community arts in the north, but in our project as well. In appropriating the term, however, we also misinterpreted its original intent, and reproduced the very dynamic we were using it to critique, placing ourselves (again) in the centre of the conversation.[xxxviii]

Official practices of community arts have been built around colonial art forms, so public discussions often exclude people and practices that don't fit the dominant cultural mode, even though women artists of "colour" have led the struggle within arts councils to address such exclusions. We have to ask not only how we reproduce ourselves in such projects but also how the very terms of reference limit participation. While VIVA! partners identify with a more politicized practice, the terms we use and the organizational forms we adopt often exclude activist artists and artists of "colour." These artists may

also reject the growing institutionalization of community arts, challenge the rigid disciplinary boundaries of the arts altogether, practice a more integrated cultural expression, and/or choose to work mainly within their own specific communities.

White women, too, have likely benefited from the increasing attention to the community arts field by government bodies and funders in North America. Some of this propensity comes from white women's historical roles in charitable social work activities with so-called "underprivileged" populations; a more contemporary version of this phenomenon in community arts has generated considerable debate among artists who eschew a social work connotation of their work. White women often have greater social capital and strategic connections which contribute to their dominance in the field, and so maintain a role of gatekeeper, all the while facilitating processes with communities not their own.[xxxix] These are contradictions that need to be named and addressed, not only to address institutionalized racism, but also to curb the perpetuation of Eurocentric organizational and artistic practices.

Tensions reflecting gender, race, class, and generational differences are alive in most of the local projects as well, many of which explicitly engage diasporic populations. Jumblies Theatre's project uses the metaphor of the "Bridge of One Hair" to highlight the challenge of building connections (as fragile as one hair) between early Irish settlers and recent Caribbean and Somalian immigrants in social housing high-rises in a downtown Toronto neighbourhood. The tensions of conflicting cultural aesthetics were revealed, for example, in a multicultural performance in 2006: a black Caribbean youth group felt upstaged by a professional Somalian opera singer, while she struggled to follow sheet music composed by the Canadian composer/conductor. Jumblies artists/animators also identified the Somalian women's sewing skills which inspired another art project of making tea cosies and papier mache teapots, a symbol that cut across the various communities involved in the project. A vestige of British colonialism in both Africa and the Caribbean, tea has become the drink that symbolically unifies the new and old settlers in the neighbourhood. The multi-media performance both parodies the colonial symbol while also using the tea drinking ritual as a vehicle for connecting across differences.

Embodied knowing/technological mediation in transnational projects

Most of the community arts projects we are exploring are based in performance traditions: the song/dance/theatre practices recovered by Kuna children in Panama, the centrality of dance and hip-hop to UCLA's Artbridge program as well as to Toronto's Telling Our Stories projects, the multi-disciplinary community plays by Jumblies theatre in Toronto's multicultural neighbourhoods, the drumming and spoken word components of Guadalajara's Cultural Marketplace, and the researching of body memory to create performance pieces in the Personal Legacy Project in Canada.

This latter project perhaps most deeply challenges Eurocentric dualisms and privileges embodied knowing. Drawing on non-western theatrical practices centering on Central and West African movement, dance, ritual and performance traditions and the roots of her Caribbean legacy, Diane Roberts is working with two women representing distinct

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diasporas to probe their ancestral history, both through archival research as well as through exercises that tap the multi-generational stories that, she would say, "we have collected within our bodies." The context for this work is the colonized body, and the process "encourages people to go deep into their own personal legacies through a complete embodied process in order to experience, share and begin to dialogue in a deeper and more real way what it means to be a part of an intercultural experience."[xl] This approach ruptures western constructs of the individual and of the body as separate, it challenges our linear notions of time, as the women recover memories tapping a collective unconscious in their bodies and integrate characters from past centuries into their own contemporary performance representations.

Performance theorist Diana Taylor would identify this form of research as part of the *repertoire*, our store of embodied knowing and expression, that was negated, demonized, repressed, and even outlawed by America's colonizers. The centuries-old privileging of written texts over embodied ways of knowing still dominates contemporary academic practice, including our spoken and written communication with each other in conferences and books like this one. As Taylor admits, "It is difficult to think about embodied practice within the epistemic systems developed in Western thought, where writing has become the guarantor of existence itself."[xli]

Taylor uses the metaphor of the *archive* to frame text-based learning, which "separates the source of knowledge from the knower," while the *repertoire* "requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there.'"[xlii] While resisting a dichotomizing of these two ways of knowing (which are often complementary or integrated), Taylor nonetheless problematizes the equation of writing with memory/knowledge and suggests that embodied practices might "invite a remapping of the Americas," offering another perspective on transnational contact – both historical and contemporary. And the embodied practices themselves may offer a greater integration of thought and feeling, challenging the Cartesian split and reflecting what Central American popular educators have tagged *sentipensando*, or thinking/feeling.[xliii]

Local and international popular theatre practitioners participating in the second meeting of the VIVA! partners in Achiote, Panama, in August 2005, helped shift our communication and collective analysis into the embodied realm. Opening rituals, chanting, and dancing, creating sculptures with our bodies to represent the tensions we wanted to probe — all countered and complemented our tendency to limit our dialogue to linear word-based conversation. It also gave us a break from the intense work of bilingual exchanges, always mediated by earphones and translators.[xliv] We would move outside the ecological centre and actually inhale the fragrances of the jungle we were nestled in, hear its howling monkeys and cacophony of tropical birds. We could viscerally challenge the separations embedded in Eurocentric thinking and language, revealed poignantly by Margarita Antonio, our Nicaraguan partner, who taught us a Miskitu word, *taya*, which simultaneously means skin, bark, and family.

However, another layer of activity was superimposed on both our verbal and non-verbal exchanges. Our tiny stark meeting room in the midst of the humid jungle was filled with

the tools that mediated our conversations: 4 simultaneous translation transmitters, 25 receivers, and charging cases, an LCD projector for viewing the video-letters which introduced each project, video recorders and a playback, digital still cameras, and mini-disc audio recorders, cords to step carefully over, a noisy fan both competing with our voices and mitigating the heat (nicely reflecting the contradictory nature of all our tools). We were set to capture every utterance and movement, to freeze images and store conversations for future review, digestion, analysis, and dissemination.

This hyper-documentation translated into hours and months of work by two graduate student research assistants, who had to learn new software for downloading sound and video, for transcribing and translating, for designing and desktop publishing a photo-filled report, or *Memoria*, as our Latin American partners call it. And then there were our commitments to keep in "touch" with each other across the vast distances between our annual meetings. We experimented with webcam conversations using Breeze (but that required everyone to have high speed Internet), and Skype teleconferences (but then the power went out in Nicaragua). These technologies at least offered aural connections and a more intimate sense of each other than we got through email, but we spent as much time working out the technical glitches as we did talking substantively. Then there is the now requisite website, totally bilingual (thus requiring a regular translator), creating spaces for internal conversation, a genealogy of relevant terms, as well as stories, image galleries, and articles, our own and others, for more public consumption.[xlv] We are faced here with another challenge: a generational divide; some older technophobic partners feel awkward if not resistant to the tools and their use, while younger collaborators move easily from one form of technological connection to another. The north/south divide is evident as well, in terms of differential access, quantity, quality, and use of electronic equipment.

How does our adoption of every new technological device sit in juxtaposition to our passionate commitment to embodied knowing and practice? Are we distancing ourselves even further from the practices and people that we prioritize? Are we destined to be cyborg researchers? The technological mediation of the VIVA! project might, in fact, build on Donna Haraway's classic notion of the cyborg not only as a hybrid of machine and organism but also as a metaphor for transgressing boundaries, "not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."[xlvi] There are definitely contradictions we must confront daily in our transnational exchange: financial, material, technical disparities and limitations, even as we also depend on these new information and media technologies for communication and dissemination of our transgressive conversations.

Thus, on the one hand, URACCAN's young people are able to produce community television programs of the rituals and dances of the diverse indigenous and creole groups on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast; these embodied cultural expressions captured on video can also serve as counter-hegemonic curricular material in URACCAN classrooms and coastal communities. The website created by Checo Valdez's community-based mural production course, *Pintar Obediciendo*,[xlvii] offers its graduates a way to share the murals that are popping up on walls in Munich, Toronto, San Salvador.

Without the simultaneous translation equipment (and committed translators!), it would have been very difficult to enter into transnational bilingual dialogue. Without the audio and video recordings, we would not now be producing a bilingual book, integrating multiple voices from transcriptions, and including a DVD of short videos that will bring the projects alive, beyond the written text. But what are we losing? What, in the end, do we carry forward deep within us? Our email and web-cam conversations are only possible because of our shared embodied exchanges. Nothing can replace that contact or the deep human relationships that have been forged during our annual encounters and our visits to each other contexts. And yet we hope to share our projects and the exchange with a broader public, across many other geographic and cultural spaces. This is also made possible by these new media tools. We are creative transgressive cyborgs – finding our way through this morass by experimentation, reflection, and rethinking of our priorities.

Another tension within the group stems from the fact that we come from both NGOs and university contexts, and so feel comfortable with different kinds of languages depending on our institutional locations and practices as activists, artists, academics. There are, on the one hand, conferences and articles, like this one, that are directed to more academic discussions, and can be alienating to some partners.[xlviii] Yet we have agreed that our bilingual collective book is to be geared to a broader activist public, requiring a more popular narrative approach, with multiple examples of practice in both verbal and visual form (such as the short videos on a DVD inserted into the book).

It is important to acknowledge that our attempts at communicating across (at least) two languages (as well as differences of social location, education, gender, race, class, north/south dynamics) are at the core of our exchange, perhaps the most difficult but also the richest dimension of the transnational project. We have worked to identify words and concepts that can't be translated from Spanish into English or from English into Spanish; they point the way to the distinct histories and specific contexts that have shaped each of us and that inform our work. "Community arts," for example, is not a term used in Central America, where "popular communications" might more likely be used to refer to grass-roots forms and processes of media and art-making for social change; they are similar but not the same. In our discussions about "colonization" and "decolonization" at our third annual gathering in Chiapas in 2006, we struggled to find common terminology for how historical forms of domination and resistance are practiced today; we also debated our own understandings of "art," "education," "research," and "politics."

Over the three years of the exchange, we have been developing a genealogy of terms that are central to our diverse and common practices. We have deliberately framed this exercise as a process of constructing a genealogy, rather than a glossary, precisely because we are not interested in agreeing to precise definitions; rather we are seeking to understand the specific historical contexts out of which the terms have arisen and what diverse meanings they have taken on from one place and time to another. Our efforts to understand each other have been accentuated as each collaborator's chapter for the collective book is translated; in fact, the translators themselves have helped us to identify the "untranslatable" terms.

We collaborators in the VIVA! project have to recognize as well that we are still working in two colonial languages; while there are intriguing differences between them, there are even more pronounced differences between them and the Indigenous languages represented by two of our partners, in particular, a Kuna in Panama and a Miskitu in Nicaragua. In both cases, we have to be careful to not fall prey to what Marie Battiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson call "the Eurocentric illusion of benign translatability," a dominant cultural assumption that worldviews can be translated. Such an assumption has often gone hand in hand with benign neglect in the face of the extinction of up to half of the world's 6,000 Indigenous languages. Our experience has confirmed what the Supreme Court of Canada declared in 1990, that "Language is more than a mere means of communication, it is part and parcel of the identity and culture of the people speaking it."[xlix] This notion, as well as Battiste and Henderson's caution about "cognitive imperialism," keep us probing, listening, and trying to walk in each other's shoes.

What implications does this questioning have for collaborative transnational research on community arts and embodied practices? How do we engage these contradictions in a way that recognizes the limits and particular values of each? How do we appropriate technologies in way that doesn't reproduce dominant relations? How do we juggle the multiple languages we are working with and the audiences we are engaging? How do we communicate across language differences which reveal distinct world views? These are questions we would like to further probe with other similar transnational activist/scholars.

Insider/outsider collaboration

The final cross-cutting tension addresses aspects of our collaboration, both between artists/animators and participants in local projects as well as project partners in the transnational gatherings and productions. While we recognize that power relations constantly shape our interactions in north/south, university/community, professor/student, artist/participant, funder/recipient terms, the ways in which we move between positions of insider and outsider are complex and constantly changing. Tuhiwai Smith suggests that the conventional notion of distinctions of the outside researcher and inside subject, for example, is based on positivist notions of objectivity and neutrality. Participatory action research, on the other hand, turns upside down the insider/outsider dichotomy, transforms subjects into researchers, and, at its most transparent, advocates self-reflexivity to constantly monitor our shifting roles and relationships.

A crisis in 2006 accentuated certain insider/outsider dimensions of our north/south partnerships in the VIVA! project. In late May of that year, an attack by the Mexican military on Indigenous people claiming their territory in Atenco caught two young participants from the Mexican mural project team in the crossfire as 'free media' journalists; one was arrested, beaten, and sexually assaulted by police and deported to her native Chile. The flurry of emails that alerted our network to the details reminded us starkly that the risks of alternative media and community arts work are greater for some than for others, what VIVA! collaborator Heather Hermant calls a "hierarchy of risks."[l]

In Canada, at least in the social movement contexts of our projects, we are rarely in real political or physical danger. Those on the front line of life-and-death situations not only risk more but also possess a kind of "epistemic privilege"[li] in understanding the potency of combining grass-roots media/art with political struggle.

A less dramatic difference, though endemic in our roles as academics collaborating with activists or artists, is the university/community divide. In Canada, there has been a shift toward legitimizing and funding collaborative research that will benefit communities. But academic agendas and methods often still dominate in what turn out to be somewhat unequal partnerships.[lii] Our community artist partners in Toronto remind us that while we are paid to do this kind of work, they survive on piece meal grants, with little time to dedicate to the critical reflection, writing and exchange so central to the VIVA! Project. In overseeing the book project, I often find myself in an uncomfortable nagging role, asking people to do something which may not be a priority for them. We dance around our insider/outsider roles as we move in and out of each other's contexts; academia can be alienating for activist partners, and university researchers viewed with suspicion by community participants - even *if* the process is participatory and arts-based.

Collaboration is messy, agendas can conflict, our work rhythms don't always jive -- whether institutionally or culturally or emotionally based. Why do we do it? Because even the tensions - inevitable in our attempts to (re)integrate art, academics, and activism -- are real and compelling, and, if engaged honestly, can be ultimately creative.

But is there not a basic contradiction in the arguments I have put forth? Does our framework of creative tensions ultimately reproduce the dichotomous thinking that we claim to challenge? Popular education as a practice shaped by Latin American activists was built upon positivist European and Marxist dialectical analyses of history, even though it was been interrogated and reshaped in recent decades by feminists, people of "colour," environmentalists, and Indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, as we revisited our tensions in Panama in 2005, some found the framework limiting in its dualistic form. After three days of hearing about and analyzing the local projects, we engaged in a process of *sistematización*; out of this grounded theorizing emerged a new model in the form of a spiral, which resonated more with non-western visions which most inspire us.[liii]

From pairs of tensions to spirals of processes

Our analysis could be synthesized in two interrelated spirals: one *(figure 3)* which envisioned the *substantive* core of our collaborative research as historical and cultural reclamation, and within that a focus on transformative processes of ethical representation and artistic creation, all of which are aimed at fomenting popular education and art for social change.

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Figure 3. Spiral of the transformative processes central to the focus of the VIVA! Project.

What?   Why?   With whom?

Transformative processes
of ethical representation
and artistic creation

Historical and cultural
reclamation

Popular art and education for social change

Transformation

The second spiral *(figure 4)* articulates the key features of our collectively crafted *methodology*: an integral or holistic approach (ecological, interdisciplinary, body/mind/spirit), promoting intergenerational dialogue (between students, interns, and youth participants with elder partners), and engaging intercultural and equity-related tensions (both within our projects and within own transnational collaboration).

Figure 4. Spiral of key methodological components of the VIVA! Project.

How?

Intergenerational
  - dialogue
  - oral histories in many artistic forms
  - internships

Integrated and holistic
    - integration of body, mind, spirit
    - transciplinary
    - ecological vision

Intercultural
    - diverse geographic and political contexts
    - ethnicity, race, gender, age
    - organizations
    - urban/rural

Creative tensions

The spiral, of course, conjures up a completely different universe story than the creative tensions. But for now, perhaps we will sit with these two different world views, side by side, since our practice as well as our hemispheric dialogue is clearly in the interstices within and between them. Our bodies and the ground we stand on carry the stories of multiple layers of mapping and remapping the "Americas."

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[i] For a fuller introduction to the VIVA! project, see its website: www.vientos.info/viva and the forthcoming bilingual book, tentatively entitled *VIVA! Art, Education and Politics in the Americas*, co-publication of URACCAN University in Nicaragua, UAM in Mexico, and York University in Canada.

[ii] We have chosen this name for our transnational project because it is understandable in both Spanish and English, and reflects cross-fertilization among activists in the south and the north. It is at the same time a recognition of those who have given their lives to a cause, a celebration of struggle, a call to action.

[iii] While popular education has become known in the north mainly through the pioneering pedagogical theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, its emerging practice was very much shaped by grass-roots organizing by poor communities (and liberation theology) in the 1960s in response to poverty, military dictatorships and U.S. hegemony in the region. Related concepts with different histories are emancipatory or liberatory education, transformative learning, critical pedagogy, radical adult education, among others.

In Canada, we have adapted the term as an overall frame that draws from specific practices by equity-seeking groups: indigenous education, anti-racism education, feminist pedagogy, labour education, global education, queer pedagogy, popular environmental education, etc.

^{iv} The fertile space at FES is evident in the recent publication of a collection of essays by 18 former graduate students whose work challenges the separation of art, activism, and academics. See Deborah Barndt (ed), *Wild Fire: Art as Activism* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006.)

^v Latin American scholars have challenged cultural studies for not giving "sufficient importance to social movements as a vital aspect of cultural production." See the landmark volume: Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (eds), *Culture of Politics, Politics of Culture: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

^{vi} The eight local projects serving as case studies in the VIVA! Project include:
1) Kuna Children's Art Project in Kuna Yala, Panama: Centro de Acción y Educación Social Panamena (CEASPA);
2) Bilwivision Community Television Station run by youth in Bilwi, Nicaragua: Universidad Regional Autonoma de la Costa Caribeña de Nicaragua (URACCAN);
3) Pintar Obedeciendo, Community-based Mural Production Workshop in Mexico City: Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM);
4) Tianguis Cultural (youth cultural marketplace) in Guadalajara, Mexico: Instituto Mexicano para el Desarrollo Comunitario (IMDEC);
5) Arts Bridge Program in Los Angeles, California: UCLA World Arts and Culture Department;
6) Telling Our Stories in Toronto, Canada: Catalyst Centre;
7) The Legacy Project, Diane Roberts, Montreal/Toronto/Vancouver;
8) Jumblies Theatre in Toronto, Canada: Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University.

^{vii} Transnational social justice activism, in particular initiatives that promote alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, also challenge a male/female dualism upon which western feminism has been built.

^{viii} There's a double edge to the racism here, because obviously the sculptor used a European woman as the model for the smaller, browner Indigenous woman.

^{ix} Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 91.

^x Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

^{xi} Cajete emphasizes the spiritual and psychological importance of dreaming, as central to art, education and ceremony. Gregory Cajete, *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (Skyland, NC: Kivaki Press, 1994), 145.

^{xii} Susan Strega, "The View from the Poststructural Margins: Epistemology and Methodology Reconsidered," in *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005), 203.

^{xiii} Christine McKenzie, "Popular Communications: Negotiating Contested Terrain on Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast." Unpublished MES paper, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, 2002. Ilan Kapoor, "The Devil's in the Theory: A Critical Assessment of Robert Chambers' Work on Participatory Development," *Third World Quarterly* 23(1) (2002) 101-117.

^{xiv} See Liam Kane, *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2001); Carlos Nunez, *Educar para Transformar, Transformar para Educar* (Guadalajara, Mexico: IMDEC, 1994); and Deborah Barndt, *To Change This House: Popular Education under the Sandinistas* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991).

^{xv} Colleen Reid, "Advancing women's social justice agendas: A feminist action research framework," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(3), 2004. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_3/html/reid.html

^{xvi} Patricia Maguire, *Doing Feminist Participatory Research* (Amherst, Massachusetts: Centre for International Education, 1987).

^{xvii} Roberto Antillón, *Para Construir Conocimiento a través de la Sistematización de la Práctica Social* (Guadalajara, Mexico: IMDEC), 2002.

^{xviii} See Laura Reinsborough, "Sistematización: A Guide to Critical Reflections for Community Art Work," unpublished zine, 2006.

[xix] See Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding, eds., *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000). Both Shari Stone-Mediatore and Lorraine Code in their respective essays laud Chandra Mohanty's refusal to dichotomize the local specific analysis and the broader analysis of global forces shaping the local. I adopted a similar approach to my study of women workers in the NAFTA Food Chain: *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

[xx] Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[xxi] Artists such as Judy Chicago, Judy Baca, and Suzanne Lacy pioneered more collective feminist art-making processes. See Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995) and the more recent: Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). For a more global perspective on feminist practices, see Pilar Riano, *Women in Grassroots Communications: Furthering Social Change* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1994).

[xxii] Diana Taylor found echoes of this dynamic among the Nahuat in colonial Mexico: a *ixiptlatl*, referring to the integration of the spiritual being and the physical being, was always constructed as temporary, the "constant making and unmaking pointing to the active role of human beings in promoting the regenerative quality of the universe.." Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 39.

[xxiii] Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[xxiv] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, Ltd, 1999).

[xxv] bell hooks and amalia mesa-bains, *homegrown: engaged cultural criticism* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 119.

[xxvi] Robert Young, *Postcolonialism*, 79.

[xxvii] "It is a paradox that a feminism that has insisted on a politics of a historicized self has rendered that self so secularized, that it has paid little attention to the ways in which spiritual labour and spiritual knowing is primarily a project of self-knowing and transformation that constantly invokes community simply because it requires it." Jacquie Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.

[xxviii] Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 174.

[xxix] Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America: Women From the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

[xxx] Beth Brant, quoted in Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories* (Toronto: Dead Dog Café Productions and CBC, 2003), 144.

[xxxi] See Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2004) for convincing evidence that certain past Indigenous civilizations have, in fact, self-destructed due to a lack of ecological consciousness, depleting natural resources that led to their downfall.

[xxxii] Thanks to Margo Charlton, Heather Hermant, Maggie Hutcheson, Laura Reinsborough, and Diane Roberts for the island retreat and the Kits beach rant!

[xxxiii] Organizational affiliations, in contrast with individual academic collaborators, also translate into potential turnover of staff, and thus shifting participation. Three of the original partners have left their organizations and thus the project; over the first two years, we integrated four new partners.

[xxxiv] We think these issues are important ones to discuss in transnational feminist networks, and they resonated with other co-authors when we first met in Minnesota in 2006, and shared our "creative accounting" strategies.

[xxxv] Diane Roberts, during VIVA! project meeting, May, 2006.

[xxxvi] We have called "sticky moments" those situations that emerge and cause us discomfort, often because they are tapping really important issues that we have avoided but need to address. The challenge is to name them, to go into instead of flee the discomfort, and to work through the underlying reasons that they seem "sticky."

[xxxvii] There is an ongoing and challenging conversation with Latin American partners about the different constructions of race, ethnicity and gender in a context where 'mestizaje' and 'machismo' have been dominant cultural developments. In Bilwi, Nicaragua, for example, the production team of the community

television station includes young people of Miskitu, Creole, and mestizo origins, in fact most have two or more of these ethnicities in their ancestry. As the regional autonomy law enshrines the "right to self-identification," however, most of them chose to identify themselves as Miskitu.

xxxviii Thanks to Diane Roberts for her comments on this section and for keeping this conversation alive and critical, challenging us to wrestle with this internal contradiction.

xxxix Thanks to Heather Hermant for articulating some of the nuances of this contradictory role white women play in the emerging field of community arts.

xl Diane Roberts, "The Lost Body – Recovering Memory: A Personal Legacy," forthcoming in *VIVA! Art, Education and Politics in the Americas* (Bluefields, Nicaragus: URACCAN University, 2008).

xli Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, xix.

xlii Ibid, 19-20.

xliii Carlos Nuñez, *La Revolución Ética* (Guadalajara, Mexico: IMDEC, 1998).

xliv We are committed to making the VIVA! Project totally bilingual, an ongoing, labour-intensive and expensive proposition. For us, it is more than an issue of equalizing participation (four Latin American partners don't speak English, one North American partner doesn't speak Spanish), but a deeper belief that collaborative knowledge production must draw from the distinct epistemologies that are so embedded in language.

xlv Our website is part of a 'free media' network, Drupal, which emphasizes access and democratic use; each new tool offers us a chance to consider how we use it in ways that counter its dominant exclusionary, individualistic, and commodified uses. However, one of the contradictions of this "free" server is that there is little technical support available.

xlvi Haraway built her cyborg myth on the premise that "most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artifacts associated with 'high technology' and scientific culture. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991, 154).

xlvii Valdez has adapted the Zapatista mandate of "mandar obediciendo" or "lead by taking direction from the people" to his approach to community mural production; "pintar obediciendo" means literally "to paint by obeying", but we have translated it more loosely as "painting by listening."

xlviii Thanks to Heather Hermant and Diane Roberts for raising this issue as they read drafts of this paper.

xlix Marie Battiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge* (Saskatoon, SA: Purich Publishing Ltd, 2000), 79-80.

l Heather Hermant, elaborated this idea during our VIVA! meeting, December 2006, Chiapas, Mexico.

li I have adapted the notion of "epistemic privilege" from Uma Narayan, "Working Together Across Difference: Some Considerations of Emotions and Political Practice," Hypatia 3(2), 1988, 31–48.

lii Niks suggests, in fact, that there is less money now available for community groups to do their own research, as they are forced into collaboration with academic partners. Marina Niks, "The Politics of Collaborative Research Between University-Based and Non University-Based Researchers," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2004.

liii The spiral can found in many ancestral practices of diverse origins; consider, for example, the Celtic tri-spiral which can be traced back to the Druids on what is now known as the United Kingdom. Of political significance to VIVA! partners, however, is the fact that the spiral also echoes the Zapatista symbol of the *caracol*, referring simultaneously to the conch shell which was a major form of popular communications among Indigenous peoples in Chiapas and the snail shell (which we have adopted as a symbol). The *caracol* is the name given to the seat of autonomous government established by the Zapatistas in the liberated zones of Chiapas, Mexico.