

**Rooted in Place, Politics, Passion and Praxis
Decolonization, Popular Education, Community Arts, and
Participatory Action Research**

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INTRODUCTION

Rooted in Place, Politics, Passion, and Praxis

Decolonization, Popular Education, Community Arts, and Participatory Action Research

The central ideas driving the VIVA! project can be seen within a circle that acknowledges our colonial history and aims to decolonize our practice as educators, artists, and activists through popular education, community arts, and participatory action research. In this chapter, I introduce these key fields that provide the common theoretical and methodological ground for the projects described within these pages. The stories you will read are rooted in place, politics, passion, and praxis—four interrelated components that together aim for balance in our practice.¹



Rooted in place: The colonial context of the Americas

Every context is political in its own different way, whether it’s rooted in your body, or it’s rooted in the colonial history of people trying to take back the land that they live on or people who have been displaced from their land and don’t know each other in their new community. I see more similarities than differences among our projects in this sense.²

—Christine McKenzie, Catalyst Centre (Canada)

All VIVA! partners and projects are located in multicultural contexts, with Indigenous and diasporic populations from many different origins being central protagonists in





diverse processes of community-based art-making. Our cross-border exchange speaks to an increasingly integrated hemispheric economy that is epitomized by the migration north of many Central Americans, and reflected in the U.S.-controlled global media.

Our exchange is also an example of the globalizing of civil society and a growing movement of Indigenous peoples, communities of color and their allies challenging the “official stories” of dominant media and the Eurocentric values driving corporate globalization.

José Angel Colman, a Kuna popular theater artist in Panama, found that our exchange challenged dominant media stereotypes:

With the monopoly of global media, we mainly get information from the metropolitan centers. So part of the work of popular education in our communities is to counter that, because we know that even in the U.S., people also struggle to have access to art, to information.

VIVA! partner Nicaraguan journalist Margarita Antonio builds on this idea:

We see a lot of stereotyped images of the U.S., where everything is idealized, or where everyone is imperialist. But projects like ArtsBridge in Los Angeles show us that even in this world of the big dreams, there is a lot of work going on, there are people who are really the majority, who are constructing something different, and art is the path.

We need a more accurate image of life in the north, recognizing that there are many immigrants from our countries living there. Because these same young people when they return from the U.S. to our communities, they often sell a false image to our youth who think that “this is the life!” and they have to go there, too, when they could be building their lives in their own context.

ArtsBridge director Amy Shimshon-Santo of Los Angeles, speaking from the North, agrees that the VIVA! project reveals the global dynamics of culture.

To be able to see in Guadalajara’s cultural marketplace, for example, a punk artist, an Indig-

enous activist, reflects a different diversity. Still, we recognize that not everyone is equal.

Five hundred years of colonization: Carved in stone?

The issue of power and inequality, in fact, is central to community arts and popular education. Through the VIVA! project, we aimed to unearth the roots of these deeply ingrained power dynamics, a shared colonial history, represented by this statue. A monument of Christopher Columbus with an Indigenous woman at his feet could be located anywhere in the hemisphere or even



Statue of Christopher Columbus and Indigenous woman in Lima, Peru





in Europe. As a catalyst it can help us rethink how we both reflect and reproduce the power relations represented here. We can also critically analyze it as a piece of art: Who constructed it and for whom? This particular statue was erected in Peru in 1867 by a European sculptor as a tribute to the Spanish colonizers. It offers one representation of the colonial history and its deconstruction feeds the postcolonial theoretical framework of the VIVA! project.

The statue immortalizes 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 woman. The military struggle involved in the subjugation is only hinted at by her arrow tossed to the side. Even though this artistic representation is more than 150 years old, people today inevitably still see their own lives within the persistent (carved in stone?) and intersecting power relations represented here: sexism, heterosexism, classism, militarism, evangelization, racism.³ 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.⁴ The relation is complex, and there are contradictions within.

Representatives from each of the VIVA! projects see this image through different lenses, depending on their own identities, histories, and locations. As Heather Hermant reflects in the VIVA! video:

Even within our own group, we see the colonial story repeating itself—in little bursts—all the time, and that in itself speaks to why we need to be doing this kind of work.

No matter where we are located, we have to confront the fact that we are all immersed in colonial contexts that are not just of the past, but perpetuated in new forms such as corporate globalization. Our projects inevitably reflect our locations in the struggle between colonization and decolonization. VIVA! partners respond to this statue from their own vantage points:

José Angel Colman (Panama) was provoked by the image of the cross:

Since we were born, the Catholic Church was there teaching us the Bible, which was like the

*José Angel
Colman, Panama*





Diane Roberts, Canada

ABCs of another culture. . . . I was brought up as a Christian, but I've come to the conclusion that I'm not a Christian. We Kunas have our own Indigenous religion; through my religion, I can accept the face of Christ as an historical being.

As an Afri-Caribbean woman, Diane Roberts (Canada) asks us to consider who is missing from this official artistic representation of the Americas:

It is impossible to ignore slavery or the slave trade. The river of blood I referred to fed the land, makes the land grow, and mixes with the blood of

all of the ancestors in this room. But there is a de-valuing of the contribution of the African culture, a deracination, a removing of race, a removing of culture. Yet we can see it in the music, the dance, the literature.

Margarita Antonio (Nicaragua), a Miskitu woman, responds to the gender dynamic in this statue, challenging the image of a subservient Indigenous woman and reflecting on colonization and art:

In Nicaragua, we can see two levels of colonization: first how those of us from the pluriethnic





Margarita Antonio, Nicaragua

Caribbean Coast are seen by the Pacific mestizo (Spanish descendants) side of the country, where we are represented in the news only when there are disasters or drugs. And secondly, how we have internalized this colonized view of ourselves, so we reproduce in our community television station how others see us, for example, focusing on barely clad women dancing.

In working with artists of color who have developed projects with marginalized youth, Christine McKenzie (Canada) raises questions about the ethics of representation:

We can't use photos of the "at risk" youth in our material without their permission or participa-

tion, and, similarly, who asked the Indigenous people how they wanted to be represented in this statue? What's more, the Indigenous woman is being sexualized, which is another part of the patriarchal and racist colonizing project.

Rebeca Santiago (Mexico):

We as Mexicans have a continuous colonial process with North America, through its food, its fashion. For example, I work with artisans and I see the artisan dressed up in a Converse baseball cap and running shoes, and a brand-name T-shirt, but he has nothing to feed his wife. We call this "cultural hybridity" in which our culture is subjugated by the colonial culture, by the dominating culture.





Christine McKenzie, Canada

Amy Shimshon-Santo (USA):

These same dynamics exist in the inner-city schools of Los Angeles today, kids in poor and racialized neighborhoods are shaped by homogenous consumer culture, but are denied the resources, the chance to express themselves and their diversity through many other forms, much livelier than monuments, like break dancing.

Noah Kenneally (Canada):

Since Jumblies Theatre proposes working across differences—of race, generation, and class in Toronto—we would challenge the representation limited to only two groups, and ask how bridges could be built between the marginalized groups (Indigenous, African, etc.) as well as with mestizos and creoles in the current context.

Checo Valdez (Mexico), a mestizo graphic artist who critiques his own training in European art as egoistic, says:

Our concepts of art come from Europe; the term “art” itself is colonized.



Amy Shimshon-Santo, U.S.A.

Checo challenges the fact that this statue was produced by a European sculptor, revealing a Eurocentric view of the world, and in a European form, the monument. Through the Painting by Listening project, he facilitates a participatory community mural production process in which people bring their own histories and aesthetics to a mural that they themselves paint.

Deborah Barndt (coordinator, VIVA! project, Canada):

How do we decolonize the VIVA! project itself when it has been initiated in the North, funded by Western academic monies, and coordinated by me, a white Anglo university professor? Every meeting, every written document, every artistic product emerging from this project bears the traces of



Noah Kenneally, Canada

colonization. How can we alert the reader of our book to look critically for those contradictions within these pages?

As the VIVA! project evolved, it became clearer that we were engaged in a process of decolonization: of education, of research, of art, and of community. Examining any one of these practices or constructs inevitably implicates the others; that is, in attempting to decolonize them, we are reclaiming their inseparability. In considering the colonizer–colonized relationship, each of us in the VIVA! project is located in different (and shifting) places in these relationships of power. The challenge is how to acknowledge these differences as we work through them and with them. This is an ongoing process of questioning for all community artists and activists: How

does the Columbus statue reflect your history and current relationships? What is missing? How do we find the cracks within institutions of power to creatively challenge and change unjust power relations?

Digging up the bones: Decolonizing as a conscious process

If none of us escapes the process of colonization, if it continues with or without our participation, with or without our consent, then decolonization is a process that we must enter into consciously. We must choose to participate in it, even within our own interrelationships and find ways to involve others in this process. VIVA! partner Diane Roberts raises questions about the language we use:





Checo Valdez, Mexico

I want to find a way to name it so that it's not hidden, so that we have a language for naming it without it being buried. I'm just trying to find a way to dig up the bones and to be able to look at them.

Decolonization can be seen as comprising several different processes: acknowledging the

history of colonialism; working to undo the effects of colonialism; striving to unlearn habits, attitudes, and behaviors that continue to perpetuate colonialism; and challenging and transforming institutional manifestations of colonialism.⁵

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her classic *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* connects colonialism to European imperialism that involved not only economic expansion and the subjugation of “others” but also an idea or spirit as well as a particular field of knowledge.⁶ Postcolonial theorists (Fanon,⁷ Loomba,⁸ Young,⁹ Spivak¹⁰) have helped us unpack colonial notions of knowledge and knowledge production while also probing the ways that colonized peoples are speaking back from the margins, reclaiming not only their land but also diverse ways of knowing and communicating.

In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, performance theorist Diana Taylor explores the tensions between the Eurocentric text-based ways of knowing and performative practices that honored embodied knowledges. In her genealogy of cultural practices in the Americas, Taylor delineates how colonization involved discrediting Indigenous ways of “preserving and communicating historical understanding.”¹¹ At the same time, the colonizers witnessed the performance of rituals that integrated many forms of artistic expression; for example, they used the 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.”¹² We see this privileging of text-based learning over embodied practices in academic contexts and even in our attempts to write about embodied practices in books like this one! While acknowledging this contradiction, we urge the reader to refer regularly to the accompanying videos, which will stimulate the senses and provoke the emotions, through bodies and sound, movement and connection.

Indigenous cultures had no word for art, yet they





Deborah Barndt, coordinator, VIVA! project, Canada

do have names for specific cultural forms, such as the elaborate masks and powerful totem poles of the Haida on the coast of British Columbia that now grace major art museums and are being recognized for how they pass on ancestral knowledge in the context of community ceremonies. In *Look to the Mountain*, Santa Clara Pueblo educator Gregory Cajete frames art as integral to the educative process of the community, based in visions and dreams.¹³ There is among Indigenous peoples both a reclaiming of traditional practices as well as a creative fusion of the historical forms with new technologies, and a challenge to the stereotypes of Aboriginals as frozen in the past.¹⁴ For Indigenous peoples, resistance to the imposition of dominant cultures has often meant learning various cultures and developing the capacity to operate in many different contexts, and to construct bridges to support meeting across differences. VIVA! partner Jose Colman refers to his experience with

Kuna children who learned from their elders while also attending Panamanian public school:

People are dynamic, they aren't static. Indigenous people advance, are sometimes pulled, changes are always coming. I believe that the Kuna Children's Art Workshops were important because they were flexible and run with a spirit of accepting others. We don't see ourselves shaping ourselves only as Indigenous people, in order to close ourselves within our Indigeneity. We are forming ourselves in our own traditional school as Indigenous people in order to project ourselves in the broader world.

Collaborators in the VIVA! project, from the Global North and the Global South, have found many allies in the process of decolonizing our art, education,





and research. Ontologically, we critique the materialistic and mechanistic worldview driving global imperialism; epistemologically, we identify with postcolonial notions of knowledge and power; and methodologically, we adopt a feminist poststructural stance that honors the subjective, emotional, aesthetic, and natural.¹⁵ 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 (way of knowing) 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.¹⁶

Ultimately, our goal is not merely anticolonial, it is shaped by a vision that embraces all people, while acknowledging difference. African American scholar/activist Robin D. G. Kelley suggests that the way “to dream ourselves out of this dark place” is “to think like poets (*sic* artists), to envision and make visible a new society, a peaceful, cooperative, loving world without poverty and oppression, limited only by our imaginations.”¹⁷

As U.S.-based educator/artist Amy Shimshon-Santo articulates in the introductory video accompanying this book:

Decolonization is to come into that awareness of how your ancestors brought you here, and to engage in an affirming way with who you are, where you came from, and what your potential for creativity and change might be. Cultural and educational institutions should be reflective of who we are as a people. What we consider beautiful, what we consider meaningful, what we consider intelligent and knowledgeable, should be reflective of all of us.

Popular education can animate the process of unveiling and transforming power relations, while community arts can tap our collective imaginations about other ways of being. As Myles Horton, renown North American educator, storyteller, and founder of the Highlander Research and Education Center¹⁸ would put it: “We need two eyes: one focused on what is, the other on what could be.”¹⁹



Rooted in politics: Popular education as a common ground

The partnerships at the core of the VIVA! project were forged in the early 1980s when many educators, activists, and artists from all over the Americas converged in Nicaragua, during the early moments of the Sandinista Revolution. The first project of the new government was to mount a National Literacy Crusade that mobilized the entire country for five months, involving over 100,000 volunteers (a majority young urban students) in teaching reading and writing to 400,000 illiterate workers and peasants who in turn taught their “teachers” about the realities of their lives.²⁰ The campaign not only reduced the illiteracy rate from 52 to 12 percent but it transformed people who had been historically marginalized by colonialism and U.S.-supported dictatorships into active participants in the construction of a new society, based on socialist values. Popular education collectives were established in the communities for ongoing education and community development, with the new literates becoming teachers of their neighbors.²¹

I was one of many internationalists who arrived at this historic moment to share technical expertise with the massive educational program. I was invited to teach photography as part of a process of producing curriculum materials based on the stories of the adult learners and their daily lives. Between 1981 and 1983, we trained a team of popular photo journalists to produce a magazine for the new literates and mounted production centers in three regions of the country for teachers and community



leaders to produce their own photo stories, silk-screened posters, and theater pieces, all to feed the literacy process. The Nicaraguan Ministry of Education had invited Paulo Freire, renowned Brazilian educator, to advise them on their curriculum and methodology; Freire encouraged educators to develop a model that would fit their context.

The Nicaraguan adult education program in the 1980s strongly reflected Freirean principles of “popular education”: that education is not neutral, that it must start with the experiences and perceptions of the learners, that the content should be drawn from their daily lives, that the teachers are learners and learners teachers. Freire framed literacy more broadly as not only learning to read the “word” but also to read the “world”; his problem-posing approach to education drew upon the social contradictions learners faced in their daily lives. While learning to read and write, they discussed their common social conditions and considered how they might act collectively to transform them. This process of “conscientization” integrated the personal and political, the individual and collective, action and reflection (praxis).

Freire built on an analysis of power as articulated by Antonio Gramsci. The Italian Communist journalist offered three concepts critical to the VIVA! project. First, Gramsci introduced the concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony as a way of understanding power and struggle for change. His notion of hegemony is very dynamic, framing power as relational, or persuasion from above as well as consent from below. Gramsci suggested that dominant groups maintain ideological control through intellectual and moral persuasion, winning the hearts and minds of people who might not even share their interests. Struggles for power by marginalized groups represent “counter-hegemonic” forces that challenge and transform this dominant hegemony.

The late Canadian popular educator, artist, and activist dian marino eloquently interpreted Gramsci and captured hegemony in her own life as “a rainforest of movable relations.”²² Gramsci not only challenged more dogmatic Marxist interpretations of power, by framing power in more fluid and relational, and less deterministic ways, but he also emphasized the importance of the cultural realm to enrich and complexify a political economic analysis. People must consent to dominant ideas and practices in order for hegemony to work. Ideological

institutions such as schools and the media are critical to this process, and so any efforts to challenge current power relations must involve processes of education and communication. Popular education and community arts are counter-hegemonic practices within the cultural sphere. Both practices are about engaging minds, hearts, and bodies in transformative processes, which aim to develop critical social consciousness and move toward more collective actions.

Finally, Gramsci offers a more dialectical way of thinking that challenges positivist, linear, and dichotomous ways of framing issues. He proposes naming and engaging contradictions; it is only within the spaces created by contradictions of any given moment that we can take action. The framework of the VIVA! project embraces contradictions in the way that Gramsci advocates. By naming and exploring creative tensions, we acknowledge that they are inherent to community arts practices; they are not necessarily to be resolved but rather to be acknowledged and engaged. At the same time, we have been influenced by feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial critiques that recognize the complexity and intersectionality of power,²³ alerting us to the ways that gender, race, class, sexuality, Indigeneity, and education shape our identities and relationships. While we are indebted to Freire and Gramsci, we also recognize their historical locations and limits;²⁴ like bell hooks, we are thirsty for their enormous theoretical contributions even if we are drinking “dirty water.”²⁵

Having studied Freire’s methodology in Peruvian literacy programs in the 1970s,²⁶ I was aware that popular education emerged out of the grassroots struggles of poor communities throughout Latin America, in response to the military dictatorships, U.S. intervention, and neocolonial development programs. Freire brilliantly conceptualized that practice and, especially after he was exiled in the 1960s, became a major theorist of an emerging pedagogy of the oppressed (also the title of his classic text).²⁷ Of particular interest to me was Freire’s suggestion that images or theater or songs or any cultural expression could serve as codes representing a common social reality and could be engaged or decoded by learners to deepen their critical consciousness of their situation. Popular art and communications were integral to popular education from the start.



In Nicaragua, I found a gathering of internationalist popular educators who had been applying Freirean notions to their own contexts across the continents. While many were invited as educational consultants, they also found their own theoretical and practical understanding deepened and broadened by the revolutionary moment in Nicaragua, with a government that prioritized popular education for the historically marginalized. Out of those relationships, in fact, the ALFORJA network was formed, a loose alliance of six major popular education centers in six Central American countries.²⁸

Over the next three decades the ALFORJA network inspired by those dynamic years in Nicaragua, provided the most fertile ground for the theoretical and methodological development of popular education.²⁹ They organized annual ten-day Creativity Workshops in which popular educators from the region reflected critically on their practice and collectively tackled critical social issues, developed sophisticated methodologies, and dreamed up creative and dynamic participatory techniques.³⁰ The “dialectical methodology of popular education,” for example, conceptualized in detail the movement from practice to theory and back to practice; it has been adapted by North American popular educators in a spiral model for designing educational events, which also “starts with the experience and knowledge of participants, identifies patterns in their stories, adds new information (theory) to what they already know, practices skills, and then strategically applies what’s been learned in the world.”³¹

Two of the major centers in the network are current VIVA! partners, the Panamanian Social Education and Action Center (CEASPA) and the Mexican Institute for Community Development (IMDEC). CEASPA was known in the 1980s for its groundbreaking research on national issues, its magazine *Diálogo Social*, and a monthly gathering of social activists undertaking a “conjunctural analysis” of current events and plotting strategic coalitional actions. This latter practice inspired The Moment Project at the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice (1985–1995), resulting in a Canadian version of political analysis for action, which we called “naming the moment.”³²

The Mexican Institute for Community Development (IMDEC), located in Guadalajara, Mexico, has for forty-

five years been the key national training ground for popular educators, community organizers, and social movement activists. IMDEC staff developed a four-week methodological school in popular education and pioneered a process of *sistematización*, which helps groups extract the key learnings from their organizational practices and collective actions.³³ IMDEC has also been the key leader in the network in the field of popular communications, promoting the democratization of art and media and their use in popular education and grassroots organizing. IMDEC has produced dozens of videos and books, and has offered communications training in community radio, video, photography, and print media.³⁴

Central American popular educators have had a huge influence on the development of the field in North America as well as in Europe.³⁵ In Canada, ALFORJA members came north to help us establish the Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action (1985–1995); similar work has been carried on since the late 1990s by the Catalyst Centre, one of the VIVA! partners.³⁶ Of the other VIVA! partners, teachers in the two universities in Mexico and in Nicaragua were more familiar with popular education, given its influence in the region, than those in the North. York University, however, the host of the project, for over twenty years offered the only graduate course in Canada in popular education for social change.

In the adoption of popular education in the North, there has always been a danger that it is reduced to participatory techniques and depoliticized, while its origins and intent have been intensely political; there is also an important debate about the application of these methods with more privileged populations.³⁷ Paulo Freire has had an influence in the academy in the related field of critical pedagogy (Giroux, McLaren, Shor, and Simon),³⁸ which has tended to focus more on the application of his ideas in public schools, while popular education as a practice in social movements has been adapted in the women’s movement,³⁹ antiracism movement,⁴⁰ environmental movement,⁴¹ antiglobalization movement,⁴² and progressive sectors of the labor movement.⁴³ Thirty years ago, the term was unfamiliar to those in the North, equated with pop culture, rather than understood as the Spanish “popular,” which has a class





connotation in Latin America, referring to the people, the grassroots, or most marginalized populations.

When VIVA! partners first gathered in 2004 to collectively shape our project, we nonetheless agreed that popular education was our common ground, and a starting point. Our objectives focused on two levels of activity:

A local objective: Using participatory action research, to recover, promote, and create diverse cultural and artistic practices integrated into processes of popular education and community organization, and aimed at both personal and social transformation that respects diversity.

A transnational objective: 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 our first meeting, while we agreed that popular education was common to our practices, we had diverse ways of defining it. From Panama, Kuna educator and CEASPA director Jesús Alemañcia described it as “the act of educating and being educated, of enriching ‘knowing’ by participating in the processes of life (social, economic, political, cultural and individual),” while Christine McKenzie of the Toronto-based Catalyst Centre defined popular education as “grassroots people collectively raising consciousness, analyzing their histories and current situation, and from this acting to challenge unjust power that affects their social realities.”⁴⁴

Since the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Zapatista uprising challenging the impact of neoliberal corporate

globalization on lands and peoples, biodiversity and cultural diversity, there has also been a concomitant globalization of social movements. Popular educators, social justice activists, and committed artists have been responding to similar forces of privatization, deregulation, a diminishing of the public and social sphere; geopolitical borders have become less relevant as they find ways of connecting through social media and new technologies such as mobile phones.⁴⁵ These tools have also become part of our exchange, and have shaped our constantly evolving frameworks.⁴⁶

Popular education itself has been challenged for its Eurocentrism, evident in its Marxist intellectual roots, a rationalist orientation, and a focus on class often at the expense of questions of race, gender, and sexuality. Postcolonial and postmodern critiques have reshaped the theoretical frames and strategic directions of popular educators.⁴⁷ Raul Leís, VIVA! partner in Panama and secretary general of CEEAL, Latin American Council for Adult Education, offered this conjunctural assessment at our 2005 gathering:

Popular education now faces new challenges, it is time to revitalize our practice. For example, before the focus was the working class, now it is social movements. In the past, we focused on what we considered “objective reality,” now we also pay attention to the “subjective.” Before we had socialism as a utopia, but then the [Berlin] wall fell. Now we have to build the kind of world we want, not based on dogma. We have to cultivate, sow, and water it to make it grow. And, as Paulo Freire would say, dialogue remains the core of our action, dialogue even with our contradictions.

Leis concludes:

In Latin America, popular education and popular theater can help build critical hope through a collective and participatory process of change. Independent of ideologies. That is, we cannot support a liberatory proposal that is authoritarian, that would be a contradiction in terms. A transformative methodology must be ethical as well as political.



Rooted in passion: Community arts as a common strategy⁴⁸

At the core of the VIVA! project is a belief in the power of the arts and a commitment to reclaiming the right and capacity of everyone to express themselves, their identities, concerns, hopes, and visions through a myriad of cultural forms. For many of us, this is what has been missing in top-down, didactic, and text-heavy approaches to education and organizing by leaders of progressive social movements.

Community arts, as a term and recognized field of practice, only came into currency in the latter part of the twentieth century. But the process it refers to—the engagement of people in representing their collective identities, histories, and aspirations in multiple forms of expression—is as old as cave paintings and ritualistic chanting. Gregory Cajete describes art in North American Aboriginal contexts as “an expression of life” practiced by all the people, usually an “anonymous activity expressing a unique cultural perspective of living.”⁴⁹ Thus, art was/is integral to life, totally democratized, and reflecting a community rather than an individual identity. Art was/is also a means of visioning, used within rituals and ceremonies, and integrating “myth, dream, art, ecological philosophy, communality, and spirit.”⁵⁰ Certainly for many Aboriginal peoples art is synonymous with community, whereas for the mainstream Western art world, “community art” is often discredited as something of lesser quality when judged against the work of individual geniuses of “high art.”

The separation of “art” from “community” perhaps has its roots in both a body/mind and a nature/culture split in Western consciousness emerging from certain streams of the European scientific revolution of the 1700s⁵¹ and in the commodification of art and knowledge associated with industrial capitalism of the 1800s.⁵² This has intensified in recent decades with commercialized and individualistic practices of art and media in the context of corporate cultural globalization, often “reducing culture to commerce.”⁵³ This process is paralleled by and integral to the commodification of knowledge, which emphasizes knowledge transmission and accumulation rather than the knowledge production process, and frames learning as a personal and primarily mental undertaking rather than a social relation and holistic experience.⁵⁴

Besides the resistance of Aboriginal peoples to fragmented ways of knowing often implicitly promoted in Western schools, media, and institutions, there have been many forms of education, art, and activism that have also challenged these dominant paradigms.⁵⁵ In the North American context, the cultural workers of the 1930s, for example, promoted collective production of the arts through the mural movement and film, theater, and dance workers’ leagues associated with socialist politics and supported by U.S. President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs.⁵⁶ Community development and community animation in the radical 1960s (and the related *animation socioculturelle* in Quebec) linked the organizing of marginalized communities with the expression of their issues through theater (Teatro Campesino was linked to organizing Chicano farmworkers in California⁵⁷), video (the Canadian National Film Board’s Challenge for Change program documented and represented video portraits back to Maritimes communities⁵⁸), and music (Black spirituals were transformed into hymns of the United States–based civil rights movement⁵⁹).

In the Latin American context, popular communications was a more common term than community arts, and, along with popular education, was integral to the building of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge military dictatorships, United States intervention, and extreme disparities between the rich and the poor in the southern hemisphere.⁶⁰ Art and media forms such as community radio, popular theater, *nueva canción* (new song), slide shows, and video were



democratized and used to engage an exploited majority in naming and challenging current power relations while envisioning utopias of more just and equitable societies.⁶¹ In this context, the critical and the creative were wed. As popular education promoted the collective production of knowledge, popular art offered both a mode of collective inquiry and a form of communicating that knowledge to the poor majority in ways that touched hearts as well as minds. It was understood that change would not happen unless the majority not only understood the root causes of their oppression and the necessity of struggle but also felt a deep commitment to working for change and a growing sense of their own power to make a difference.

The arts were not only tools in education and organization but engaged people more fully, moved their spirits, and inspired collective action. In the past twenty years, the term “community arts” has become more common in North America, but its meaning remains as diverse as the contexts in which it is practiced. At its most conservative, it refers to the dissemination of elite or classical arts to rural communities that have been marginalized by the large (and more heavily funded) urban cultural centers. Many municipal or provincial community arts councils, for example, were responses to this disparity. Adams and Goldbard, U.S. consultants in community arts for the past thirty years, eschew the term because of this connotation and prefer instead the concept of community cultural development, which they define as “a range of initiatives undertaken by artists in collaboration with other community members to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change.”⁶²

Until late 2010, a community arts website based in Virginia provided a gathering place, a rich collection of readings, and an exchange of artistic projects in fields ranging from corrections, education, environment, health, and spirituality.⁶³ One section listed over one hundred opportunities for training in community arts in North America, from courses or degrees in arts, urban studies, and education to summer institutes offered by established socially relevant art groups. The teaching of art for social change was a rallying point for progressive artists and academics meeting at the College Art Association conference in Los Angeles in 2009, where Beverly Naidus’s *Teaching Outside the Frame: Art for Social Change*⁶⁴ was

launched and incorporated the practice of over twenty artists/activists/educators. Thus, the field is growing, even as funding sources have diminished.

In the Canadian context, this new institutional space, however, has also been claimed by more political artists, who work collaboratively with diverse communities of interest and location. Honor Ford-Smith, Jamaican Canadian theater artist and postcolonial theorist, assesses both the potential and the dangers revealed in a new surge of public and private funding for community arts. Concerned that funders might hijack community agendas, she argues for an increasingly hybrid definition of community and community arts, one that allows for a diversity of practice, that promotes rigorous critique of all practice, and that challenges the essentially conservative dichotomy between professional and amateur and between product and process.⁶⁵ Among activists of the new millennium, there has also been a resurgence of participatory production of the arts, often in response to the commodified culture of global capitalism and the promotion of passive consumption rather than active citizenship.⁶⁶ It is evident in the proliferation of puppets, masks, and performance artists in street protests,⁶⁷ as well as in the adoption of culture-jamming practices,⁶⁸ theater of the oppressed techniques,⁶⁹ hip hop music, and reclaim the streets movements.⁷⁰ It is perhaps most fertile currently in creative activist art blossoming from multiple sites through new social media⁷¹ and web-based activism.⁷²

Community arts is often implicitly a critique of the domination of Western mass media and popular consumer culture. It is also a response to migration and diasporic populations claiming and creating diverse and multiple identities. In global cities such as Toronto, a cauldron of diverse cultural practices, new cultural fusions are drawing on traditions that challenge the Eurocentric content and individualism of hegemonic White Western culture.⁷³

In using the term “community arts” in the VIVA! project, then, we recognize its multiple connotations and the contestations about who does it, in what contexts, for what, and how. The juxtaposition of the two words—“art” and “community”—challenges our commonsense notions of both complex concepts. It behooves us to constantly interrogate how we understand art (as most of us are socialized in a more colonial and capitalist notion of the term) as well as how we understand community—





whether it be defined by place, tradition, intention, practice, or spirit.

Cleveland suggests that community arts can nurture four different kinds of purposes: to educate and inform us about ourselves and the world; to inspire and mobilize individuals and groups; to nurture and heal people and/or communities; to build and improve community capacity.⁷⁴

The social experience of art-making can open up aspects of people's beings, their stories, their memories and aspirations, in ways that other methods might miss. When people are given the opportunity to tell their own stories—whether through oral traditions, theater, visual arts, music, or other media—they bring their bodies, minds, and spirits into a process of communicating and sharing their experiences; they affirm their lives as sources of knowledge, and they stimulate each other in a synergistic process of collective knowledge production. Art, education, and research become part of the same dynamic and creative process.

Rooted in praxis: Participatory action research as a common methodology

Pure action without reflection is uncritical and nonstrategic activism, while pure reflection without action is mere verbalism.

—Paulo Freire,
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Integral to popular education is a process of participatory research, engaging learners in an investigation of their own lives in order to more deeply understand the power relations that limit them so they can become more conscious and active agents of change. Participatory research in fact originated within popular education networks, and is understood to be in-



tegral to the three-pronged process of research, education, and action associated with Freirean-shaped popular education.⁷⁵ Community arts and popular communications are thus tools in this process of people researching their own lives.⁷⁶ VIVA! partners adapted a participatory action research (PAR) methodology, based on the notion of praxis promulgated by the thought of Freire and Gramsci. We proposed this approach for our case studies, as a way to involve participants of local projects in naming the issues that are most critical to them and their context, in probing them through community arts processes, and in envisioning change and/or feeding social movement action.

According to Kemmis, PAR is critical social research, different from positivist research (often carried out by a detached scientist) or interpretive research (focusing on subjective meanings). The purpose of liberatory or critical research is the creation of movement for personal and social transformation in order to redress injustices, support peace, and form spaces of democracy.⁷⁷ PAR is thus distinguishable from other forms of research by its action component and by being carried out on a group basis (rather than by external researchers independently). It involves praxis, or reflecting on what needs to be done, taking action, and reflecting on that action.

Susan Smith proposes that “a holistic framework for PAR methodology must capture dynamic, lived experience, or ‘*viviencia*,’ acknowledging people as complex beings with different motivations, perceptions, capabilities, feelings and relationships, but with shared problems and desires for community and common effort. It must make room for the necessary dialectical tensions and conflicts.”⁷⁸

PAR has been critiqued by postcolonial, feminist, and critical international development scholars for its origins in Western development paradigms, its potential perpetuation of colonial relations, and its frequent implementation in projects led by outsiders.⁷⁹ At the same time, however, Indigenous researchers have found resonance in its relational epistemology and emancipatory methodology.⁸⁰ Feminists have brought a gender lens to critiques of PAR, challenging the composition of research teams, the issues researched, and the emerging analyses.⁸¹ Such critical questioning did not escape VIVA! partners as we reflected on our local and transnational processes:





in the video of Tianguis Cultural, for example, women question the lack of female leadership in the organization; in our own annual gatherings, we noted that the major organizing was handled by women partners, even when the country hosts were male. Race and gender (and class) converged in the dynamic of the domination by white women in community arts projects in the North.

On the other hand, there are several ways in which the VIVA! process has been informed by certain feminist epistemological questions and methodological practices:

- Adopting an intersecting analysis of power;
- Honoring 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 toward 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.⁸²

PAR has also been a fertile ground for the development of arts-based research methods, a growing field within education, health, and social science research. The Center for Arts-Informed Research at the University of Toronto has published numerous volumes in the past decade, focusing on a wide range of arts-based methods in qualitative research,⁸³ on multimedia methods,⁸⁴ on visual inquiry,⁸⁵ and dissertations in alternative forms,⁸⁶ among others. Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles, codirec-

tors of the center, suggest that “the central purpose of arts-informed research is to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible.”⁸⁷

In contrast to “arts-informed research,” Susan Finley distinguishes “arts-based research,” locating it in the realm of socially transformative approaches:

By its integration of multiple methodologies used in the arts with the postmodern ethics of participative, action-oriented, and politically situated perspectives for human social inquiry, arts-based inquiry has the potential to facilitate critical race, Indigenous, queer, feminist and border theories and research methodologies. As a form of performance pedagogy, arts-based inquiry can be used to advance a subversive political agenda that addresses issues of social inequity.⁸⁸

One of the complexities of the VIVA! project is that both the content and the process of the research have been art based; thus we are using art as a method to reflect on community arts practices. Our approach draws from the rich understandings of the power of the arts in learning as well as the suggestion that it can empower social action, as suggested earlier.

While PAR offered a common language and practice for both Spanish-speaking Latin American and English-speaking North American collaborators in VIVA!, the Latin partners suggested that their related practice of *sistematización* was perhaps more suited to their purposes when outside facilitators are not needed, as it engages participants in a program or project in a focused reflection on their shared experience for the purpose of understanding it more deeply, potentially impacting their subsequent actions.⁸⁹ We adapted *sistematización* as a process for deepening our collective analysis of projects during our annual meetings.

Nor were these processes without their contradictions, however; Laura Reinsborough, a VIVA! intern working with our Panamanian partner, was asked to facilitate a process of *sistematización* with the Kuna Children’s Art Workshop participants, and grappled with the





contradictions of taking on such a role as an outsider to the context, project, and process.⁹⁰ While understanding her contribution as a documenter, Laura reflected on the limitations:

the most important rule of *sistematización* is that only those who have participated in the experience are able to evaluate and reflect upon it. Therefore, the stories of the participants comprise the central elements for analysis and reflection. The process is also collaborative, as it engages the participants in all levels of the research: from gathering people's experiences to sharing their reflections, and from designing the research plan to evaluating and analysing the findings. The role of documentation is emphasized, not just for an archive but also for a deepening of critical reflection. In addition, *sistematización* is considered "self-research," meaning that it asserts that the responsibility of theorizing from the lived experiences rests with the participants, not with an outside institution.⁹¹

The application of PAR and *sistematización* in the local projects varied, and there were perhaps certain moments when the contradictions were most acute: for example, the writing of the chapters for this book, which in some cases was highly collaborative, and in other cases not. The video documentation, too, is shaped by one videographer or director's perspective on a project. We understand that any and all of these efforts reflect partial knowledge (adopting a poststructural stance) but at the same time, we hope that they will generate critical reflection by the readers, not only of these cases, but also of their own practice. Ultimately, we combine transformative methodologies (more influenced by Eurocentric critical social thought) with both non-Western and poststructural methodologies. This messy and unfinished dialogue, in fact, has provided some of the richest parts of our transnational exchange, and needs to continue.

Firm grounding

This chapter has introduced the theoretical and methodological foundations of the VIVA! project: decolonization, popular education, community arts, and participatory ac-

tion research. When these interrelated practices are firmly rooted and offer a strong base for community-engaged processes, they hopefully birth creative processes of knowledge production and inspire individuals and groups to express themselves and to act collectively to challenge inequities and to create more sustainable and just communities, ecologies, and nations as well as a shared planet. The chapters that follow bring these practices alive in their very particular historical and geopolitical contexts and in all their complexity. And through the diverse voices of the VIVA! partners.

See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 60.