



Main Street Project Civic Engagement Call 5/28/08
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**“Cultural Organizing for Social Justice: Using Arts and Culture in
Organizing and Community-Building**

Featuring
Caron Atlas, Center for Civic Participation
Carlton Turner, Alternate ROOTS

Caron Atlas

Hi everyone I'm going to kick it off and then Carlton is going to speak. I'm also eager to hear what's on your mind and know who I'm talking to-- so were trying to move it fairly quickly into a discussion and then maybe you can say who you are. I work for the Arts and Democracy project for the Center for Civic Participation and really what a lot of this work is about is figuring out how people can have more say in the decisions that have impacts on their lives. One of the ways that helps make that happens is art and cultures in more of a role of organizing in communities.

We are looking at both at how organizing groups can really bring more of a cultural perspective to the organizing that they do, and we are looking at arts group to figure out how they can work with organizers. When we talk about cultural organizing we find that its a useful phrase to talk about the work we are doing. We know that sometimes it works and is understandable and sometimes we have to give some context for it. We use it partly because a lot of groups we admire, who are organizing groups use it. What we really mean by 'Cultural Organizing' is that culture is at a center of an organizing process. That can mean organizing from 'who you are.' And I really see amalia as a model of that-- that the organizing she does is really imbedded in people's identities and what they really hold near and dear to them. And we also see it as a set of skills and approaches that can be learned, and methodologies. Just to use Carlton's organization Alternate Roots as an example of that--Roots has developed a number of methods and approaches. How do you develop equitable partnerships between artists and communities? How do you do a power analysis so that you are understanding the context that you're working in? And what are forms of discussion like storytelling that enable there to be more of a level playing field when you are trying to get people to talk often across difference?

We also recognize cultural organizing is something that has to have a purpose to it. There is cultural organizing that plays on peoples worst fears and intolerances--that is not what we are interested in. We are interested in the form of cultural organizing that is connected to a progressive analysis and agenda. So I think to talk a little bit more about that, we really see arts and culture as being integrally linked to community and as part of a greater whole and this is not in any way part of an elitist view of arts that exclude people. We are looking for work

that is based in self-determination. That the people most impacted by the change have to be an integral part of the decision-making about it. That we are looking for how arts and culture can be tied to social movements and systemic change. That it's not the sort of activism that is marginal to what communities are doing. And, that we are really interested in this work going deep and addressing difficult problems.

And often it is a way to bring up topics that people don't want to talk about. I wanted to emphasize that because I recently was talking to a group of organizers and people involved in policy change about cultural organizing and was challenged because I was talking about culture and community a lot without really talking about what I meant about them and was challenged by someone saying to me 'those seem like euphemisms to me to avoid dealing with race and class.' That is not at all the intention of our work that it is very much about dealing with race and class and other things that are often not surfaced so we are not trying to use these words to avoid these topics.

I wanted to give a little bit more background and a couple of examples. I think one of the reasons that we are combining culture and organizing can be effective because it is asset based that it is drawn on the wealth of the communities instead of just focusing on the problems and looking at how communities can solve their own problems. That, as I mentioned earlier, it is about recognizing what people hold the closest to them the things that people really care about like their culture and identity. That images and stories have a great power in peoples lives but are often excluded as part of organizing. That we really want to use the power of stories and images. That a lot of folks that are organizing in rural communities it may be the same people showing up at the meetings all of the time it may be a way to broadening the participation and including the people who have felt excluded. And finally I think this work can break down fear and humanize polarized issues.

I'm going to give you a couple of examples that tie to the last thing that I said and tie to my work in Appalachia in Appalshop and another example from Texas. In Appalshop which is a media art center in Appalachia in the coalfields one of the things in that community that prisons are being as seen as the gross economy and a number of prisons are moving into that area? The people in the prisons are often people from color from cities where as the people who are the guards are white working class people from the local community. Thousand Kites was initiated when Appalshop's radio station realized that most of their audience were the inmates at the prison and that the radio show provided a very easy medium for a conversation with folks to bridge a gap that exists in the community between the prisoners and their families and the people in the community.

That grew into a much larger project working in a number of different mediums that started local and now has grown into a national conversation about criminal justice issues. But again it started out using in an innovative way radio call in shows and that extended into theatre and music which Carlton is part of and to have a kind of dialogue about whether this is in fact prisons are what people want in their communities and want as their community to have as their identity. And also about human rights issues in the prisons that had not been communicated more broadly. Second example is a play called higher ground that was done at a community center, Appalachian center. This again had a cast of 75 people from 2 – 90 years old was a way to bring people in this case across class to talk about an issue prescription drug abuse that was a taboo topic in the community to talk about even though it was rampant. Through the process of creating a community play and then performing it in a

number of contexts including context with policy makers they were able to have this conversation in a pretty frank and forthright matter.

And finally the last example that I want to bring up is the LLano Grande Center that is in Edcouch Texas that is a really innovative education center that has a view of education that is culturally based and all about engaging students in civic participation. Again they base their organizing in the culture of the area and provide all sorts of opportunities for the students to move forward issues in the community that the adults have not been able to do and often times the students are more effective at. And that is everything to getting bond issues through to getting money to the school, which is very poor, holding elective, issues accountable which is a big issue to getting a park restored. I'm going to stop there and I'm going to hand it over to Carlton. I also have resources and websites I can offer later on.

Carlton Turner

I'm glad to be here, my name is Carlton Turner from Raymond Mississippi; I do a lot of work with Caron Atlas as well as amalia anderson who has been doing some conversations around cultural organizing with the Center of Civic Participation. I'm an artist as read in my bio I work with my brother we have a group called Mugabee, which stand which stands for (Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction). We operate out of a place where we use art and culture as a way to help people in communities to activate their imaginations. I think as cultural workers as organizers we are very reactive we build most of our platforms out of combating something that has already been created to go against our communities. We want to think more holistically about creating and envisioning the type of future we want to have for our communities and begin to build from that base.

Art and culture is one of the things that really activate the imagination allows people to have space to get outside of the box, the reality they are living from day to day to imagine what it would be like if it would be the world they wanted their children grow up in or their grandchildren or they wanted to live in themselves so they can begin to create that. I think we operate from a place where not understanding the power of our minds the realization that we have to think a thought first before it can manifest itself in the world. To help people activate and understand to move from a place where they can be reactionary to a place where they can uplift those things where you want to see the values, the core values in your communities that you want to see uplifted and carry on to the next generation.

We do this in many projects we work with. Caron mentioned the Thousand Kites piece that we worked with for the last couple of years with the folks from Appalshop and the Roadside Theatre. We are working on a piece now that is called 'the race piece' it's just a working title. We are working with a couple of different theatre companies--one called Mondo Bizzaro which is our primary partner out of New Orleans and Jim Buck Productions out of New Orleans as well as Roadside Theatre out of Appalachia. Basically what we are doing with this piece is exploring conversation around stories that have been transforming people's ideas in view of race and the destruction of stereotypes. We are going to operate and create a series of performing art projects based on the transforming stories so not so much based on the stereotypes themselves or based on the problems that we see and illuminate in our communities but really based on what are those transformative instances in your life what of those things that have happened to you that have deconstructed a stereotype that you held or something that you viewed or some racial issue that you have struggled with. What are some of the things that have helped you move past those.

We are going to build this project over the course of the next two years doing conversations and interviews across the countries in different communities with people of all ethnic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, class backgrounds, education backgrounds and just really look at the issue of race and what have been those things that have transformed their views on the stereo types. We just finished a piece on uprooting the Katrina project which was basically like a two year long piece that was done by artists around the gulf coast that was done around the struggles since Hurricane Katrina. Part of the piece and in creating it was a desire to just talk about all these issues that have come up and all the bad things that are going on in New Orleans because of Katrina. What we realized is that the first thing we have to do is to go and remember New Orleans as it was and remember the gulf coast as it was before the storm hit and think about the values that the people in the community were built on. And how can we illuminate that and carry that so as this piece tours from place to place those are the things that people will really see as the connecting points and begin to hold those things up and rally around and those begin to organize and then to get back in touch with what's happening on the ground in these affected areas so that people can get connected back to the work that is happening to rebuild their communities but not from a place from being reactive to the issues that are happening but to be proactive in promoting the things that you want to see. That is the way that we want to view and the way we have been working our projects and the different things we've been doing and about envisioning a better world.

You know the United States Social Forum in Atlanta last summer the model for another world is possible another US is necessary so we have to look at it as our own backyard and what can we do about building our communities around these values and really uphold these values. And I'm not talking about community from the non-profit buzzword that doesn't really have any value to it unless you define what community you are talking about. The communities we are talking about are those people who see a need for change and want to identify ways in which ways they can transform their lives and transform their own spaces to reflect those changes. I don't want to talk a whole lot but those are a few of the things that we are doing and we continue to build work and continue to work with communities. Before I go I want to say the work that we do is really grounded in a place making sure that the work really rests within the community and trying to keep it from where its all about the art or all about the performance because the performance and the art is just a vehicle to see and have some real progressive and sustainable social change. So we use the art as a vehicle to address the issues and move forward and build the community that we want to see. I just wanted to say that the work is grounded in community. I'm done want to move into the portion where people asks questions.