CULTURESTRIKE: IN THE HEART OF ARIZONA

by Elizabeth Mendez Berry

22 WRITERS, 16 VISUAL ARTISTS, 2 MUSICIANS, 7 THEATER MAKERS, 2 FILMMAKERS, & 3 COMEDIANS VISIT ARIZONA ON A PRO-MIGRANT ARTIST DELEGATION

INVESTING IN ARTISTS TO LEAD AND CREATE CHANGE
About the Organizations who made this possible:

THE CULTURE GROUP

The Culture Group (TCG), a collaboration of social change experts and creative producers, joined together to advance progressive change through expansive, strategic and values-driven cultural organizing. TCG identifies, studies and deploys effective models for increasing the creative industries’ and individuals’ participation in the progressive movement. Culture is the realm of ideas, images, and stories; it is where people make sense of the world, where they find meaning and forge community. History shows that when the culture changes, politics follows. TGC believes that the culture can and must be shifted to build public will for progressive values, ideas, and policies.

APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER

The Applied Research Center (ARC) is a racial justice think tank and home for media and activism. ARC is built on rigorous research and creative use of new technology. Our goal is to popularize the need for racial justice and prepare people to fight for it. By telling the stories of everyday people, ARC is a voice for unity and fairness in the structures that affect our lives.

CULTURESTRIKE

CultureStrike is an artist-led initiative whose mission is to cultivate innovative and urgent collaborations between artists, writers, musicians, and other cultural workers to shift the national imagination on immigration. CultureStrike possesses special access to high-cultural artists as well as on-the-ground connections with organizations fighting the immigration battle in real time. Responsive to what’s happening in the moment, the model begins with raising the consciousness of key artists, so their cultural production will inspire others.

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Every weekday in Tucson’s DeConcini courthouse, it takes about 37 seconds to deport an immigrant. Dozens of undocumented people—many of whom have made long journeys across thousands of miles—are sentenced *en masse* through Operation Streamline, a controversial federal initiative of the U.S. Border Patrol.

The program has led to a threefold increase in criminal prosecutions of minor immigration offenses in border towns like Tucson. It’s part of the reason that President Barack Obama has been able to deport 1.1 million people, more than any American leader since Eisenhower.

On Monday, September 12, 2011, federal magistrate judge Jennifer Guerin Zipps, a blonde, middle-aged woman, conducted the trials of 13 people simultaneously. In eight minutes, they all pled guilty, and the next group stepped up to the microphones at the front of a spotless courtroom.

Dozens of others, mostly men, awaited their fate on wooden benches, as if at church. They were all shackled together, and the sound of their chains as they shifted in their seats clattered around the courtroom. The smell of body odor wafted through the air.

The magistrate went down the line. “Mr. Martínez, do you understand the charges against you?” Then she waited as interpreters repeated the question in Spanish into his black plastic headphones.
“Si,” he replied.

“Mr. Chávez, do you understand the charges against you?”

“Si.”

Opposite the defendants sat members of the CultureStrike delegation, a group of more than 50 artists, writers, filmmakers and comedians from around the country. Organizers had invited the illustrious group—which included a National Book Award winner, an artist whose work hangs in New York’s MOMA museum, and at least one person who’s seen his own FBI file—to meet in Tucson. The goal was to offer them a crash course in the border crisis and ignite their creativity.

“Our work is premised on the belief that culture, as the realm of ideas, images and stories, is where people make sense of the world, find meaning and forge community,” reads the group’s mission statement. “Cultural change precedes political change.”

For many of the delegates, the trip offered a shocking glimpse at business as usual. “It was tragic theater. The border agents looked like they were bored out of their minds. They put on black latex gloves before touching the boys,” said writer Jessica Hagedorn, whose latest book, Toxicology, is haunted by the ghost of an undocumented woman. “I zeroed in on the kid who was the only one who said no. When Hector López said no, tears came to my eyes. He was so small and young and gaunt. I thought there was this gleam of hope in his eye.

At dinner that night, members of the delegation discussed the scene. “It reminded me of modern day slavery, seeing young men in shackles and chains, with no rights at all,” said Emory Douglas, an acclaimed movement artist and the former Minister of Culture of the Black Panther Party.

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day slavery, seeing young men in shackles and chains, with no rights at all,” said Emory Douglas, an acclaimed movement artist and the former Minister of Culture of the Black Panther Party. “I didn’t know it was going to have that type of impact.”

In Arizona, 83% of senior citizens are white, compared with 43% of children, the largest racial generation gap in the country. White retirees from the North—an infrequently demonized wave of migrants–have been the most supportive demographic of the state’s Tea Party takeover.

Previously part of Mexico and the last of the contiguous American states to join the union in 1912, Arizona has emerged as a laboratory for reactionary immigration policy. Kat Rodríguez of the human rights group Derechos Humanos told the delegation, “Arizona is the opposite of Vegas; what happens in Arizona doesn’t stay in Arizona.”

In Arizona, anti-immigrant demagoguery has taken the form of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio’s disturbing, aggressive policing and humiliating treatment of undocumented prisoners. It has turned up in the government attacks on the Tucson Unified School District’s Mexican American Studies program. And it is reflected in the extremist legislative proposals, such as bills to remove citizenship from U.S. born children of undocumented parents.

In 2010, state lawmakers passed SB 1070, a bill that requires police officers to check a person’s immigration status while enforcing other laws; copycat legislation has passed in Georgia and Alabama. Similarly harsh anti-immigrant measures are now on the books in Utah and Indiana.

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to Arizona’s SB 1070 in the spring of 2010, and their support helped the resistance to the draconian law reverberate around the country and the world. Musician and activist Zack de la Rocha asked Arizona organizations how he could support them. Their response? “Join the boycott.”

So on May 25, 2010, de la Rocha announced that a coalition called the Sound Strike, including Los Tigres del Norte, Kanye West, Calle 13, Michael Moore and Sonic Youth, was boycotting Arizona. Through a series of concerts, Sound Strike generated more than $400,000 for activists on the ground.

On July 13, 2010, Ken Chen and Andrew Hsiao of the Asian American Writers Workshop released a letter pledging to honor the boycott of Arizona. As a result of their efforts, that letter was signed by over 100 authors, including Junot Diaz, Naomi Klein and Salman Rushdie. Meanwhile, visual artists like Ernesto Yerena, Jesus Barraza, Melanie Cervantes, César Maxit and Favianna Rodriguez were producing images that stood up to SB1070, many as part of a “creative resistance” coalition called Alto Arizona.

The artists’ work demonstrated their unique capacity to advance alternative narratives, to tell
compelling stories, and to perch outside an often-paralyzed political system. Even as they responded to a specific piece of legislation, they imagined another world with an alternate approach to the issue of migration, one premised on dignity, inclusion and compassion. Their impact demonstrated culture workers’ capacity to win over hearts and minds, and to invigorate movements.

As Jeff Chang and Brian Komar argued in the American Prospect: “Culture […] is where people make sense of the world, where ideas are introduced, values are inculcated, and emotions are attached to concrete change. Cultural change is often the dress rehearsal for political change. Or put in another way, political change is the final manifestation of cultural shifts that have already occurred.”

Artists have long been at the vanguard of social change. Still, misgivings and missteps have hampered many potential partnerships. Some activists worry that creative types will never attain a nuanced understanding of an issue, that their work will not accurately represent it or could even have negative consequences on the ground. Meanwhile, some artists feel like activists take them for granted or exploit their skills without offering opportunities for genuine engagement.

“Artists need to be a valued, strategic partner in movement work,” said Favianna Rodriguez, a co-founder of Presente.org and a member of the Culture Group along with Chang and Komar. “While I had been going to Arizona, I felt that there was limited thinking of how artists could get supported for their work on an ongoing basis. So even though a lot of my friends and myself were making a lot of artwork, I didn’t see it being used strategically.” She and other artists would design posters, and then see stacks of
them at activist organizations, unused.

Despite such challenges, Chang and Komar believe collaboration is essential: “Until progressives make culture an integral and intentional part of their theory of change, they will not be able to compete effectively against conservatives,” they write.

Rodriguez recalls meeting with Chang, as well as Chen and Hsiao of the Asian American Writers Workshop. “We said, ‘What if we become the facilitator of that relationship [between artists and activists]?’ We didn’t want to tell the artists what to create; we wanted to inspire them, and trust that many of them would create work that could grow the movement.”

Along with Javier González of the Sound Strike, the group began developing the idea of a delegation to Arizona. They were mindful of the legitimate concerns of many Arizona activists, who had been burned by national organizations that exploited SB 1070 to fundraise but had done little for the state since. “Because Arizona is such a hotbed of activism, there’s a fear that artists will parachute in and do things that are not helpful,” said Rodríguez.

At the invitation of Alfredo Gutiérrez, a legendary Arizona politician and community organizer, they visited Arizona in November 2010 and met with artists and the primary pro-migrant organizations in the state. As the delegation concretized, the organizers relied on guidance from Arizona-based activists like Carlos García of Puente and Kat Rodríguez of Derechos Humanos, local artists like the poet Logan Phillips, the journalist Jeff Biggers and, crucially, Roberto Bedoya of the Tucson Pima County Arts Council, who served as the delegation’s de facto host in Tucson. Air Traffic Control, a non-profit founded by Erin Potts that “provides strategy and support for musicians creating change”, put on a smaller delegation in Tucson in the late spring, providing a model and laying groundwork for the Culture Strike delegation.

After months of planning, on September 11, 2011, the tenth anniversary of the tragedy that transformed the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service into the Department of Homeland Security, the delegates arrived in Tucson. Among this multigenerational, multiracial group were photographers, a DJ, creative provocateurs, comedians, filmmakers, visual artists, journalists and novelists, a Living Treasure...
of Hawai‘i, propagandists and gallery artists.

Some, like the writer Roberto Lovato, had a long history of engagement with the issue of immigration; others were just learning about it. Some were Arizonans—there was a member of the Diné nation, which long precedes the existence of both the state and the United States—and others came from around the country. There were citizens, green card holders and undocumented immigrants in the group.

“In the selection process, we made sure to include artists with a broad and diverse set of mediums and approaches to their work,” said Rodríguez. “We had people like César Maxit, who works directly with migrant rights groups, and people like El Mac, an acclaimed street artist who’s interested in immigration but hasn’t found a way to incorporate it into his work. Our goal was to have a team of people who would inspire each other.”

A pre-retreat survey indicated that many of the delegates felt confident in their knowledge about immigration, but were hoping to deepen their understanding of the issue. “I didn’t come here knowing a whole lot. I want to learn how to become a better ally,” said the writer dream hampton, who co-authored the rapper Jay-Z’s bestselling autobiography, *Decoded.*

Over the next four days, the group spent most of its time listening, learning and brainstorming. The organizers introduced the delegates to captivating characters, many of whom have played starring roles in the long-running local tragedy that is the border. Isabel García, co-chair of Derechos Humanos and director of the Pima County Legal Defender’s Office, gave an impassioned presentation on the first day that offered context. “NAFTA created 14 billionaires in Mexico and displaced six million Mexican agricultural workers,” she said, referring to the North American Free Trade Agreement. “And the public asks why Mexicans are here.” García encouraged the delegates to take on immigration: “The arts reach
people in fundamental ways,” she said.

A few days later, Phoenix legislator Mary Rose Wilcox, who has stood up to the architects of anti-migrant policy, spoke of the intimidation she faced as a result. Along with people like Carlos García and Alfredo Gutiérrez, these women provided a feel for the texture of the area, as well as the stakes for anyone who speaks up in the current political climate. García has received death threats. Wilcox has been shot.

Delegates hit some of the obvious pro-migrant photo opps: they went to the border fence and dangled their arms through the thick metal bars; they visited Sheriff Joe Arpaio’s tent city, where they couldn’t see much but the vacancy sign, but Javier González advised them to tell the guards, “I’m just looking for my cousin.” They crossed an unguarded border into Nogales, Mexico, where they met a handsome Jesuit priest who provides
During the two-hour drive back from the border through the desert, the delegation’s bus hit three checkpoints. As Kat Rodriguez, who led the border tour, pointed out, more than 50 percent of border patrol officers are Latino. “Growing up in South San Diego, in a Mexican area, almost everybody just out of high school joins up,” said the artist Jesus Barraza.

This delegation of world-class artists and writers was not immune to worries about the Border Patrol. Several members chose not to participate in the border crossing. Instead, they visited Tucson’s Medical Examiner’s office, which attends to the human casualties of U.S. immigration and border policy.

In 1994, as NAFTA encouraged the unfettered flow of goods between Mexico and the United States, President Clinton took steps to restrict the flow of people. He implemented a “prevention through deterrence” strategy that shut down traditional routes into the country and funneled migrants into ever more dangerous areas of the desert, particularly Arizona, where scorching heat poses the greatest threat.

After NAFTA, more migrants than ever began streaming north, particularly from the south of Mexico, where subsidized U.S. corn had undercut local farmers and devastated the rural economy. Many of those migrants paid the highest price. As a result of Clinton’s funnel strategy, the death toll along the border exploded, with some 5000 killed since 1994. In Arizona, where it’s illegal to leave a dog without adequate water, people have been convicted for placing water in the desert for migrants.
At the examiner’s office, delegates learned that people’s bodies could be mummified in the desert in as few as six days. Many of the human remains lack identification, so examiners look for identifying tattoos or dental work, but cadavers can remain unclaimed for years at the office. The medical examiner told them of the summer of 2010, when they had accumulated so many bodies they had to lease a portable freezer.

Delegates had some time to debrief after these visits—though many would have preferred more—and several developed ideas for collaborations during formal brainstorming sessions, while riding the bus together, over dinner and during after hours gatherings on the hotel patio. The artist Jesus Barraza plans to develop a series of border prints, with images of the wall and Operation Streamline. Ron Wilkins, an author and activist who has written a book about the history of the relationship between African Americans and Mexicans, enlisted the artist Julio Salgado to illustrate it. Over dinner at the Mercado San Agustín, Ernesto Yerena and Salgado shared art-making strategies.

The Culture Strike organizers also facilitated opportunities for exchange with community members, often at the request of Tucson groups. Several delegates read poetry and prose at a packed public reading. Others offered workshops in stenciling, storytelling and slam poetry for local residents.

The celebrated young writer Daniel Alarcón led a Spanish-language interview workshop with the women organizers from Derechos Humanos. In it, the women shared losses, memories and fears. One undocumented woman broke down as she revealed her ever-present anxiety of being discovered. Alarcón said, “It was like there was all this stress just below the surface, and they were looking for an opportunity to let it out.”

There were several structured options to explore Tucson with fellow delegates as guides: a meeting with filmmaker Jason Aragón to talk about his Copwatch program; a visit to a local mission on Tohono O’odham land with the street-artist El Mac; and a guided tour of South Tucson with journalist and historian Jeff Biggers. As members of the group walked through the rapidly gentrifying area of Barrio Viejo, they learned that the city’s current educational conflicts have been brewing for decades.

Though the first public school in Tucson was funded and founded by the Mexican Estevan Ochoa in the 19th century, community leader Salomón Baldenegro, Sr. told of attending an Americanization course called “1 C” when he
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was a child—until 1965, all Mexican American children had to take it, even those whose families had been in the area for centuries. Children were paddled for speaking Spanish. Those that had an accent were held back.

Today’s equivalent: the campaign to eliminate Chicano Studies in Tucson public schools. Members of the student group UNIDOS (United Nondiscriminatory Individuals Demanding Our Studies) spoke with the delegation about their strategies to defend the program, which included chaining themselves to the dais at a school district meeting (funds to buy the shackles were provided by the Sound Strike).

For the Diné poet, Sherwin Bitsui, who lived in Tucson for ten years, their struggle resonates. “It’s very personal for me. I was a visiting writer at the Tucson Unified School District, I taught an African-American lit class and a Native American lit class,” he said. “I was inspired to pursue writing because of other writers from my community. If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t have seen a reflection of myself in the world of letters. These are witnesses to our own experiences.”

The idea of bearing witness to the people and policies of Arizona was a recurring theme. Some delegates also found themselves and their own histories during the trip. “I know more what my mother and father went through,” said acclaimed author Maxine Hong-Kingston. “My father traveled from China to Cuba, and he stowed away from Cuba to New York and got caught and sent back twice. The third time he made it. Then 15 years later he was gambling and he won his wife’s papers. It was a real visa, but it was for someone else’s wife, so my mother came.”

Others felt their own distance from the issues acutely. “This experience has made me hyper

Mural at the Kino Border Initiative. Photo by Jesus Barraza.
aware of my own insulation from this suffering every day,” said Colette Gaitier, a multimedia artist and professor. “It’s cognitive dissonance; what’s the tipping point where we realize this is intolerable and this is our national policy?”

The delegates moved quickly from alarm to action. Throughout the trip, many of them communicated with their Twitter and Facebook communities, sharing anecdotes and photos. The Laughter Against the Machine team—comedians Kamau Bell, Janine Brito and Nato Green—were the first to leave. The next stop on their tour was Chicago, where they planned to berate the locals. “I’m glad we’re going to the Midwest now,” said Nato Green. “I’m wondering what you’re doing with your white people here because they’re moving to Arizona and fucking it up!”

Many delegates hoped the Culture Strike experience would help them better articulate their concerns over immigration. “I’ve been wanting to deal with the current situation more explicitly in my work, since it’s been getting worse and worse, and this may help facilitate that,” said the artist El Mac, who splits his time between Phoenix and Los Angeles. “I think creatives do have a lot of power in the way that we help shape our culture. We can educate, inform and influence.”

And so they went home brimming with ideas. Teju Cole soon returned to Arizona to begin individual writing projects. Javier González and DJ Sloe Poke are working on a “Boycott Hate” mixtape. A group of CultureStrikers recently went to Blue Mountain Retreat Center in the Adirondacks, New York to advance new projects and make plans about CultureStrike’s future.

The next phase, organizers say, will include giving out micro-grants from what they are calling their Catalyst Fund, to jump-start projects that the members want to develop. The organization also hopes to open new distribution channels for the work, including the expansion of a website (www.wordstrike.net, www.culturestrike.net), and the implementation of an op-ed strategy and a nationwide poster project.

More than anything, the delegates felt that the trip opened their eyes. “I lived here for ten years, and you’re never fully confronted. It’s ever-present but abstract,” said Bitsui. “I’m glad to have witnessed this. I want to develop ways to communicate it back to my community. The stories need to migrate.”