

Liberation Dreams: Popular Education in the Immigrant Rights Movement

In the pages that follow, Diana Pei Wu reflects on the role of popular education in her own organizing with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and we share excerpts from interviews she conducted with immigrant rights activists from around the country. Longer versions are available online at www.urbanhabitat.org/lrpe/lliberation.

By Diana Pei Wu

Like many children of immigrants, cultural work became an expression of who I am. My parents introduced me to Chinese visual arts and folkloric dance, providing an important learning opportunity using all my senses and whole body. I maintain this approach in the ways that I design and run workshop trainings and meetings. Likewise, continuing practice as a capoeirista has helped me challenge my fears of singing in public and my parents' version of appropriate femininity and gender expression. Capoeira is a body-learning of whole personhood that I bring to my work as a popular educator and movement builder. As Kayse Jama from the Center for Intercultural Organizing reflects (see page 52), participatory, celebratory learning and organizing is as natural as breathing for many immigrant and refugee communities: we struggle and thrive because our ancestors survived.

When I was 17, I worked as a children's summer camp counselor at the local nature center. In that job, I learned a key component of popular education: the critical importance of creating situations where everyone did something together and had the space to reflect on and share what they learned. In other words, popular education creates experiences that facilitate a particular type of learning within a liberating project, where one is not alone and solidarity drives the relationship. (See, for example, Joyti Chand of the South Asian Network's account on page 46.)

Later, as a field ecologist, I learned to appreciate and see small changes that other people wouldn't notice, like the slower rhythms of seasons changing and trees growing. That attention to detail and the recognition that deep change is a long, slow process is also at the core of popular education: our work needs to focus on more than short-term policy victories and campaign wins. It is about the minute shifts in people's attitudes, taking the time to honor what is already present, in order to ground our work, and taking time to establish common visions and directions that affirm dignity, justice, and life.

Building a Race and Immigration Dialogue in the Global Era

In the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Right's Education and Capacity Building Program, we create spaces for education in the immigrant and refugee rights movement, where community leaders and members can begin to unlearn, heal from, and educate against the racism and oppression that we have learned in our places of origin, and from mainstream society. For instance, a common group agreement in popular education spaces is, "oppression exists: not in our space." And we work to collectivize the visions for a just society that honors the histories of struggle here in the United States and in our places of origin.

We have also worked with community organizers and leaders from indigenous, African American, and civil rights groups to build bridges between communities, challenge stereotypes, and build broader movements for economic and social justice. This was one of the origins of the BRIDGE Project (Building a Race and Immigration Dialogue in a Global Economy.) We understand that a key aspect of the oppression and domination of our communities is based on a global

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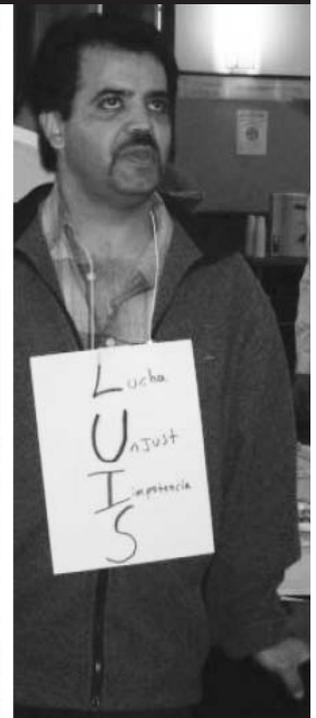
economic and political elite that controls access to resources, development, and movement. They promote the rapid flow of money and goods while increasingly blocking the movement of people as anything but labor—treating them as disposable appendages of the economy, and not as bodies, hearts, or spirits.

In the BRIDGE curriculum we honor the specific experience of people-in-place: that the experience of Colombian students growing up in the South will be different from that of a young Somali woman in Portland, and that the relationships between people of African descent in the border region will be different from those of Indigenous people's communities in California. The tools in the curriculum are designed to be living tools, modified and shaped to match the needs and experiences of different communities.

The BRIDGE curriculum emerged from the immigrant rights movement at a time when the founders of organizations like the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights were often the only people of color and the only people without advanced degrees in a sphere dominated by professional white men. Though people of color and poor people are sometimes those professionals now, the challenges for grassroots leaders and communities to have their voices heard have not changed.

Many of the factors that lead people to migrate—war, civil strife, ecological destruction, poverty, genocide—are rooted in the political and economic policies of a global elite. The BRIDGE curriculum recognizes this and asserts that popular political education must strive to reveal and critically address those root causes of migration.

Through the BRIDGE curriculum and our popular education work, we affirm that we need to stay grounded in our values and to value our experiences as knowledge. Doing this allows members of our communities to interact in the official places of power with a strong backing and grounded in a community-based vision. Just as importantly, being our whole selves in official spaces challenges the dominant society's definitions of legitimacy and affirms our humanity in spaces designed to strip us of the very aspects of ourselves that have survived the last 500



years of colonization, racism, displacement, and fragmentation. Thus, leadership is not necessarily taken from those who have the most education, who speak English the best, and who are comfortable doing public speaking.

Some of the groundbreaking work in the BRIDGE curriculum is working with immigrant and refugee community leaders to see the implications of a gender and sexuality analysis for our organizing work. Our work must always be for inclusion, equality, and against homophobia, sexism and racism, helping us envision our work together as a work in progress. This creates a new type of generosity for when we make mistakes and the courage to struggle to change and grow together.

Effecting this transformation means lifting up leadership that is facilitative, cooperative, and collective. We must be committed to developing leaders who will grow a movement that creates more leaders, and take that leadership from below and work to orient our communities towards the left. This is a radically different vision of leadership from dominant trends among community organizing.

My colleagues who work in the rural South and the rural Northwest remind me that there is a great need for anti-racist, anti-oppression, liberatory popular education among white people. As Kayse Jama tells it, his work with white people was, in some ways, a precondition for the Center for Intercultural Organizing to be able to begin the work

Photos: Participants at the 3rd National Immigrant and Refugee Rights Training Institute.

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of community building and development among immigrant and refugee communities; it helped non-immigrant allies to learn to step back and be supportive without taking over. This type of work and insight is applicable to all work against racism in progressive movements for justice and dignity.

The Need for Dreaming

A liberatory practice is a collective endeavor of dream-making and dream-implementing, something which our critical abilities often do not engage without becoming uncomfortable. Our collective process is about sharing stories and developing understanding, deep listening, loving, and healing. It takes more than one: it is all of us helping, supporting, challenging, and loving each other as our whole selves.

To follow the words of Audre Lorde, “We must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply.”¹ Popular education is part of a set of tools and actions that help us create and articulate our dreams together. The heretical part may cause great discomfort because our dreams are a rejection of the seductive paths laid out by the dominator’s dream. Liberation dreams create their own desires, paths, and trajectories for the future. We have those roads to make and walk, together. I’ll see you there, on those roads, in those dreams, in our whole bodies and whole selves, and in our own time. ■

1. Lorde, Audre. 1984. “Poetry is not a Luxury” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (Triangle Press. New York, New York, 1984) 38-39.

Resources

National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

310 8th Street, Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94607
(510) 465-1984
www.nnirr.org

Center for Intercultural Organizing

2808 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Suite 13
Portland, OR 97212
(503) 287-4117
www.interculturalorganizing.org

Colectivo Flatlander

9300 South IH 35, Suite A-500 #235
Austin, TX 78755
(512) 945-7576
www.colectivoflatlander.org

Highlander Center

1959 Highlander Way
New Market, TN 37820
(865) 933-3443
www.highlandercenter.org

South Asian Network

18173 Pioneer Blvd., Suite I, 2nd Floor
Artesia, CA 90701
(562) 403-0488
www.southasiannetwork.org

Diana Pei Wu is program director of education and capacity building at the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights in Oakland, California. Diana’s Ph.D dissertation, Healing and Dreaming as Radical Decolonial Practice, celebrates organizing as healing, and healing as decolonizing. She celebrates life through capoeira, salsa, and samba.

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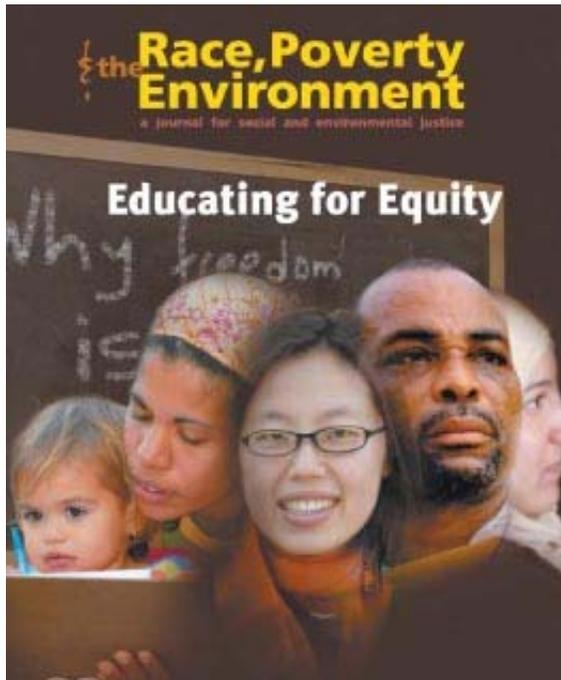
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