

Spring 2020

Amplifying Community Voices through Public Art

Michelle Angela Oriz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Oriz, Michelle Angela. "Amplifying Community Voices through Public Art." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020. pp. 25-37. doi:10.25148/14.2.009034.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Amplifying Community Voices through Public Art

Michelle Angela Ortiz

For the past twenty years I've been utilizing public art and public spaces to create platforms for social change. I am a child of immigrants, a woman of color, a mother, a product of two people that experienced extreme poverty that led them to immigrate to this country. It is within this context that I see my work as an artist as cultural currency that I use to invest back into the communities I am connected to and to reflect what we contribute to our society.

I understood early on that stories are powerful, especially within the context that they are told or represented. When I visited Colombia for the first time at age seven, I could see the spiritual richness of the people that shined brighter than the poverty that surrounded them.

The children with no shoes and holes in their clothes were the very same children that became my friends and who had the desire and willingness to learn. These children were reflections of who my parents once were. I carry their experiences and struggles with me, I see myself and my family reflected in the many communities that I work with. I also understand that when I rise, they rise with me.

These personal experiences inform my creative process, which is activated through facilitating dialogues, identifying themes, translating themes into visual representations, and doing this with integrity and respect with the community.

“Aquí y Allá” Transnational Mural in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In 2012, I created the “Aquí y Allá” mural project (See Figure 1) that connected eight teens in Philadelphia and eight teens in Juarez and Chihuahua City in Mexico—cities that are hours away from El Paso, Texas.

Seeing that there was a need to provide a space for youth to share how immigration has impacted them and their families, I created the curriculum and mural project as an outlet for the youth to speak freely, with no judgment, of their experiences:

- of being reunited with their parents after not seeing them for years and re-establishing their relationships;
- navigating a new school, neighborhood, and city;
- and processing the feelings of loss and otherness.

Each student in Philly and Mexico created their panels sharing their stories and experiences of immigrating. All of the panels were made by the youth in Juarez and Chihuahua and shipped to Philadelphia to be installed permanently in South Philadelphia, where there is still a growing Mexican and Central American population.



Figure 1

“Construyendo Puentes de Igualdad” Mural in Buenos Aires, Argentina

As a United States Cultural Envoy, I traveled to Buenos Aires, Argentina where I worked with Talleres Protejidos, a forty-year-old institution that provides outpatient treatment of psychosocial rehabilitation for people with severe mental illness. I facilitated creative sessions with therapists, patients, and administrators using writing and movement exercises that helped define their struggles with their mental health issues and the discrimination they experienced in their lives (See Figure 2).

“In the times of choosing a place, in times of change and losing lucidity, I find your soul full of light.” This was one of the many collective poems and conversations that informed the themes presented in the over-100’ mural created with the community (See Figure 3). In the sea of gray buildings in the community of Barracas in Buenos Aires, the mural stands as a beacon of light that represents their messages of hope in the midst of isolation and intolerance.



Figure 2



Figure 3

“De La Memoria Al Muro” Mural in Mexico City, Mexico

In 2015, I worked with the Indigenous Mazuahua and Otomi communities that migrated to Mexico City and have fought for twenty years for decent housing for their families. I worked with the communities in Mexico City and created two sixty-foot-tall murals in Chapultepec and Mesones in Mexico City (See Figure 4). The mural designs were inspired by objects, documents, memories, traditions, and oral stories told from the community members that form their collective identity. Doña Francisca witnessed every stage of migration. She is pictured at the top of the mural within the traditional embroidery patterns of their ancestors.



Figure 4

As we painted the mural, Otomi families were moving from the streets to their apartments.

Doña Francisca shared in our group conversations, “I don’t have to carry my life on my back anymore.” The mural represents indigenous communities living in the city to be seen, not as a memory in history books, but as a living thriving culture that deserves to be recognized, respected, and heard.

*“Journeys South: Different Paths, One Market”
Installation in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*



Figure 5

The 9th Street Market is one of the oldest outdoor markets in the United States. The Market continues to be a place where immigrant families, like my own, have worked to provide a better future for their children. This is my neighborhood. Through the “Journey South: Different Paths, One Market” project, I interviewed and created designs that illustrated the stories of different immigrant families that arrived one hundred years, forty, to ten years ago.

Using the existing hanging structure created by the vendors, I installed each awning at the participating fruit vendor’s stand. As you walk through the market you encounter the printed awnings with the vendors’ stories illuminated by the natural light. Along with the awnings, printed stickers were placed on the poles holding the

awnings. Each sticker included writings of the vendor's stories in English and the vendor's native language (Italian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Spanish).

Mary Messina is one of five children of Mary and Frank Messina, Italian immigrants from Sicily, Italy. Mary's father bought the house and the fruit stand. Her older brothers, Carmen and (Popeye) Tony—pictured in the awning—stayed at the store and helped their father. There was a time when her brother Tony did not want to work on the stand. Then he was drafted to the Korean war away from his family. Mary shared a letter that her brother wrote to her stating that he was finally coming home and making a promise to return and help them work at the stand (See Figure 5). Each story is part of the common thread of the immigration history in our city.

"Seguimos Caminando" Animated Projection in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

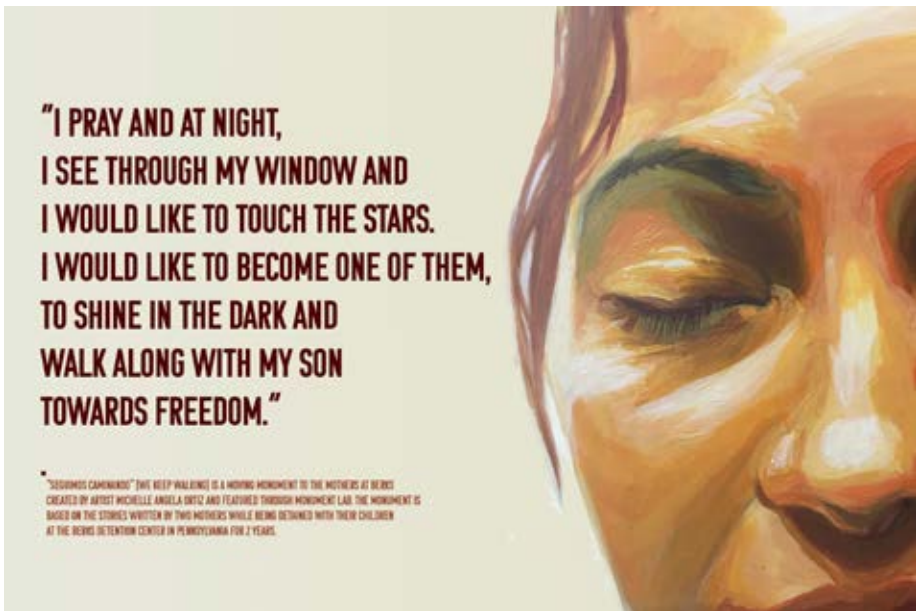


Figure 6

[“Seguimos Caminando”](#) is a moving monument on the gates of City Hall that brings to the forefront the stories written by detained undocumented mothers through a series of animated projections. For five months, I met with two mothers from Honduras and El Salvador that were detained for over six hundred days at the Berks County Residential Center, a family prison in Pennsylvania.

My visits were centered on their continued fight for freedom and reminding them of their strength, love for their children, and resilience in the midst of a place and system that constantly is devaluing their existence. Understanding that trauma

causes powerlessness, insecurity, stress, and fear, I asked the mothers to speak to these core questions: “What gives you strength in moments of darkness?”, “When is a moment that you felt the freest?”, “What is your wish for you and your child?” (See Figure 6).

It was through these conversations that the mothers wrote a combined story that shared their experiences in detention. When I was visiting the mothers at Berks, I was not allowed to leave them with any art supplies. After several visits, I found that I was only able to leave them with paper and pens.

The idea of creating the paper flowers came from these visits. It was also a tradition that I learned through my maternal grandmother, Maria Dionisia. Each of the mothers at Berks created ten to fifteen flowers that traveled outside of the confines of the Center. A total of 1,600 flowers with messages of freedom (including the flowers made by the mothers at Berks) were hand-dyed and assembled at the north gates of City Hall in late October.

“[Flores de Libertad](#)” became the installation of these flowers that were arranged to spell out the 10’x40’-word “Libertad” (Freedom/Liberty). This creative action was followed by a press conference led by the Shut Down Berks Coalition to put pressure on Governor Tom Wolf, who has the power to shut down the center and end family detention in Pennsylvania.

“Familias Separadas” Public Art Project

In response to the rise of deportations in 2013, I created my “[Familias Separadas](#)” (Separated Families) project, focusing on the stories of families living in Philadelphia and how they have been impacted by deportations (See Figure 7).



Figure 7

The main goal of the project was to shift the focus from statistics and numbers of deportations to seeing the fathers, mothers, and brothers that have been torn apart from their families. Partnering with community members from *Juntos*, a local immigrant rights organization in South Philadelphia, I conducted workshops and interviews showcasing stories of five families. Each story was depicted through temporary site-specific public art works in different locations in the city: City Hall, Love Park, 9th Street Market, 6th and Tasker, and the Immigration Customs Enforcement Building (ICE).

Maria's husband lived in Philadelphia and was deported. He attempted to cross the border again to be reunited with his family. He was caught by ICE in Texas, was incarcerated for three years in a jail in California, and was then deported back to Mexico. Maria continues to live in Philadelphia and has five children that she is taking care of. She speaks about the difficulty of making the decision to stay or leave to Mexico to be reunited with her husband.

The portrait of Maria and her daughter was placed on top of the Compass Rose by Edmund Bacon in the center of our city where north, south, east, and west meet (See Figure 8). In this context, her story is centered at the same level of importance as the William Penn statue looming over her.



Figure 8

Maria's story was installed blocks away from the Liberty Bell, the Declaration of Independence, and many monuments and symbols of justice and freedom. She is one of fifty thousand undocumented immigrants in our city fleeing their homelands due to violence and conflict, oftentimes conflict initiated by U.S. interests, or lack of economic security due to U.S. economic policies forced upon countries in Latin America.

At LOVE Park, where tourists take their selfies in front of the Robert Indiana LOVE sculpture, you find the story of Suyapa. Suyapa proudly wears this gold necklace on her chest. It is a memory of her oldest daughter that she carries with her. Suyapa left Honduras fleeing violence, crossed the border with her two youngest daughters, was detained in Texas, and after being in sanctuary for two years, she finally won her deportation case. In this artwork, Suyapa speaks about love and what happens to love when you leave or are forced to leave (See Figure 9).



Figure 9

This is the Immigrations Customs Enforcement building in Philadelphia (See Figure 10), which has jurisdiction in PA, DE, and NJ. In a recent report from Pro Publica, this ICE facility is the most aggressive in the country due to their high numbers of non-criminal arrests. This is the first point of detention.



Figure 10

On Monday, October 12th, 2015, on “Columbus Day,” I organized over thirty volunteers and undocumented families to place the words of Ana, an undocumented mother, in front of the ICE building.

Together we installed the 90’-long words, “[WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS, RISKING OUR LIVES, FOR OUR FAMILIES AND OUR FUTURE](#)”. These words were placed at the exit point where the detained family members are then transported to other prisons to process their deportation.

A high point in my career was this powerful moment when we gathered as ICE agents looked down at us; we stood together in front of this building that represents fear and, together in solidarity, became fearless.

In 2017, I began the second phase of my “Familias Separadas” project focused on the stories of fourteen families that were detained for more than two years at the Berks family prison.

While at Berks, the mothers organized labor and hunger strikes as they fought for their freedom. Ten families were deported back to their home country, returning to the violence they were fleeing, and four families were released, still fighting against their possible deportation and living through the trauma of being detained. The Berks family prison operates in violation of Federal and State law.

[The Shut Down Berks Coalition](#) is a group of organizations and individuals fighting to close the Berks family prison in Pennsylvania. Their most recent [petition](#) is to demand the release of the families at Berks and protect them from the COVID-19 risks that they face being incarcerated in confined spaces.

In November 2018, I unveiled a total of eight installations that included billboards, bus shelters, a permanent mural, and an 88'-long vinyl installation on the Capitol steps (See Figure 11). The installations begin as you enter the city of Harrisburg, towards the capitol steps, the capitol, then to Allison Hill, where the immigrant community lives. Each installation represents the words of the mothers and children detained at Berks.



Figure 11

After being detained for 651 days, Karen and her son were deported back to El Salvador, returning to the violence that they were originally fleeing from. I installed the portraits of Karen and her son on the capitol steps, where policy makers and the people in power that can shut down the Berks family prison can see their images everyday. My intention was to make her story and image so large that she cannot be ignored.

One of the eight installations included a 35' mural that was created as a symbol of hope for the community in Allison Hill, who continue to fight against poverty, violence, and the constant attacks of local and state police collaborating with ICE raids (See Figure 12).

This mural was unveiled as part of the statewide action against family detention that I co-organized with the Shut Down Berks Coalition. Over two hundred people from all over the state gathered at the capitol steps and then marched to the mural.



Figure 12

The mother pictured in the mural, Delmy, lost her life to a violent tragic event. Before her unexpected death, she and her son were able to witness all the people coming together to support them and to continue to fight for the families currently detained at Berks. I created a [thirty-minute documentary](#) that shares the testimonials of the mothers detained at Berks. Delmy's story lives on in the documentary and her words in the mural continue to serve as inspiration to the immigrant community in Allison Hill (See Figure 13).



Figure 13

In my practice I ask myself, how do I begin to shift power structures? How do I utilize my privilege, skills, and resources as a way of providing opportunities to others? How can I support others to have courage to share their stories, especially in spaces where they are not represented?

Stories are powerful, especially within the context that they are told or represented. My goal is to use my art as a way to record, reclaim, and elevate these stories that connect us to our humanity.

Author Bio

[Michelle Angela Ortiz](#) is a visual artist/ skilled muralist/ community arts educator who uses her art as a vehicle to represent people and communities whose histories are often lost or co-opted. Through community arts practices, painting, and public art installations, she creates a safe space for dialogue around some of the most profound issues communities and individuals may face. Her work tells stories using richly crafted and emotive imagery to claim and transform spaces into a visual affirmation that reveals the strength and spirit of the community. Ortiz is a 2018 Pew Fellow, a Rauschenberg Foundation Artist as Activist Fellow, a Kennedy Center Citizen Artist National Fellow, and a Santa Fe Art Institute Equal Justice Resident Artist. In 2016, she received the Americans for the Arts' Public Art Year in Review Award which honors outstanding public art projects in the nation.