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**Public Art and Marginalized Communities**

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**Abstract**

For historically marginalized communities, arts have a long history as a powerful way to read the world and speak back to it. In this essay, Christine Sleeter reflects on the significance of a piece of public art near her home in Monterey, California. Although not created by the Mexican farmworkers the piece represents, it opens up space for considering their humanity in the context of oppressive work conditions. It also prompts reflection on why the arts are essential to public education. The figures in the piece have particular significance because many students at California State University Monterey Bay are children of farmworkers. Although the arts have suffered tremendous cutbacks in the public schools, this essay reflects on projects that invite a deep level of intellectual engagement and action on issues that matter to young people, and that invite rather than silencing marginalized voices.

*Keywords:* Public art, activist art, community art

### Public Art and Marginalized Communities

I am thrilled to help inaugurate *Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts*. This new journal invites work that is not only about the arts, but also work that is art. Indeed, the arts are a potent form of literacy.

For historically marginalized communities, arts have a long history as a powerful way to both read the world and speak back to it. Baca (2001), for example, explains how murals in Los Angeles served as a medium through which oppressed peoples could occupy a public space, work that helped to “shape a movement toward identity and justice that reached a mass population” (p. 3). “Disobedience art” offers young people an open-ended way to engage with diverse social movements that speak to conditions of their lives (Kotin, et al, 2013). The arts may serve as *testimonio*, produced as a way of bringing communities into being (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001) and making public powerful counter-narratives of indignation toward unjust policies and affirmation of the humanity of those affected (Faltis, 2010).

In this essay, I reflect on the significance of a piece of public art near Monterey, California, where I live. I selected it because it moves me every time I drive past it. Although not created by the Mexican farmworkers the piece represents, it opens up space for considering their humanity in the context of oppressive work conditions. It also invites reflection on why the arts are essential to public education.



*Figure 1.* Pop-up murals by John Cerney.

Highway 68 between Monterey and Salinas offers expansive views of the rich agricultural fields at the mouth of the Salinas River Valley, and of public art placed there. For a couple of decades, Salinas artist John Cerney has been creating giant pop-up cut-outs of people from all over the county, including those who work the fields of the Salinas River Valley. The two farmworkers in this photo represent people who probably picked lettuce in the salad you ate yesterday. They are part of a larger panorama of farmers Cerney placed in a field along one side of Highway 68. While these two workers are not named and do not speak, they remind passing motorists of their presence and their labor.

These two figures have significance for me because many of the students at California State University Monterey Bay, from which I retired, are children of farmworkers. K-12 students

in Monterey County are 77% Latino, 69% free and reduced lunch, and 41% English Language Learners. But in the stories of this region's rich agriculture, what usually goes untold are stories of the farmworkers' poor working conditions, inadequate housing, backbreaking labor, and health problems. Cerney's large figures at least open up a space for their stories, space that my campus's arts program uses.

California State University Monterey Bay has a vibrant program in Visual and Public Art (VPA), which its website explains "is a hands-on program that brings together studio and community art" (<http://vpa.csumb.edu/><sup>1</sup>). The program was initially founded by performance artist Suzanne Lacy, whose work powerfully engages communities around social issues, and muralist Judy Baca, whose work involving Los Angeles gang members throughout Los Angeles is amazing (neither is still at CSU Monterey Bay). Until she retired recently, it was directed by the award-winning installation artist Amalia Mesa-Bains, whose work appears in the Smithsonian as well as other museums. It was from the artists associated with VPA that I came to understand the power of public art for evoking memory, engaging debate, collaborating with local marginalized communities, and prompting action. For example, in one project, a VPA faculty member collaborated with a farmworker advocacy center on a class project creating and hanging banners in Salinas that told farmworkers' stories.

The campus has also maintained a relationship with El Teatro Campesino in San Juan Bautista (about thirty miles from Monterey), founded in 1965 on the Delano Grape Strike picket lines of Cesar Chavez's United Farmworkers Union. Under the leadership of Luis Valdez, El Teatro has for the last sixty years served as an important voice of farmworkers, and the Chicano community more broadly. The theater regularly involves young people in its work, cultivating

next generations of Chicano and Latino youth who use theater as a form of speaking back to the world.

But arts in the local schools are another matter. While the arts offer a powerful venue for engaging young people intellectually, due to steady decline in funding for public schools and pressures to increase students' standardized test scores in mathematics and reading, most elementary schools, particularly those serving children of Mexican farmworkers and other low-income families, cut back arts programs several years ago. Wexler (2014) argues that a byproduct of corporatized school reform has been marginalization of the arts, replacing discovery and experimentation with passive submission to expository reading, writing, and test preparation. This shift has certainly been visible over the last twenty years in schools I have visited.

Young people still have access to the arts, but perhaps more through community-based arts programs and community-funded school arts. *Artistas Unidos* in Salinas, for example, harnesses artistic energy of underserved peoples of Monterey County, with youth involvement being one of its central programs. The Arts Council for Monterey County funds a wide variety of programs and artists for schools. Yet, the arts take a subordinate position to subjects students will be tested on, particularly students whose success on standardized tests is tenuous.

How might the arts engage children of farmworkers and other marginalized families? In Texas, Soto and Garza (2011) found that the drawings and writings of young children enabled their highly perceptive expression of dangerous experiences with immigration and border-crossing, the drawings enabling richer expression than writing alone would have done. In New York, Rivin (1996) engaged her immigrant students with the work of contemporary urban visual artists, finding their issues of identity, community, racism, immigration, and alienation to speak

directly to students' lives without depending on their mastery of English vocabulary alone. In Oakland, the "67 Sueños" project involved youth creating video *testimonios* and murals expressing the lives, dreams, and frustrations of the 67% of undocumented youth and adults who do not qualify for the DREAM Act and are subsequently ignored (Arriaga, 2012). As Arriaga explained, "The youth of 67 Sueños have risen up to create space for the undocumented to be heard, to heal and to impact change. Their work creates a space where silence will no longer be an option" (p. 76).

These kinds of projects invite a deep level of intellectual engagement and action on issues that matter to young people, in forms that complement but do not depend on emerging facility with English. They are also the kinds of projects that invite students to construct narratives that reflect their points of view and experiences, projects that invite rather than silence marginalized voices. In such projects, the farmworkers and their children speak for themselves. In other words, these examples illustrate meaningful learning through the arts that should have a prominent place in public school curricula.

I extend my warmest congratulations on this new and very timely journal. May it signal a resounding return of the arts to education and the public schools.

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