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**An Act of Bravery: Sharing Our Community Organizing Stories**

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**Abstract**

This is a reflective, narrative essay about community organizing. The essay is written collaboratively by a community engaged scholar, two community partners, and an international doctoral student. In alignment with narrative format, the authors reflect about their community organizing work in connection with their personal and professional narratives. They conclude with lessons learned through this reflective, collaborative writing experience. While acknowledging the challenges of sharing vulnerable parts of their lives, the authors conclude that this level of vulnerability is essential for long-term sustainable organizing for a better world. Ultimately, they see this as work that feeds their souls.

**Keywords:** community, organizing, engagement, stories, reflection

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## Introduction: Maria Avila

I am a community engaged scholar and a relational organizer in the USA, and the first author of this essay. I have worked in the community engagement field in academia as an administrator and as faculty for over two decades. This is a narrative, reflective essay, written collaboratively with three coauthors: two long-term community partners and one international doctoral student from Chile. We use this opportunity to reflect about our experiences with community organizing, along with how we discovered our organizing interests and became aware of our personal and collective power. I invited these colleagues to write with me as an opportunity to learn with and from each other, to build collective leadership, and to share my organizing work with younger generations.

While we welcome the opportunity to share our stories and perspectives in this journal, we are also aware that this is not fully aligned with typical academic papers. We are therefore faced with the challenge to balance the richness of our reflective, narrative writing with structuring the essay in ways that would make it easier for readers to follow. In what follows, I share my organizing journey inside and outside of academia. This will be followed by my co-authors.

## My Organizing Origins: My Narrative

I begin with the origins of my interest in, and discovery of community organizing.

I was 17 when I started working at a General Electric factory in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. After three years of experiencing the hard labor conditions (i.e., at times my fingers were bleeding but had to keep working), and inspired by a coworker who was studying to be a lawyer, I decided to enroll in social work. I studied a technical degree in social work at *Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez* and fell in love with community organizing while doing my practicum in the rural areas near Ciudad Juárez, organizing residents of a small village to get electricity and other basic services established. I graduated in the late 1970s, and after a few years of working as a social worker, I came to the USA in 1981.

One of my early jobs in the USA was as co-director of an alternative, adult school for Latino immigrants in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. The school used Paulo Freire's (Freire 1995) adult education methodology to involve students in decision-making about syllabus, grades, and the administration of the school as a way to understand their socioeconomic and political realities. The school had been founded by a group of Latino leaders, some of whom later became prominent in various sectors, including the government, business, and the first Latino elected officials at the City, County, State, and national levels. My exposure to this adult education experience added to my interest in community organizing but I didn't know how to use this in this new country. I decided to go back to school for a master's in social service administration at the University of Chicago as a way to continue exploring social work and its connection with community organizing. I graduated in 1987 and moved to Los Angeles.

The jobs and social work field internships I did in Chicago, and my first social job in Los Angeles convinced me that community organizing was not part of mainstream social work or non-profit organizations in the USA. Eager to find my way back to organizing, I moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1990, and while organizing around groundwater contamination there, I found out about

the Industrial Areas Foundation<sup>1</sup> (IAF). I was invited to take IAF training in 1990, and after this, I began to recruit faith-based leaders to build the first IAF affiliated organization in New Mexico. I moved back to Los Angeles in 1991 and worked with an IAF affiliate there until 1995, when I moved to Northern California and worked there with two IAF affiliates until 2000. This model of organizing exposed me to institutional, broad-based organizing with a focus on leadership development and power-building. This organizing experience has informed all my work in academia as an administrator, as a doctoral and postdoctoral researcher, and as a full time professor.

## **Community Organizing's Role in Advancing Community Engagement**

During the more than two decades in the field of community engagement I have learned the various ways in which community organizing can contribute to advancing the field of community engagement. I reflect here about three specific areas I have experienced: co-creating campus-community partnerships, community organizing's contribution to community engagement scholarship, and organizing for culture change.

### **1. Co-creating Campus-Community Partnerships**

From experience and multiple conversations with colleagues from campuses in the USA, I know that one of the most challenging aspects of community engagement is building reciprocal, long-lasting, mutually beneficial campus-community partnerships. This reminds me of an instance from my early years as an IAF organizer in the 1990s in Los Angeles, when I hosted two students from a community organizing class. The students became part of an organizing campaign which aimed at getting a supermarket built in an area where families had to walk a long distance to get their groceries. For decades, most of the people living in this neighborhood were primarily Black, working class residents, but by the early 1990s they were starting to move out of that neighborhood to more affordable, safer cities where to raise their families, often one or two hours east of Los Angeles. As they were moving out, Latino, recent immigrant families were moving in. These new residents of this community were often working two or three low-paying jobs to make ends meet, and most had no cars to drive several miles away to the closest supermarket. Looking back, I can see now that this experience would have been more helpful to this organizing campaign had the professor and I been more intentional in the co-creation of this project, taking into account different interests, types of knowledge, and resources community residents and leaders, the students, the professor, and me as an organizer brought to the project.

### **2. Community Organizing's Contribution to Community Engagement Scholarship**

I first learned of the connection between the community organizing practices I used at Occidental College and participatory action research (PAR) methodologies during my doctoral studies, which I did at Maynooth University in Ireland. My research methodologies have continued to evolve, and during my time as a professor at California State University Dominguez from 2014 to 2022, I led five research in action projects combined with narrative inquiry. Three of these projects took place with multiple stakeholders on campus and two off campus. The five projects aimed at exploring the creation of spaces for collaborative learning and collective action to change parts of institutional cultures that support, and reward working in silos and discourage collaboration and democratic ways of being; aiming to create more collaborative cultures within their respective contexts. These

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>

five projects are the focus of my recent book *Building Collective Leadership for Culture Change: Stories of Relational Organizing on Campus and Beyond* (2023). While I have always known that my work in academia has a strong foundation in community organizing, the process of writing this book revealed to me the extent to which community organizing has influenced my research methodologies.

### **3. Organizing for Culture Change**

To test out using my recent book as an organizing tool, in 2023 my coauthors and I led several virtual and in-person gatherings, including a day-long event with representatives from 12 academic institutions in metropolitan Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island, and one community organization from Boston. Through emails and virtual conversations, some participants of this event have shared that they have begun to integrate some of the practices and tools I and my co-presenters shared that day, as they embark on creating more collaborative and democratic cultures on their campuses and with their community partners.

I now invite my co-authors to share their reflections about their community organizing experience in connection with their personal and professional narratives.

#### **Power, Self Disruption, and Discovery: Ray López-Chang**

I was twenty-one years old when I first met Maria Avila working as a Field Deputy for an elected school board member at the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and serving my home board district with over one hundred schools and their communities. My coauthor Aixe was Chief of Staff. Maria shared her organizing model during a time when I struggled with the world's perception of my age and whether I was qualified to serve in a role that felt reserved for seasoned professionals. I was swooned by what she illustrated. However, behind my mask of curiosity, I wrestled with navigating a world I assumed infantilized me because of my age. This chapter spotlights how organizing disrupted this thinking.

#### **Learning Self Through Voice and Perception**

My journey with age and perception began young. I first became cognizant of my internal voice in first grade when I was being considered for promotion to second grade. Teachers reported my boredom with content and replacement of naps with work. I sat in the principal's office alongside my mom who was also a teacher. I knew this gave me privilege others did not have – an advocate who understood the language and systems of education. My principal asked how I felt about the decision to advance a grade. My typically outward, playful, and silly character quickly recoiled and I felt I was making a life-long decision – I was. If I said yes, I'd be with older peers, among classmates I did not know. My birthday also fell late in the year, so sometimes they'd be two years older. This mattered because I felt this would put me behind others, in age and maturity. However, I could still play with my friends during recess, so at six years old I entered 2nd grade.

I looked for the most mature student in the classroom, and I worked hard to emulate her maturity. Looking back, my rationale was that if I learned to be more serious and studious, others would forget I was younger. I was scared to be outed as a six year-old and I held on to this fear throughout my life. I started middle school at nine, high school at twelve, college at sixteen.

I share this to describe my humanity as an organizer. Sitting in the principal's office made me aware of the existence of power, both in humans and systems. I am both Asian and Latino, raised in

Cypress Park, Los Angeles. My family are immigrants and refugees from China, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. I now know my school and advocate mother attempted to disrupt a predetermined outcome for kids like myself from LA in the 90s. I took this disruption as necessary, and I am grateful for it, but I did not realize I'd begin to fixate on people's perception.

### ***Giving My Voice Permission to Exist***

In college, I came out as queer. This added layer of identity intensified my hypersensitivity to perception. Power played a prominent role when I needed to hide who I was, both in age and queerness - two closets. At the University of San Francisco, I majored in sociology to become more familiarized with the structures of human systems. I also double-minored in education and gender and sexualities. My education minor was a professional decision. I could control the world's perception of my value-add to society by studying a field with promising potential. My gender and sexualities minor was a personal decision. I didn't believe classes on feminism, gender, and sex liberation would be valued in my future profession, so I made this decision to affirm my own queerness in anticipation of rejection.

I entered my fourth year of college at nineteen and by this time, my voice flourished. I spent a year studying and interviewing drag queens for my senior thesis, and I learned about their coordinated efforts to uplift one another. They were performers, venue owners, bookers, leaders, and scholars. They were organizing to survive and I was gripped by their audacity to ignore the world's opinion. I wanted to taste that power, and in my spare time I played with drag. I started caring less about people's perception of me. My confidence increased and my ownership of being queer surged.

### ***Witnessing My Soul Activate Through Organizing***

I moved back to Los Angeles after graduation to be with my family and landed my dream job at LAUSD. I had the confidence of a drag queen, but the insecurity of being twenty. My role included communicating information on behalf of an elected official to senior leaders often 20 to 30 years older than me. This made my age apparent and stark, and my residuals of recoiling as a child reemerged. This is when Maria began working with us, becoming the most disruptive interceptor to my dwindling voice. I learned about *one-on-one* conversations and their ability to generate trust through calculated vulnerability, *self-interest* to determine someone's "skin in the game," and *house meetings* to bring together humans with shared self-interests for collective action. These are the skills I characterized as maturity, deflecting judgment of my worth and informing my qualification to be in this role. I could be perceived as a connector, leader, and coalition-builder, and no one would question my age.

My work today, nearly ten years later, is no longer a self-defense mechanism. I can freely organize seasoned leaders and political shakers without self-impostoring. But this took immense reflection. I've learned that organizing is not about formulas, but about humans - whether students, drag queens, bureaucrats, or politicians. I witness leaders display confidence and strength, yet a yearning for acceptance and affirmation. That remains true for me too. And, even in writing this chapter, I experienced a new disruption, now with more visibility of the soul behind my organizing.

### ***Self-Disruption through Storytelling, Relational Meetings, and Positionality: Aixe Aman Rivera***

Community organizing and its principles have been embedded into all aspects of my life well before I even knew what they were. I approach this narrative piece from a place of deep reflection

on how my upbringing and professional experiences have socialized me and influenced the way I navigate relationships and environments. The community organizing practices that have been the most influential in my life are: storytelling, relational meetings, and power and positionality. Actualizing these organizing practices has required that I put on a pair of permanent lenses that have completely disrupted the way I had previously seen the world. My vision of the world as it is and the world as it should be has changed, so I must adapt, too.

### ***Building Trusting Relationships Through Storytelling***

As a daughter of Filipinx immigrants, I was raised to keep my head down, not speak up, and not cause any issues or create any tension in situations. Ultimately, I was being raised not to draw attention to myself, and to assimilate. My cultural deference to elders later translated to a deference to managers, high-level decision makers, and to those who I feel are superior to me because of their experiences, age, positionality, and expertise. Over time, this turned into a form of humility that I am not always comfortable with and have for decades now been trying to unpack and, in many ways, unlearn. This deferential nature has hindered my own personal growth because I often minimize my own experiences, knowledge, expertise, and skills, which are contradictory to the work that I do and who I strive to be.

*Storytelling* is an important practice in community organizing because it is the vehicle and opportunity to connect with others in a deeper way and to earn their trust. From my experience, the key to sustaining deep relationships is when they are grounded in vulnerability, reciprocity, human connection, and trust. I believe we can achieve that grounding through intentional storytelling. Of the organizing model we learned from Maria (Avila 2017), the organizing practice that I initially struggled with was conducting *relational meetings* (or *one-on-ones*) effectively and purposefully because they are not solely about learning one's story or their resume. Instead, they are meant to uncover their *self-interest*. One-on-ones also present an opportunity to learn about each other's values, experiences, and commitments to ultimately reveal shared interests. By learning and understanding what a person cares about most deeply, we can draw connections to what agitates them and can move them to take action.

### ***Navigating Power and Positionality Ingrained in Systems***

Upon deeper reflection of my own upbringing, I realize that I have been socialized to understand hierarchy and structures as immovable, and decision makers as the people in power who are responsible for maintaining those systems and structures. Over time, I have learned to work with and around this understanding. My career in education started when I was a public school teacher in New York City. My introduction to education policy and advocacy started when I worked in a LAUSD Board of Education office. My experiences in the two largest school districts in the United States gave me opportunities to understand and navigate these large, bureaucratic systems in ways I had only read about in graduate school.

While at LAUSD, I had the opportunity to connect the work happening within elected offices to the work happening in communities. I was able to put my community organizing knowledge and experience into practice as Chief of Staff of Board District 5, with the guidance and support of Maria Avila, who consulted with us to help us 1) shift our elected office's culture from transactional to relational and 2) shift our mindsets from a focus of empowerment to capacity building. Both of

these shifts were significant disruptions in the way “things had been done” in LAUSD elected offices.

Our office conducted relational meetings with family and community members in our district, so that we could identify leaders willing to spark change in their communities. We convened them to identify problems *and* solutions in their school communities and to directly present them to LAUSD leadership. Our only agenda was to build their capacity to organize and advocate for their children’s needs in a solutions-oriented way. While our *positional power* as an elected office (“power over”) helped bring the district leaders and community members together, we learned that the *collective power* (“power with”) of this group was more effective. My understanding of how to navigate, leverage, and utilize power has been disrupted. I see how structures and systems can be moved, especially if there is the will to do so.

### ***Leading Intentionally and Whole-heartedly***

For over a decade, I have been extremely passionate about community schools – a strategy for partners to collaboratively organize in- and out-of-school resources and support for young people to thrive (Community Schools Forward 2023, 2). Currently, my work at the Community Schools Learning Exchange (CSLX), allows me to collaborate with districts, systems, and partners to strengthen community school strategies and build the capacity of the practitioners who are leading this work. I truly feel I have come full circle—I am putting my strengths and skills to use doing something I love and truly believe in.

In my work, it is impossible for me to take off my lens as a community organizer. I also recognize that my lens is colored by my experiences as a teacher, policy practitioner, researcher, community school advocate, and also as a mother of two beautiful young children. Everyday, I make intentional decisions to try to raise them in a world where I am actively trying to unlearn my own socialization, so that I do not pass on intergenerational traumas, while also being attentive to their own identities and attuned with the cultural traditions of our ancestors. The mental load is heavy. I appreciate that I am a multi-faceted human being that has been disrupted over and over again, and I remain committed to doing my part on this journey toward the world as it should be.

### **Organizing Communities and Community Engagement in Chile: Matias G. Flores**

My community organizing *experience* comes from Chile. In what follows, I share three relevant themes: my family history, the 2011 student movement, and dedicating time and effort to create new political projects.

#### ***My Story and My History***

I come from a family of women educators and activists/freedom fighters. My grandmother, from my father’s side, was a secondary school teacher who, with her sisters, created an elementary school in Santiago, Chile, in the 1950s. As strong women in a patriarchal society, they knew education was a tool that allowed marginalized people to defend themselves from injustice. My parents, on the other hand, were activists for democracy and freedom in the context of the 1973-1990 Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, one of the most obscure and violent episodes in Latin American history. During that time, several family members were prosecuted, tortured, incarcerated, and killed, and one is still *desaparecido* (missing).



Growing up in that family context was extremely challenging; as I inherited a social justice orientation, I quickly learned that social change was violently resisted by conservative/dehumanizing forces, usually backed up by Global North empires (Kornbluh 2013). This bath of reality tempered my own ideas of social change, making me a pragmatic person, which led me to study Sociology in my undergraduate studies.

### ***Connecting with the Latin American Community Engagement Tradition***

When I entered Universidad de Chile in 2010, I not only was introduced to a scholarship that allowed me a better understanding of power dynamics, but also, for the first time, I was part of student collectives that were organizing to transform Chilean higher education, questioning neoliberal policies and promoting quality, free, and non-profit public education. The following year, in 2011, that student movement grew and began an eight-month strike that shocked Chilean society through marches, occupied buildings, and even *flash mobs*.<sup>2</sup> It was one of the biggest demonstrations in the last 30 years, and it marked me and a generation of youth in Chile.

During that long strike, I participated in a student-led committee supporting the protest in different neighborhoods in Santiago. There, without knowing, we exercised several *community organizing* principles and tools. We organized one-on-one meetings and created a coalition of grassroots organizations, including housing movements, cultural centers, women's groups, and a popular education center. The co-defined goal was to support high school students who had occupied their schools. We helped them with their struggle, gathering food and creating public events to expand their reach to more people.

Once we returned to classes, we wanted to maintain the work with the coalition. There, Professor Claudio Duarte from the Sociology Department suggested we could keep working with some of these groups through Participatory Action Research (PAR), which we could conduct in one of his courses. At that moment, because of that invitation, three things were triggered. First, at the disciplinary level, I was introduced to PAR as a research and community organizing model. Secondly, it was framed in an undergraduate course, which I now understand as an engaged learning exercise. Thirdly, by deciding to work with the popular education organization, I was introduced to Paulo Freire's pedagogy. In hindsight, it was a defining moment where I learned from the Latin American community engagement tradition in the context of a real struggle (Flores, Colacci, and Cano 2023).

The principles of PAR and popular education oriented my community engagement projects throughout my undergraduate studies. I participated in a second PAR project with a housing rights grassroots organization, where we co-designed a Popular University project. As a teaching assistant, I guided other students in PAR projects with Indigenous communities, university workers, and high school students. In my undergraduate thesis, I studied the cases of community engagement projects in the Colleges of Social Sciences, Architecture, and Agronomy through participatory methods.

### ***More Stories, More Histories***

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<sup>2</sup> It even got international attention as you can see in: Barrionuevo, Alexei. "With Kiss-Ins and Dances, Young Chileans Push for Reform". *New York Times*, August 4, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/05/world/americas/05chile.html>.



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From 2014 to 2020, I worked at Universidad de Chile to promote community engagement. I met scholars from different disciplines, organized conferences, and published books and articles. There, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. at Cornell University to contribute to the academic study of community engagement, recovering voices and unknown stories.

During my master's I decided to delve into the history of Amanda Labarca, a Chilean feminist educator in the early Twentieth Century who understood higher education could change the world (Flores Gonzalez 2023). She contributed to the origins of higher education community engagement projects in Chile, connecting her feminist activism and her scholarship. Even though she is well known and respected now, at that time, she experienced backlash from university colleagues who discontinued her engaged-scholarship perspective. I learned that the history of higher education community engagement in Latin America and Chile is mostly a tragic story. It is a story of scholars who tried to promote change within higher education, and most of them failed or were forgotten.

Now, for my Ph.D., I'm focusing on a new generation of engaged scholars who, like me, entered academia in a context of demonstrations and revival of activism in Chile. In a constant innovation, they are both drawing from the Latin American tradition while recreating and expanding the boundaries of university and community. I believe thinking collectively and sharing our own stories and histories can help reimagine and disrupt the role of scholars and universities in broader processes of social change.

### **Concluding Reflections**

We began this project with a commitment to engage in deep, vulnerable reflection as we shared our community organizing journeys inside and outside of academia. Our stories include our work with community organizations and in academic institutions, anchored by our personal experiences and the richness of our different positionalities. Our roots are in Mexico, China, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Chile. We are diverse in age, gender, and sexual orientation too. Understanding our positionalities and worldviews made our conversations, reflections, and writing about community organizing deeper and richer. In the process we trusted each other with our vulnerabilities and through this, we experienced and embraced the act of self-disruption, a renewed awareness of our personal power, and of community organizing as a vehicle for justice, even if we lift different models, in different settings, and in different countries.

We all find one-on-one relational meetings are essential for finding allies for our organizing projects. We are also clear that effective organizing is best when our self-interests align with those of the institutions and organizations where we work, whether academic or non-academic. And yet, we also know that relational, reflective, story-based organizing requires great intentionality, and that it is slow and labor intensive and therefore counterculture to our hurried, hyperactive lives. We understand that this creates tension, and self-disruption.

While we welcomed the opportunity to share our stories and perspectives in this journal, we also found it challenging to balance the richness of our reflective, narrative writing as we tried to structure the paper in ways that would make it easier for readers to engage with us. We hope we succeeded in finding this balance.

Perhaps the most challenging part of writing this paper lies in the decision to share vulnerable parts of ourselves, aware that others reading us will see some parts of ourselves we are revealing for the first time. In this way, we see this not only as challenging, but also as daring, and as an act of

bravery. We hope readers of this paper will understand that we decided to do this because we consider it essential in any work related to creating long-lasting, relational, and sustainable change. This, for us, is ultimately deep, soul related work.

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