

Latino Boys and Men in Search of Justice, Testimonies

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Conclusion

The intent of this two book series was to contribute to the national dialog regarding the address of the disparities facing Latino (and Native) boys and men. While the root causes are fundamentally linked to the on-going, yet unrealized struggle to ameliorate poverty and the lingering specter of racism, is also tantamount to achieving equality and justice for Latino and other community of color. Witness the wanton disregard, contempt, and ignorance with which a wealthy white man running for president of the nation can lay out a xenophobic and crypto-fascist platform targeting Mexican people, and by association all Latinos. The fact that he finds some sympathetic ears and is not literally and/or symbolically labeled anti-American and universally condemned by mass public opinion, speaks volumes about the state of race relations.

On the positive side of the equation is that a growing national Boys and Men of Color movement holds great promise in honestly confronting and working together as a society to bridge the abyss that disparities create for the life chances of this population. The White House My Brothers' Keeper Initiative (MBK) spearheaded by President Barack Obama represents a watershed moment in this nation history. Symbolically, it acknowledges to the nation that the full benefits of democracy are being systematically denied to boys and men in communities of color. Practically, MBK is primarily focused on addressing the American anathema known as "School to Prison Pipeline" (the nexus between a failed school system and the inhumane dead end result of mass incarceration) which is devastating for impoverished boys and men of color. While these are certainly essential realms of drastic reform, inevitably there will need to be a much more comprehensive national effort to attack the full breadth of disparities in communities.

The first of the two books will hopefully serve to humanize the imperative of responding to the needs of boys and men of color, by lifting up their voices and presenting the vibrant spirit of hope that resides within these individuals through art, poetry, and heartfelt poignant writings. The essays represent a glimpse into the realities faced by a cadre of visionary people who experienced and overcome disparity themselves and have dedicated their lives to working for change in communities. They also offer a challenge to us all, speak to essential policy and systems change, and offer insights into the comprehensive efforts taking place across California and nationally. The second book offers up profiles of what some label as "best practice" in comprehensive culturally proficient program, organizational, and community-wide initiatives to dismantle disparity and improve the quality of life for boys and men of color.

All of the organizations featured in both publications represent models in best practice in restorative education, healthy human development, community transformation, and promoting true democracy, and what we call the movement of La Cultura Cura (culture cures, or healing culture). In addition to the National Compadres Network (NCN) and La Plazita Institute (LPI) which are profiled in this book, other leading model organizations and programs include: Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos; Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ); Homies Unidos; and Homeboy Industries. These groups will likely be featured in future "Best Practice Profiles" on the <http://www.insightccd.org/latino-young-men-boys/> website developed by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development (ICCED) and Arte Publico Press. As pointed out in the NCN and LPI Profiles, the fundamental unifying core element of all of these Best Practice models, is that their guiding values, principles, and strategies are rooted in and/or significantly informed by the philosophy of La Cultura Cura. It is our informed opinion, along with the panel of advisors, that cultural fluency and proficiency must be the cornerstone of any discipline or model that can be legitimately designated as a Best Practice in the healing, transformation, and nurturing of well-being for Latino boys and men. In this

regard, the La Cultura Cura philosophy and framework embodies the cornerstone tenets of best practice across disciplines, practice, systems and policy change.

Their community-based work and policy advocacy encompasses such disciplines as: youth development, culturally-based rites of passage, violence prevention, gang and delinquency intervention, family-violence, alternative schools, restorative/transformational juvenile justice, reentry and community development among others. Some of the most cutting edge efforts in the boys and men of color movement have been supported by visionary philanthropic organizations such as the California Endowment, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Sierra Health Foundation, Marguerite Casey Foundation, California Community Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and Liberty Hill Foundation. Some notable comprehensive public private partnerships or organizational efforts engaging policy change, systems change, applied research, and the development of innovative practices for the reader to explore and investigate include:

- The California Endowment, Building Healthy Communities Initiative
- Sierra Health Foundation, Positive Youth Justice Initiative
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Investments in boys and young men of color
- President's My Brother's Keeper Initiative
- Policy Link, Alliance for Boys and Men of Color
- Gathering for Justice
- Urban Strategies Boys and Men of Color Initiative
- Alameda County Coalition for Criminal Justice Reform
- Dignity in Schools Campaign
- California School-based Health
- Fresno County, Boys and Men of Color

There is also an encouraging rise in catalytic philanthropic investment in growing the field. The leaders of 26 of the nation's leading philanthropic organizations met in Chicago to consider issues facing boys and men of color in the United States. The gathering was held concurrent with the annual meeting of the Council on Foundations (California Endowment, Press Release, 2015). The foundations wishing to make public their engagement in this field-building efforts, formally agreed with this statement of intent, are:

- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- The Boston Foundation
- California Community Foundation
- The California Endowment
- Casey Family Programs
- The Community Foundation of South Alabama
- The Denver Foundation
- Foundation for the Mid-South
- Headwaters Foundation for Justice
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- The Kresge Foundation
- Liberty Hill Foundation
- Living Cities
- Lumina Foundation
- Marguerite Casey Foundation
- Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- Mitchell Kapor Foundation
- Open Society Foundations

- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Silicon Valley Community Foundation
- Schott Foundation for Public Education
- Sierra Health Foundation
- Skillman Foundation
- Tides Foundation
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

There will likely be snap shots or featured articles highlighting these important philanthropic efforts in future “Best Practice Profiles” on a collaborative website focused on Latino Boys and Men being developed by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development (ICCED) and Arte Publico Press at <http://www.insightcced.org/latino-young-men-boys/>.

As we suggested at the beginning of this narrative, given the demographic trends in the United States, our social and economic viability and competitiveness as a nation hangs in the balance of empowering health and well-being of Latinos. Prolonged disparity, overt injustice, and de facto sanctioned discrimination can only breed desperation, growing frustration, and alienation in our society. With so many Latino and other young men of color being systematically relegated to lives of severely limited life choices, and given that these young men comprise among the fastest growing segments of our national population, it is impossible to imagine how the America of the future can succeed without these young men succeeding as well. In no more than a quarter century, virtually every community across the land will be inhabited by populations of Latino American people and families. It is not simply a matter of dollars and good sense, but a moral imperative of democratic society. Certainly, America needs to realize that Latinos also are the backbone of the workforce and long-term economy. The viability of the economy and the social security system is dependent on their success and well-being; yet, the present systems underpay and fail to adequately educate Latinos, neutralizing their natural ingenuity and enterprise, thereby jeopardizing the future of a sustainable economy and its institutions.

What is offered for the reader to consider is the beauty and power of a nation truly rooted in the principles of pluralism and democratic practice. As put forth by maestro Jerry Tello, when he postulates, “I believe that from a systemic point of view, Latinos provide valuable teachings, traditions, values, and history that can both inform and transform the world. A world view that can bring the world to a place of healing and sacred inter-connectedness. Latinos offer the world a perspective that is rooted in the universal sacredness and connectedness of everyone. Moreover, that Latinos in this country, who are primarily people of indigenous/native descent (i.e., ancestral roots in what is now the ‘American’ southwest, Mexico, and Central America), have a history on earth that defines them as relationship centered people. Not only as it relates to those like them, but to others, all creation, and the universe.” It is this world view he contends, “La Cultura is laden with life affirming guiding values, principles for living, an accumulated learning and wisdom that has much to offer a broken world – being destroyed by an artificial culture of greed, mass consumption, racial chauvinism, and the violent politics of privilege.”

Moreover, disparities are perpetuating the root causes of poverty including low educational attainment, mass incarceration, health and mental health issues. With continued neglect and marginalization of Latino boys and men, the nation suffers. It is incumbent on the society to enable Latinos to use their cultural medicine to heal and restore themselves, to have equal opportunity to reach their highest potential, and thrive to benefit all of society. If the nation fails to acknowledge and cultivate the human potential of Latinos, America is unwittingly stifling the advancement of civil society, economics, science, industry, agriculture, medicine, education, and the arts; our collective future is jeopardized. Disregarding or suppressing the Latino culture is self-defeating for the nation.

In conclusion, the time has come for us to collectively examine the soul of the nation to assess the state of our democracy. The Declaration of Independence (should be Interdependence) states: “We hold

these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” In the first book collaboration with Henry A.J. Ramos and Arte Publico Press, *The History of Barrios Unidos, Cultura Es Cura, Healing Community Violence* it states: “Each generation’s struggle for justice is framed against the backdrop of chronic inequality. Thus, perhaps, the most accurate bell-weather for the vitality of American democracy today is the welfare of our children and the degree to which poverty and violence permeate the fabric of our society.”

We submit this book series in good hope, as our contribution to the national dialogue and to field of Latino and other boys and men of color. We conclude with a quote from one of the elders of the community peace movement, Daniel “Nane” Alejandrez, from his speech for the Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebration:

“We are at a cultural and spiritual crossroads where we must reclaim the truth and traditions of our heritage as we move forward towards the promise of our future. As we have learned to know and respect ourselves, we have learned to honor and respect the dignity of others. We need to practice non-violence and embrace old and new partnerships with those that share our vision for equal social and economic justice for all people. This is the true and only path to peace and the mutual well-being of all.”

All honor to our ancestors. We thank our philanthropic partners, the California Endowment, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Sierra Health Foundation, Marguerite Casey Foundation, and California Community Foundation, without whom this project would have been possible. Tlazocamati (thank you in the Nahuatl language) to all of the Latino boys and men (and women) who contributed arte, poems, and writings, or otherwise supported the hard work that it took to complete this ambitious endeavor. The organizational partners (particularly the leadership, staff, volunteers, and participants of CURYJ, Barrios Unidos, Homies Unidos, Homeboy Industries, and La Plazita, In-and-Out Writers, and National Compadres Network) who took time from their daily work in their local villages, a challenge in itself, and contributing to this community effort. This speaks to their commitment and love for humanity. A daily prayer to the circle of youth, men, advocates, and leadership (especially our incarcerated brothers) that gave of their hearts, considerable gifts, wisdom, and time.