

PREFACE

La Cultura Cura (Healing Culture)

Frank de Jesús Acosta and Henry A. J. Ramos

Poetry and Arte is eternal soul speak, heart to heart, imagination to imagination, spirit to spirit; imparting what academic rigor and science by themselves cannot express of love, truth, experience, profound beauty, transformative pain, the power of forgiveness, dignity, frailty, humanity, faith or the most sacred visions in our journey . . .

—Frank de Jesús Acosta

For decades, California's social, economic and political landscape has produced large numbers of Latino young men and boys whose normal and healthy development has been stifled, if not suspended. Beginning with their early experiences in families that often are under severe economic (and, owing in many instances to non-citizenship status, political) hardship, most of these young Americans face great disadvantages before they even have the opportunity to reach adulthood.

Everywhere Latino young men and boys go, they face largely unresponsive educational institutions, discriminatory employers and intensely hostile law enforcement agencies. There is little doubt that these young people have been subjected to detrimental barriers to success in American society. The eventual manifestations and consequences of these adver-

sities are predictably troubling and tragic: gangbanging, crime, violence, addiction and, in many cases, early death.

For still too many Californians (and others across the nation), the perennial association of young Latino men and boys with these pathologies seems uneventful, unsurprising, not newsworthy. To many, Latino youth themselves, and their families by extension, are primarily responsible for their own demise. If they are poor, it is seen as being a reflection of their laziness or lack of initiative. If they are in trouble with the law, it is understood to be a matter of bad decision-making and criminal disposition. If they cannot succeed in school, it is seen as an indication of their innate intellectual inferiority.

Sadly, such misperceptions and misunderstandings of reality—particularly in the context of hard economic times like these—play a still-too-prevalent role in public policy processes that establish the rights and opportunities of various minorities in society. As a result, over the past decades (with only recent signs of relief, as in the November 2014 passage of Proposition 47, which invoked the important Three Strikes Law sentencing reforms for offenders), California and other states have experienced an unprecedented push from legislators and policy makers to criminalize Latinos and other youth of color. This has occurred now to the point where Latino young men and boys are more likely to go to prison than to graduate from college. Most active Latino youth and young adult offenders are also more likely to die prematurely from gang or gang-related violence than from natural causes.

From an obscured amalgamation of stereotype and fact, many outsiders who observe the plight of Latino youth simply see them as inherently bad apples—so bad that seeking to redeem or otherwise reclaim them is futile. To an extreme few still, these young men and boys really should be considered more like animals or things, rather than humans.

But the grim data and harsh narratives that often go with them belie another story. They gloss over a much brighter side of the equation, which is the uplifting possibility of what even the most gang-hardened Latino young men and boys can become if we and others like us encourage and support them in a more positive direction.

It turns out that Latino men and boys—including even the most gang- and crime-tested among them—are full of the same kinds of hopes, dreams and desires the rest of us hold within. They have similar passions, similar fears and similar needs. They have the same kinds of attributes that make all of us—whatever our station or background—human.

Nothing reveals our humanity in life like creative expression. The arts are so powerful precisely because they cut through the anonymity of our commercial transactions and material acquisitions—as well as the growing rancor and divisiveness of our public discourse—to remind us more about what we share in common rather than what divides us.

Though too often perversely monetized and rendered elitist in our modern society, the arts are inherently democratic. They give a stage to any idea or form that can find its way into the public realm, however it gets there and by whoever can produce it. When properly activated, the arts can be a ready tool for even the least endowed among us; hence their appeal to the young, the disenfranchised and the alternative in societal position and perspective.

These properties make resorting to creative expression particularly accessible and appealing to Latino young men and boys, who are part of a now well-established, multigenerational tradition of graffiti-based creative culture that found its legs in the early 1970s through mural art and that now carries forward not only in the form of graffiti and tattoo art, but also

poetry, first-person prose, multi-media expressive works and the performing arts.

The pages that follow reflect the incipient elements of an important new virtual center for artistic and creative expression that is being established for Latino men and boys by Arte Público Press at the University of Houston. Its development, in partnership with the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, and funding from The California Endowment, Marguerite Casey Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, California Community Foundation and the Sierra Health Foundation, will encourage the posting, curation and interactive discussion of original works by Latino men and boys in California and elsewhere across the nation as they illustrate the conditions these young people face and the visions they hold for a better future.

We hope that by establishing this unprecedented space for the creative and expressive exchange of Latino men and boys, we can illuminate the common elements of these young peoples' humanity, their analyses of the circumstances they face, and suggest solutions in policy and practice that, if pursued, would help to improve the conditions and life prospects of these young Americans.

While initially focused on the California experience, we hope over time to cultivate this platform to establish a more broad based national repository of Latino men's and boys' creative voice, along with supporting content and commentary (both written and videographic), that can help to put American law and culture on a more intelligent and sustainable path relative to the full utilization of Latino men's and boys' capacities in American culture, economy and public policy.

We are grateful to Nicolás Kanellos, Founder and Director of Arte Público Press (APP), for his visionary support of our work, which dates back to his encouraging our earlier 2007

collaboration. That partnership, in turn, led to a published history and commentary on the work of Santa Cruz, CA-based Barrios Unidos—a trailblazer in this space, building on commentaries by national luminaries ranging from actor and social justice activist Harry Belafonte and United Farm Workers Union co-founder Dolores Huerta, to former anti-war activist and California legislator Tom Hayden and award-winning writer and poet Luis J. Rodríguez.

For this current project, we are especially indebted to allied community partners whose frontline work to support Latino men and boys has been defining, both in California and elsewhere. These include the leaders of organizations like Barrios Unidos, Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, Homies Unidos, La Plazita Institute, Homeboy Industries, the Gathering for Justice and National Compadres Network, among others. Their efforts, guidance and support have truly helped to make this effort both possible and worthy.

We encourage you to read and view forward with an eye to gaining a deeper insight into the still-largely-untapped power of Latino men's and boys' creative viewpoints. We urge you to see the world for a moment through their eyes and their hearts. We prompt you to examine your own perceptions and possible latent prejudices relative to young men like these. Lastly, we defy you to find any lack of humanity or purpose in the voices featured throughout.