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## Exploring the Relational Complexities of *Learning ART Together*: A Museum Based Art Program for Migrant Women

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### Abstract

In this article, researchers discuss how relational theory (Bourriaud, 2002) can be used to understand the experiences of five migrant women participating in a museum art program called *Learning ART Together*. We posit that museums and art centers, like many institutions, are constantly working in tension with rigid institutional structures, financial demands, and formalized curricula as they strive to

provide programming for migrants. Such structures challenge possibilities for relationship building and transformative practices. Findings reveal that by using a relational lens, we are better able to understand how dialogue creates alternative social exchanges which honor and challenge “everydayness” and shape new ways of being in the world. Our research revealed that relational theory offers insights into the ways participants create alternative sites of sociability suggesting implications for pedagogy that aims to create equitable and just experiences.

### **Exploring the Relational Complexities of *Learning ART Together*: A Museum Based Art Program for Migrant Women**

Beginning around 9:30 AM every Monday women trickle in, their children following close behind as they make their way to one of four art studios. Swept up by caregivers, the children join their new friends in the Imagination Station studio. Jaymie and Liz greet the women chatting about weekend events, family, and challenges of the day over coffee, strawberries and muffins. After a while, the studios became a hub of activity as the women talk and laugh while busily working on their art. Occasionally one of the children joins her mother to make art (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Making Art Together*

This scenario represents the swirl of social activity common to *Learning ART Together* (LAT), an art program for immigrant and refugee women at the GreenHill Center for North Carolina Art. Designed to provide art experiences in a comfortable and safe space, as well as strengthen self-esteem, build community, and encourage entrepreneurship, LAT is a grant-funded program with many goals. The degree to which the goals aligned with aims to create a just and transformative experience for the women is the subject of this paper.

In this article, we describe the activities of LAT and use relational theory as a lens to better understand what it means to learn art *together*. In particular, our inquiry focuses on understanding how LAT, when viewed through a relational lens, can yield insights into the ways social interaction around artmaking can produce “alternative sites of sociability” (Bourriaud, 2002). We position that museums and art centers, like many institutions, are constantly working in tension with rigid institutional structures, financial demands, and formalized curricula as they strive to provide programming for migrants. Such structures challenge possibilities for relationship building and consequently possibilities for transformative practice.

While LAT takes place on a micro-level in a museum-like setting, the need for such work has been amplified by recent world events that have resulted in one of the largest migrations of human beings since World War II. Thousands have been displaced, drastically unsettling lives and hurling people into a kind of purgatorial space between a life before and a life after. The effects are dramatic and far-reaching and shine a stark unforgiving light on our capacity as human beings to take action as social-cultural, socioeconomic, political, and religious beliefs polarize and divide. Heated debates amongst citizens, politicians, and countries further divide as amnesiacs fail to recognize migration as a human response while history unfortunately repeats itself marking barbed lines between those who belong and those who don’t belong. While not new, unrest coupled with increased mobility has resulted in population shifts across the globe as many choose to resettle as immigrants or, in the case of refugees, find themselves displaced as a result of conflict, unrest, or oppressive living conditions.

The most fragile, refugees make arduous journeys after fleeing conflict or persecution, spending as many as 10 years in refugee camps often experiencing great trauma before arriving in the United States (“Center for New North Carolinians,” n.d.). Once in the U.S., men and women are expected to reach a satisfactory level of self-sufficiency including overcoming language barriers, limited educational service, lack of secure jobs, crowded housing, and limited health care, and all within a very short period of time (Garrett, 2006). Overwhelming challenges coupled with limited access to community resources often lead to poverty and isolation, which greatly impacts identity, self-esteem and a sense of belonging.

These challenges contribute to a sense of placelessness that goes beyond setting or location manifesting as an embodied sense of loss. Gradle (2008) explained, that place is “most often married to memory, imagination, and our embodied experiences in such a way that words like emplaced, displaced, replaced, or out of place conjure up meaning that are felt immediately and viscerally” (p. 7). For immigrant and refugee women placelessness is particularly profound as many come from male-centered cultures with scripted expectations making it difficult for them to integrate into American culture, further exacerbating feelings of loneliness and alienation.

Given the magnitude of challenges faced by immigrant and refugee populations, we recognized that the art experiences we offered the women at GreenHill needed close examination. Much like the intent of relational artists, we hoped for social change around the making of art, and aimed to provide experiences that would strengthen self-esteem, create equitable interactions and perhaps transform insights. We also hoped that our inquiry would inspire us “to rethink the language and practice of pedagogy” (Irwin & Donoghue, 2012, p. 222).

### **Engaging Newcomers in Museums and Art Centers**

Increasingly U.S. museums and art centers are playing a central role engaging newcomers in a range of activities aimed at reinforcing language acquisition and teaching art techniques. They build community through activities that honor cultural traditions, nurture self-esteem, and instill a sense of agency. Art museums and arts centers are particularly well placed to act as inclusive sites devoted to building diverse audiences through dynamic and socially relevant programming that encourages community building. Falk and Dierking (2013) pointed out that 21<sup>st</sup>-century museums “will increasingly be institutions committed to public service— institutions that reach out and attract new audiences and work to significantly address pressing civic, educational, economic, environmental, and social issues” (p. 316).

The capacity of a museum or gallery to meet the needs of immigrants and refugees is at the nexus of much recent activity. However, museums and galleries recognize that barriers uniquely related to museum settings such as language acquisition, inaccessible infrastructure, costs associated with enjoying a museum, failure to represent non-Eurocentric work, and not feeling accepted by the community, exist and greatly diminish immigrants or refugees’ desire or ability to visit a museum (Dawson, 2014). Farrell and Medvedeva (2010) explain,

There appears to be broad consensus amongst museum professionals that museums must do more to promote social inclusion. Despite the proliferation of outreach programs intended to engage “non-traditional” museum audiences, the museum-going population continues to become an increasingly less-diverse

group. This is problematic when one considers that minorities currently constitute only 9% of museums' core visitors. (p. 5)

Unfortunately, newcomers fall into this minority; a population whose unique set of challenges further complicates access and inclusion.

In recent years, more museums have responded to this need. In partnership with the Queens Library and the Queens Museum of Art's, the New New Yorkers program offers immigrants and refugees a variety of art, technology, and English language acquisition courses provided at no cost (Queens Museum of Art, n.d.). Using visual art as a catalyst for the development of literacy and critical thinking, Queensborough Community College (QCC) and the Nassau County Museum of Art launched Culture and Literacy through Art (CALTA) whose vision includes creating "a dynamic environment where museums provide authentic, meaningful and engaging experiences to immigrant communities and where learning, enjoyment and civic engagement support the development of the individual's voice" (CALTA21, n.d.). Designed for immigrants, the program aims to strengthen language acquisition while making the visual arts relevant and accessible.

For many museums, community outreach is seen as an important means for engaging immigrant/refugee populations in their communities. Recognizing the important role that art plays in the lives of immigrant families, in 2014 the Denver Art Museum (DAM) brought art workshops based on the museum's collections to immigrant communities through six library branches. DAM states, "Art plays an important role in the lives of children, their families, and their communities and their creations of self-expression and imagination echo the immigrant experience across generations" (Amanda, 2014, para.1). The workshops culminated in a special exhibition of participant's work. The Whitney Museum of American Art partners with the ELES AIR (English Language and Employment Services for Adult Immigrants and Refugees), a YMCA literacy program, to engage "new Americans and speakers of other languages in conversation, writing, and art-making" (The Whitney Museum of Art, n.d).

The Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History has launched Pop Up, or temporary exhibits in communities inviting people, many of which are immigrants, to participate as curators of their own objects. Grant (2014) explained:

We work in collaboration with community partners to choose a theme and venue, and invite people to bring something on-topic to share. We lay out tables with empty frames and museum labels. When participants show up, they write a label for their object and leave it on display. (para.3)

Participants have included Chinese immigrants, as well as men and women working in the agriculture industry.

In the interest of encouraging and facilitating dialogue about inclusion in museums, a Seattle-based website, The Inluseum, was created to highlight inclusive efforts and insights. Many articles focus on the visual arts such as Alvis Choi's blog in which he describes his Chinatown Community Think Tank as an "open and user-led space for Chinese-speaking communities to address social, political and cultural issues that have an impact on their perception and definition of art" (Choi, 2013, para.1).

Despite increased efforts, little is known about the impact of, or potentialities for artmaking programs for immigrants and refugees in museums or art centers. This is partly due to the fact that many programs are relatively new, and often grant-funded research focuses on studying measurable outcomes yielding little information related to emerging experiences not measured by traditional assessments. Often the value of museum experiences are based on measurability and pre-determined outcomes designed to resonate with large funding agencies and corporations (Kundu & Kalin, 2015). Finally, many museum programs are designed around formalist curricula that are often medium driven and focused on autonomous production greatly restricting a greater understanding of the relational intricacies in artmaking.

### **Relational Theory as Theoretical Lens**

Looking at the outcomes of LAT as a program was very tempting. It seemed natural to conduct research aimed at assessing goals and outcomes—to in essence work within existing structures to understand the program. While our initial intent was to understand the artmaking experiences of the LAT women, it didn't take long to realize that "visuality took on a subordinate role" (Meban, 2009, p. 3) as relational attributes demanded our attention. Consequently, we decided to examine LAT as a kind of social experiment or relational practice not unlike what Finkelppearl (2013) referred to as "social cooperation" (p. 6). We asked, what can we learn by examining LAT as relational experience?

We draw from the work of curator and art critic Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) whose theory of relational aesthetics can be used to describe the work of contemporary artists characterized in a variety of ways, such as participation (Bishop, 2006), socially engaged (Helguera, 2011), collaborative (Kester, 2011) or social cooperation (Finkpearl, 2013). While participatory forms of art are not new (Miranda, 2014), socially engaged works stand in stark contrast to "a visually-centered modernist aesthetic" (Meban, 2009, p. 33) focused on private symbolic space. Instead artists, use processes "that value and rely upon collaboration, participation, and interaction" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 23) asking us to view art as social interactions shaped through dialogue. In essence dialogue becomes the medium through which new experiences

or alternative forms of sociability are created suggesting possibilities for social change. For Bourriaud and relational artists, conversations around everyday activities serve encourage the creation of new forms of sociability. Differing “from the communication zones that are imposed upon us” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 16), everyday activities create conditions for social exchange outside of institutional or consumer-driven social structures creating the potential for alternative forms of sociability. According to *NY Times* critic, Roberta Smith (2008) relational art has the potential “to re-sensitize people to their everyday surroundings and, moreover, to one another in a time when so much — technology, stress, shopping — conspires against human connection” (p. 1). Consequently relational art practice may have the potential to offer new ways of being and acting in ways that contrast activities that desensitize and work against our ability to create social change.

Often cited among relational artists is Rirkrit Tiravanjia whose work, *Untitled*, involved the cooking and serving of a rice and Thai meal to visitors at the Museum of Modern Art. The work challenged the museum experience blurring the distance between artist and viewer and encouraging visitors to socialize (Stokes, 2012) around food while raising important questions about museums and galleries. Jens Haaning (1994) whose work has long raised awareness around difficulties facing migrants, in a work he titled *Turkish Jokes*, broadcasted funny stories in Polish through a loudspeaker in Copenhagen producing what Bourriaud (2002) referred to as “a micro-community, one set up by collective laughter which upsets their exile situation” (p. 17). Recently, Tania Bruguera, a Queens-based socially engaged artist, created a political party for immigrants by immigrants named *Immigrant Movement International* whose intent, among other things, is “to serve as a think tank that recognizes (im)migrant’s role in the advancement of society at large and envisions a different legal reality for human migration” (Bruguera, 2011). While similar, socially engaged artists and participants work at varying levels of participation making dialogue central to their efforts. Yet as Kester (2004) asked, “What is at stake in these projects is not the dialogue per se but the extent to which the artist is able to catalyze emancipatory insights *through* dialogue” (p. 69). Furthermore, he cautioned that it is important to understand the ways insights about dialogue can be “constrained and compromised” urging that conversation be framed as “an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict” (p. 8).

Like socially engaged artists, many artists, educators, and social workers have designed and facilitated participatory school and community experiences “focused on dialogue, education, consciousness raising, and assisting marginalized groups to address their needs through action” (Conrad, Smyth, & Kendal, 2015, p. 26). This work elevates the importance of “active listening, empathy, reciprocity, and process-oriented approaches” (Schubert, 2006) aimed at creating and re-creating collective social encounters that are co-intentional in nature.

For Friere (1970) co-intentionality happens when,

(leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge or reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. (p. 51).

Like relational artists critical pedagogues aspire to those pedagogies that foster co-creation and social change through encounters that inspire negotiation, reflection, and action.

### **Learning ART Together**

LAT began in spring of 2014 and continues to this day. Located in a large cultural art center, GreenHill houses a gallery and an expansive hands-on educational space called *ArtQuest*. While GreenHill is not technically considered a museum, all manner of operations fall in line with museum programming to include rotating exhibitions, a full-time curator, educational programming, group visits, and museum shop, as well as challenges related to funding. Additionally, the gallery, like many exhibition spaces, is a pristine space typical to most museum spaces. Unlike the gallery, *ArtQuest* was designed with children and families in mind so they could move freely from space to space, medium to medium, in a self-guided fashion. Every Wednesday families can visit *ArtQuest* free of charge. Additional LAT activities took place in neighboring galleries and local businesses.

A new program, LAT was the result of collaboration between GreenHill and a large county child development agency and was funded by a grant focused on the theme of supporting developing economic independence for women and their families. LAT was designed to provide artmaking experiences, to strengthen self-esteem, build community, and encourage entrepreneurship (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Women in ArtQuest*

Composed of up to 18 attendees on any given Monday, the women of LAT come to the U.S. from Mexico, El Salvador, Vietnam, South Korea, and Bhutan. Early on, most were in their 20s and 30s but over time, several women 50 and older joined the group. LAT's first class of participants included women who represented a minute portion of "a population of over 60,000 newcomers in a county with over 120 first languages and 140 countries of origin represented in schools systems" (Center for New North Carolinians, 2015). Needing to learn more about the women, we enlisted the support of the Center for New North Carolinians (CNNC), a university-affiliated program devoted to supporting immigrant and refugees in the state. They provided us with research and advice, often placing social work interns in LAT.

Jaymie, Liz, and I were involved in LAT in various capacities. Jaymie, an art facilitator at the arts center, collaborated with Liz to design and implement instruction while Liz coordinated the program, organizing all activities and handling logistics such as transportation and scheduling. As Director of Programs and a relative newcomer, I concentrated my efforts on meeting regularly with Liz, Jaymie, and grant stakeholders, as well as documenting the program by collecting field notes and conducting interviews. All white women, we had limited experiences working with migrant populations. Liz and Jaymie had worked with migrants as part of activities in other organizations, but our learning was ongoing as we constantly sought the expertise of other organizations for guidance.

Liz and Jaymie focused on activities that would foster what Jaymie referred to as a "fun and relaxing" atmosphere (Jaymie, transcript, 3-11-15), meet the women's immediate needs, develop community, and provide access to resources. A self-described facilitator, Jaymie's pedagogy was well suited to building a welcoming and trusting environment. Her undergraduate background was in interior design instead of art education, and much of her experience had come from working with children in *ArtQuest*. Consequently, she worked with the women much like she did with the children following the women's interests, respecting their pace, allowing space for choice and encouraging social interaction. In her interviews, she described how she would follow the lead of the women often asking them what they wanted to do. Many times Jaymie would have to learn a new technique such as "how to make cornhusk dolls" or t-shirt necklaces freely expressing to them her need to learn along with them (Jaymie, transcript, 3-11-15). Activities included recycled or up-cycled art, paper-based arts, various painting mediums, jewelry making, and textiles such as quilting and embroidery. Jaymie recalled creating activities that demonstrated how materials, that cost little or nothing, could be used in a range of ways to create different things.

Encouraged to make links between their native cultures, each of the women brought a unique history and creative drive to her work. Using their phones, they searched the Internet for artmaking activities that interested them and kept journals. They visited the art center gallery

and other nearby Native American and African American Galleries and learned about mediums and new art techniques shared by visiting artists who provided instruction in printmaking, watercolor painting, embroidery, collage, jewelry making, and paper making.

Jaymie and Liz met regularly with LAT partners to make sure they were meeting outcomes outlined in the grant and to discuss ways to honor the grant's focus on literacy and entrepreneurship. After conversations with the women around food and Liz's familiarity with the book, *They Draw, They Cook* (Padavick & Swindell, 2011) in which artists illustrate their recipes, they decided to create a cookbook. The resulting recipe book featured collages created from hand-painted and printed papers illustrating the recipes and stories of cooking and sharing food with families. In addition to the recipe books, "culture cards" or postcards featuring their recipes, stories, and art were also printed and grouped in sets of 10. Both were sold in the arts center gallery and a local bookstore. In celebration of their work, the arts center exhibited the women's work. The exhibition included food featured in the recipe book along with a wide array of work created by the women. The show traveled to a local library four months later.

To better understand entrepreneurship, the women went on field trips to learn about local resources in the community and ways artists sell their work. They visited a local bookstore to see "how the store was set up and look at other images and recipes in cookbooks so they could get an idea of possibilities for the cookbook they would make" (Jaymie, transcript, 3-11-15). On these visits they became more familiar with the community, sharing new discoveries and navigating the risks of venturing out with one another's support.

### **Our Inquiry**

Our interest in examining LAT stemmed from continued conversations that Liz, Jaymie and I had about the women's experiences. Fueled by emerging questions about our own pedagogy, we wanted to learn more about their interests and needs. We drew from case study (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2006) methodologies situating ourselves as non-objective participants, aware that our actions played out in the unfolding of research events, interviews, this paper and our relationships with one another and the women.

We focused our attention on the experiences of five women: Jum, Estrella, Isabel, Karina, and Mariana, all between the ages of 25 and 40 who had children that attended LAT with them. Using purposive selection (Maxwell, 2013), we selected the women who we thought would feel comfortable talking about their experiences, were active participants in the program, and brought varied perspectives. I conducted open-ended interviews with each of the women (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) using interpreters as needed. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded. Findings revealed that by viewing LAT as a relational

encounter, we were better able to understand how dialogue is a relational medium that honored and challenged “everydayness” and shaped alternative forms of sociabilities for the women.

### Dialogue as Relational Medium

*Learning ART together* meant being together at the art center every Monday morning to create art. Limited by the time, three hours a week, the women navigated the strangeness of new people, places, and art processes unknowingly recreating social exchanges or new ways of being together through “dialogue, discussion and...inter-human negotiation” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 41). Meban (2009) describes relational practice as an aesthetic process of dialogical interaction where “inter-human relations and dialogue become a central part of the aesthetic process, in which art is contingent upon its environment and audience, who often become collaborators in the art making process” (p. 33). As a medium, dialogue fostered the reshaping of their singular experience toward a collective aesthetic that offered the hope of community, greater self-esteem, and hopes for the future.

One day the women were learning how to make scarves from old T-shirts. Self-segregated, the women from Mexico and El Salvador congregated at one end of a long banquet table while women from Bhutan, Iran, and Vietnam gathered at the other end. Non-stop chatter hung over the room as the women talked while tearing the t-shirts into rolled strands of fabric (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Women working on scarves

Many demonstrated techniques by reaching over to assist neighbors while others quietly focused on their work. Allowing for very little idle time, their hands moved in a kind of rhythm. Occasionally a loud burst of laughter would attract the attention of the larger group, and then the group would quiet back down.

While language in the traditional sense posed a challenge, women navigated this barrier in multiple ways. They often segregated themselves so they could converse easily, but when they did talk to someone who spoke another language, they spoke in English opening up a shared space linked to the challenge of learning a new language creating a social interstice which, in essence, built community and confidence at the same time. Mariana described this new way of working together as,

It's like you feel like you don't speak very well language and ...you both are at the same level. You say, 'They are second language'. So we feel confident to that you are also at same level. Very confident to say, 'Okay, we are two try to learn a second language and we are in the process. (Mariana, transcript, 5-23-2016)

Language, which had the potential to divide, created common ground, a shared space that empowered Mariana.

The women also shared their ideas by demonstrating techniques or pointing to the visual details or ideas found in their work. Those women who mastered a skill generously helped others. For Jum, being with others became a valuable and enjoyable means for learning something new and "watching people make something that she [I'm] able to learn" (Jum, transcript, 3-15-15). Watching took on a communicative role, a visual dialogue of sorts that sidestepped language producing a pedagogical space in which the women could act as facilitators.

During one activity, Jaymie noticed a non-verbal conversation between an Iranian woman and Bhutanese woman, who instead of talking, were communicating by smiling and laughing, talking with their eyes, and handshakes. She wondered what was communicated. This broadened our understanding of what it means to communicate recasting dialogue as a verbal and non-verbal medium that was central to the women's aesthetic process and their relational practice.

Through dialogue the women not only helped one another with their art, as Mariana described, they used the time to share contacts and skills. "One woman repairs clothes and one makes very good desserts. So, they have the opportunity to sell the job. Or, we learn that

chamomile tea is good for stress” (Mariana, transcript, 5- 23-16). The women used dialogue to re-create LAT as a market to share goods “suggesting other trading systems” (Bourriaud, 2002) within the structure of an art program, aimed at helping one another gain access to resources.

Isabel, Jum, and Karina shared materials, techniques, and their new knowledge with their children. Isabel explained, “My daughter make a necklace and bracelet. Then, we look at YouTube video to make more” (Karina, transcript, 5-23-16). By sharing new learning with their children, the women extended the conversation, initiating what Bourriaud (2002) referred to as transitivity or “unfinished discursiveness,” (p. 26) unintentionally setting up new possibilities for social exchange through dialogue with their children. In essence, they extended the aesthetic conversation to include those beyond the confines of the group.

### ***Everyday Encounters***

Tapping into the everyday as a means for working outside institutional and consumer-driven structures lies at the heart of relational theory (Bourriaud, 2002). Using LAT aesthetic processes, the women built relationships through dialogue about everyday activities such as cooking and family, while at the same time working against the restrictive dynamics of their everyday responsibilities.

Liz and Jaymie’s welcoming demeanor and conversations around everyday activities set the tone for LAT sessions. Unhurried, it often took close to a half hour for the women to settle their children and socialize around refreshments. Liz and Jaymie realized that honoring the ever-present role of the everyday in the lives of the women was essential for helping them feel comfortable especially given their challenges. Liz pointed out, “It takes a longer time for this population to trust and to build momentum” (Liz, transcript, 3-20-15).

Conversations about everyday activities acted as a social thread, building relationships while bringing a level of familiarity to the women’s lives. In Mariana’s words, LAT was a place to “share conversations about education, kids, and schools” (Mariana, transcript, 5-23-16). For some, having left behind everyday normalcy, having their children nearby, sharing food, and recalling their creative capabilities brought a level of comfort to their experience while combating an ever-present feeling of isolation. Participation in activities that felt familiar acted as a scaffold between their lives prior to displacement and their new lives. In doing so activities opened up opportunities for the women to contribute, with confidence, to activities while adapting to new processes, mediums, places, and people. For example, the weekly sharing of food inspired the women to talk about recipes and tell stories about memories associated with the making and sharing of food with their families (see Figure 4). For many, cooking for their families was a great source of pride and a way of honoring their cultures



*Figure 4. Sharing food*

and the lives they left behind. Responding to the women’s shared interest, Liz and Jaymie suggested to the women that they create a cookbook. Jaymie explained this decision,

Every single one of these women cooks. And I think most of them are cooking based on what they grew up with. In other words, one of our goals was to have them really identify with their culture, and I think food is perhaps the easiest way to approach that. This is also just opinion, but I think art/craft is a little more difficult to pin down which is why I think it was smart to use food—you have ingredients, instructions and you have a final product. (Jaymie, transcript, 3-11-15)

Designed as a community building, literacy, and art activity rolled into one, the recipe book project rallied the women around a common cause with shared purposes highlighting the intersections of food, family, and culture as the women recounted how they learned to make recipes, revisiting memories and sharing stories and emotions associated with them. Recipes became a springboard for remembering family members and the activities they shared around food. Alejandra recalled memories associated with the making of Chiles Con Elote Y Crema (see Figure 5):

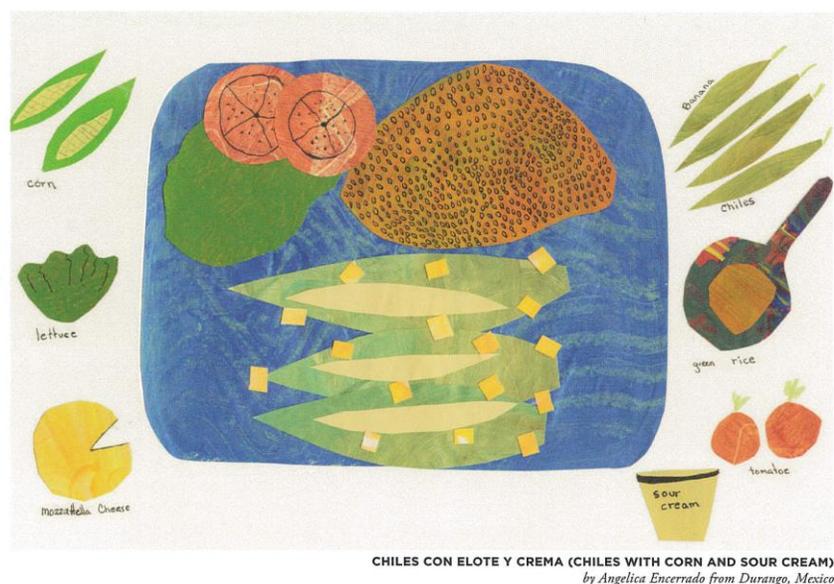


Figure 5. Culture Card and Recipe Book Art by Alejandra

I learned this recipe from my sister. She is a wonderful chef and cooks all the time. I love this dish! I remember every Sunday, my sister, brothers and my mom would come over for dinner to have a special meal. I have five brothers and two sisters. Two of my brothers live here, but I haven't seen everyone else in 14 years. They live in Mexico. It's 28 hours away by car. I try my best to have special Sunday dinners here with my kids. When I make this recipe I think of my family and my sister Mercedes. (Alejandra, transcript, 6-10-15)

While everyday activities functioned as common ground for dialogue around artmaking, we were challenged to reconsider our use of the word “art” to talk about the objects the women had made and were making at LAT. Jaymie explained that when the women first came to LAT, when asked if they create art, they all responded that they did not. But to her surprise one by one, they continued to bring in things they had skillfully created: a handmade dress for a young girl, jewelry, or embroidered objects. For the women, these objects were not art, rather items created as part of their everyday lives. In interviews, most of the women talked about items they had made prior to coming to the U.S. Karina shared how she used to make bracelets by assembling seeds from a tree while living in Mexico. Mariana remembered working with her sister, a teacher, to create decorations for her school, and creating jewelry she sold while living in Mexico.

Over time, the women adopted the word “art” to describe what they were doing. In an interview, Alejandra described herself as “the first person in her family to be an artist”

(Alejandra, transcript, 6-10-15). Later, as artists, the women shared food from their recipes, art, and the cookbook with others in an exhibition at GreenHill. Their art, displayed on white pedestals and pristine walls, was accompanied by the fragrances of spices wafting from the dishes they served, marrying the everyday with the artful and creating an alternative social space that honored their multi-faceted identities as artists, women, and mothers (see Figure 6). While their friends and children attended, their husbands did not.



*Figure 6. The Exhibition*

While relational theory and many relational artists champion the everyday, everyday experiences for most of the women was influenced positively and negatively by existing patriarchal structures. For Jum, LAT stood in sharp contrast to her everyday home life, which she described as filled with “a lot of problems”. She added,

I come here its like I'm in heaven. I can relax my brain and be away from my kids. I don't have to scream (laughs)... And I can watch people doing something that I don't have experience with or don't know what I'm doing. So its like I enjoy watching people making something that I'm able to learn. To improve. Like making a symbol for art or whatever we are making in class. (Jum, transcript, 3-23-15)

Cultural expectations positioned the women as caregivers largely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and child rearing, which made their lives particularly stressful. While the women took great pride in their cooking, children, and families, they also saw value in LAT as a social space that honored them as women. Conversations with the other women helped them imagine “beyond the limits of fixed identities” (Kester, 2004) re-creating a space where they could create new experiences together. Mariana explains,

We can connect in our space, like a woman or a mom, it's our space and our time. It is important for women to have. You can concentrate on one thing. You feel like a productive person...a woman. I love it ! (Mariana, transcript, 5-23-16)

### ***Alternative Forms of Sociability***

While it would be presumptive to suggest that LAT was transformative, the women were able to co-construct alternative sites of sociability through dialogue and the connections that the everyday provided. LAT became an experience that honored and bridged cultures while opening up new possibilities for the women who were collectively crafting a new life. Over time, the women became more comfortable and confident. Many developed a sense of agency initiating new projects on their own, working with one another outside class, or taking work or materials home to extend their artmaking. Many of the women would translate instruction for Jaymie, transferring power from the facilitators to the women and building confidence in their abilities to contribute.

Jaymie observed what she described as a “positive kind of peer pressure” (Jaymie, transcript, 3-11-2015), whereby Estrella was challenged by other women to put more effort into her embroidery transforming the design significantly. Instead of using an applique technique, she returned to her work and painstakingly hand-stitched her design. I remember talking with her about her work and being amazed that she had never embroidered before. The quality was admirable and the amount of time and effort remarkable. In essence, social influence of the group encouraged Estrella to take action, improving her skills, resulting in positive reactions from the community.

Some, like Alejandra, took on leadership roles. She organized a small cohort of women around the creation of a quilt, which was commissioned. This group worked both at the center and on their own, bringing their quilt squares in to seek advice or to show their progress. It became a side project, which further deepened and strengthened their relationships, building both confidence and community beyond the art center space.

Alejandra accompanied Liz as they worked with another group of women at another center to create art and recipes for the recipe book. Having already created a collage and a recipe card, Alejandra had gained confidence in her abilities to teach others. In an interview, she proudly talked about her experience working with the women to not only translate but to teach the women. She intentionally emphasized her role as a teacher as opposed to serving as a translator. Alejandra shifted from the role of learner to teacher demonstrating the capacity of artmaking to affect her actions and reveal a new role for her.

Jum saw artmaking as a viable means for gaining financial independence, representing hope for a better future for her and her children.

I think that is good for the program and it may help us, especially me as a student here. That I can make some money out of what I am making and spending my time. Instead of go find some job and have to work. And I have to have my children with me and I cannot do it right now. So having my children and somebody to take care and somebody that take care of me as well (laughs) as a student. (Jum, transcript, 3-23-15)

Through LAT, Jum received funding to attend a local entrepreneurship conference. She described her experience,

I heard people who have struggling just like me. Uhm I guess I didn't know. I thought that I was the odd number...By being there I heard people talk about how people started their business and their asking money for starting their business. It was impressive. (Jum, transcript, 3- 23-15)

Jum's need to make a living was pronounced. She knew that if she could learn how to make and sell art, she would have options for a better life. In contrast to tenets of relational theory that work outside of capitalist and consumer driven structures, LAT offered the women an alternative social space where they could imagine achieving financial independence, a goal that would open up opportunities. All but one of the women expressed a desire to make money by selling the art they made in LAT.

## **Discussion**

By using relational theory as a lens we came to better understand the profound role that dialogue and the sharing of everyday experiences played in the ways the women, together, re-crafted LAT. Working against isolation, placelessness, and with great generosity, they co-navigated challenges associated with daily life and artmaking, shared knowledge in the interest of building community, and collectively shaped new ways of being together in a new place. Findings foregrounded the women's aesthetic making of new forms of sociability which included crafting a sense of belonging, greater self esteem, and hope.

By focusing on the relational, we were challenged as facilitators to reconsider our practice. Findings suggest that while our pedagogy was responsive and co-intentional in intent, it took a closer look at the relational to help us fully understand how dialogue, in its varied forms, functioned as an aesthetic medium for the remaking of the women's worlds. Our role became secondary as their actions shaped their new identities as women who just happen to be migrants. Additionally, because of our relationship with the women, we discovered how Western structures were unknowingly embedded in our practice. We recognized that the word "art" and consequently "artmaking" cannot fully represent all aesthetic processes and forms which challenged us to imagine yet-to-be processes and forms created through social interaction. This suggests that without an understanding of the relational intricacies of our practice, we remain, in many ways, unaware and unenlightened perhaps unintentionally marginalizing.

By attending to the relational, we came to better understand the power of collective social engagement as an aesthetic driver. As revealed, dialogue, when viewed as a communicative force, has the potential to create newly realized spaces where challenges can be met together, a collective aesthetic realized, and new structures shaped and reshaped in the interest of equitable ways of being. This suggests a shift in our views as educators toward inspiring collective ways of learning together in the interest of the common good, and as researchers it prompts us to consider practices that are participatory in nature.

## **Conclusion**

Just as the art world struggles to fully accept relational art (Finkelpearl, 2013), art educators in museums, schools and other institutions struggle against curriculum and programming as "a standardized artifact" often mired in frameworks and histories designed to make art manageable and consumable and unfortunately out of reach for some. Meeting outcomes, objectives, or building audience often takes precedence over creating a new social experience as is demonstrated by the work of contemporary artists who challenge us to make the relational central to the way we interact, employ knowledge, and design experiences.

Building on Kwon's (2002) "collective art praxis," Meban (2009) proposed that, pedagogy, like relational art, is incomplete, partial and fluid, a work in progress that is to be performed over and over again. This suggests that social interaction, like pedagogy, is anything but stable; rather, a series of encounters that provide an opportunity to re-examine our identities and cultures in relation to one another, to jointly craft alternative ways of being that lie outside "the straightjacket of ideologies" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 44).

Breaking free requires purposeful shifts in the ways art experiences are conceived, employed, and realized, calling for reverse pedagogies (Butler, 2008) or interventions that amplify practice through principles such as, "patience, trust, generosity, uncertainty, chance, respect, complexity, free organization, consensual decision-making and ambiguity" (Irwin & O'Donoghue, 2012, p. 223). We imagine a pedagogy that encourages co-intentionality and creates relation-making spaces where dialogue, not paint or clay, shapes a form. A kind of pedagogy that fosters active listening and empathy and supports opportunities to untether "fixed boundaries and identities" (Kester, 2011, p. 20) and inspires transgression and transformation. This kind of pedagogy would be flavored by the everydayness of lives represented through stories, identities, cultures, and histories and remade collaboratively in the spirit of a collective form that is perpetually reformed.

This work suggests that only by working in co-intentional ways can yet-to-be-known spaces emerge through collective efforts towards new ways of being. This is particularly important when working with newcomers, who need opportunities to shape their new worlds with those who share their challenges. While challenged to design experiences in the shadow of existing structures, new pedagogies that foreground dialogue need further exploration, not in the interest of standardizing practice, but rather in the interest of reimagining what it means to learn art together.

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