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Challenging Conversations: On Arts, Humanities, and Community Building in San Diego

Luis Alvarez

Department of History, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA
Email: l2alvarez@ucsd.edu

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Abstract

I was the inaugural Director of the Institute of Arts and Humanities (IAH) at UC San Diego from 2016 to 2019. The job entailed running 16 undergraduate programs, but that was only half of the gig. I was also charged with creating a hub for public arts and humanities. It was exciting, but daunting. It was a chance to cultivate meaningful exchange between the University and greater San Diego, but I was not well-versed in engaging public audiences or collaborating beyond academic circles. Against the backdrop of Trump's rise to power, my first move was to announce two public forums: Challenging Conversations, and Community Arts and Resistance. Despite my steep learning curve in doing public events, IAH came to prioritize empathy, togetherness, and social justice storytelling. Our success was measured not simply in the number of events or audience members (those mattered, to be sure!), but in community building that grew from such work. It was less about one-off events than sustained conversation with our campus and surrounding communities. The work was collaborative and political. It rested on bringing communities and institutions together, pushing beyond the University's gates, blending arts with humanities, being adaptable, and embracing the possible.

Keywords: community; public arts and humanities; public events; social justice

It's summer 2016, and I've just been appointed the inaugural Director of the Institute of Arts and Humanities (IAH) at UC San Diego (UCSD).¹ The job entails running IAH's 16 undergraduate programs, but that's only half of the gig. I'm also charged with creating a hub for public arts and humanities on campus and in surrounding communities. It's exciting, but daunting. It's a chance to cultivate meaningful exchange between the University and the greater San Diego region, but I'm not well-versed in engaging public audiences or collaborating with folks beyond academic circles. I slide into what feels most familiar and announce IAH's arrival with a series of public events, a lecture series called Challenging Conversations (CC), which invites visiting scholars to campus to share research relevant to our university and city. Not very innovative.

¹ As the inaugural Director, I worked closely with the UCSD Dean of Arts and Humanities (Cristina Della Coletta), two Associate Directors (Professors Mark Hanna and Nancy Kwak), and two Chief Administrative Officers (Helen Olow and Katherine Levy). IAH also served as the administrative home for 16 undergraduate programs – each with its own faculty director – and provided research support to faculty and students. For more, see <https://iah.ucsd.edu>.

Our first event in October 2016 reveals that IAH can do much more. The plan is to host brilliant historians Gaye Johnson and Jordan Camp for presentations on race and state violence. Just days before the event, an all-too-familiar story unfolds not far from UCSD. Alfred Olango, a thirty-eight-year-old Ugandan refugee, is killed by police in El Cajon, a city of 100,000, a mere 25-minute drive southeast of campus. Olango was shot by police on Broadway after his sister Lucy called for help when he wasn't acting like himself. She was 20 feet away when a responding officer fired four times, killing her unarmed brother. Olango was holding a vaping device when shot. What happened next followed a recognizable script. In subsequent hours, a bystander's cell phone video of the confrontation went viral and protests against police spread across town.² In light of Olango's death, it is impossible to *not* rethink IAH's opening event.

With the help of Mychal Odom, a history Ph.D. student with deep ties to Southeast San Diego, I reach out to contacts in El Cajon. They invite me to visit the makeshift altar in Olango's honor near the site of the shooting. Under a canopy covering flowers and photos of Olango, I spend several hours talking to local residents in the parking lot of Pancho's Mexican Grill. They include Rumbie Mubaiwa and Wilnisha Sutton. Both help mobilize the El Cajon community to protest Olango's murder. It was Mubaiwa's cell phone recording and post to Facebook that sparked initial organizing efforts. They graciously agree to join the IAH event on short notice.

In the lead up to the event, I'm worried about how to introduce my nascent, unformed vision for IAH. I am also concerned we won't fill up the room! It isn't until our event specialist Joelle Fusaro and I have to drag in extra chairs to seat the overflow crowd that I breathe slightly easier. Still, my opening remarks feel half-baked and, at least to me, like I am fumbling in the dark for the switch to illuminate IAH's brand of public arts and humanities.

Despite my clumsiness, that first swing at public programming is not a complete miss. The organic interchange between our guests makes it work. Camp kicks the evening off with a snapshot of his book, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State*, tracing the links between the rise of the carceral state, urban rebellion, and radical culture since the 1960s.³ Mubaiwa and Sutton follow. Mubaiwa walks the audience through a poignant frame-by-frame discussion of her cell phone recording of the altercation between Olango and the police. You could hear a pin drop in the lecture hall. Sutton details the blossoming protests and, as an aspiring vocalist, treats the audience to a chilling rendition of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the 1900 hymn also known as the "Black National Anthem."⁴ Johnson concludes the session with an address on Afro-futurism drawn from her books *Spaces of Conflict*, *Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* and *The Futures of Black Radicalism*.⁵ The Q&A is an impassioned conversation about the past, present, and future of urban rebellion, the murder of Alfred Olango, and the need for more social justice-oriented public programming. It also raises difficult questions about why faculty and students weren't *more* involved in the emergent justice for the Olango movement.⁶

² Davis 2016; Riggins 2019. Nearly three years later, in July 2019, a jury took less than an hour to find Officer Richard Gonsalves not negligent in Olango's death.

³ Camp 2016.

⁴ For lyrics and a brief historical description of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," see <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing>.

⁵ Johnson 2013; Johnson and Lubin 2017.

⁶ *UC San Diego Today* 2016.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't relieved when the event was over. It was a disorienting and stressful experience! I also remember thinking it was better in the end because I at least tried to adapt on the fly, listen to our partners, and embrace the apprehension, unfamiliarity, and chaos that came with moving out of my comfort zone. These lessons stick with me as IAH grows.

Soon after our first CC event, I develop a second forum called Community Arts and Resistance (CAR). This is another well-intentioned but less-than-original idea! It showcases artists, musicians, poets, and filmmakers in twin performances at UCSD and a community venue off campus. The first rendition, just a month following IAH's opening CC event, features UCSD alum, poet, and educator Adrian Arancibia. He shares his history as part of the politically charged, San Diego-based spoken word collective Taco Shop Poets. The program includes performances at UCSD and the Black Box Theater at San Diego City College in downtown. Both presentations chronicle the recent cultural history of immigrant rights in San Diego and are amplified by the anti-immigrant ethos surrounding Trump's 2016 presidential victory. Hosting an event away from UCSD is also a revelation. It diversifies our audience and signals my intent for IAH to establish a presence beyond campus. I hope it will serve as a model to jumpstart partnerships with allies across the city.

There are also shortcomings in CAR that I can't quite articulate at the time. I want it to broadcast IAH's investment in the arts in the way CC did for the humanities. Perhaps because I'm a historian by trade with little background in the arts, it takes me a while to see that a separate series for arts and humanities is not the right approach for IAH. There is nothing inherently wrong with the dual track, of course. Unlike many humanities centers at other universities, however, IAH was built to blend arts and humanities. I think this is simply because the arts and humanities departments at UCSD share a home in the same School of Arts and Humanities. I come to realize, however, that there is also a dynamic exchange to be had between the arts and humanities and that both share a commitment to the public good. CC and CAR artificially pulled the two apart. I wrestle with this observation, and it lingers throughout my time as Director of IAH.

I don't want to make it sound like IAH's public programming is designed by accident. Our team pours over potential themes, community partners, format, logistics, and metrics, all with an eye toward making IAH a vessel for dialogue on the most pressing issues of the day. Still, I am routinely reminded of the Zapatista idiom *preguntando caminamos*, or "asking as we walk." It rings true. We try to consider unforeseen or serendipitous opportunities when they arise, even if it means altering preexisting plans or organizing on the fly. This is especially the case because I'm not the only one for whom Fall 2016 ushers in a period that is not business as usual! Trump's rise to power sparks friction, dissent, and urgency that animates everyone's lives on campus and off.

We lean into debates over xenophobic calls for a border wall; the specter of ongoing racial violence; and the swell in public discussion of white supremacy, systemic racism, anti-immigrant hysteria, and anti-blackness. These aren't just topics ripped from the headlines. They are grounds for recouping the public commons in a time of racial discord and heightened political tension. As IAH does more events, I begin to see CC and CAR as living and breathing organisms, constantly energized and conditioned by the moment and people involved. It feels like walking a tightrope between intentionality and a kind of unrehearsed networking. The IAH method is a combo of the "if you build it, they will come" quote from the Kevin Costner movie *Field of Dreams* and Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome." Talk about a mix of the popular and academic!

IAH's mission crystalizes over time. Its *raison d'être* becomes to spark dialogue, build community, and cultivate empathy, togetherness, and social justice. It is much less about the success of one-off events than facilitating ongoing conversations with our campus and surrounding communities.

As event planning ramps up, my introductory remarks about what IAH does and why it matters transform. I stress a broad understanding of the public arts and humanities as two sides of the same coin, one that prioritizes *how* we think and speak as much as *what* we think and speak. I emphasize exchange and discovery across institutions and communities; the value of intersecting lived experiences over rigid academic specializations; and the power of generative partnership. Social justice storytelling emerges paramount. To borrow from Lee Anne Bell, this means accentuating "counter-stories," or "concealed, resistance and emerging/transforming stories" that highlight "broad narratives that echo through the experiences, hopes and desires of those who are left out of mainstream stories that bolster the status quo."⁷ Even if I didn't fully see it coming, CC and CAR morph into a community-building project. It brings people together in a rolling interrogation of the limits of democracy and citizenship *and* how ordinary folk speak back to power.

It is rewarding, but tiring! I often feel like I am on a hamster wheel. Perhaps the best advice comes from our IAH chief of staff, Katherine Levy. She tells me more than once that "less is more." We try to be intentional and not do *too* many events. From 2016 to 2019, IAH organizes 20 in-person CC and CAR events – roughly two per academic quarter – with audiences ranging from 80 to 350 attendees.⁸ We host renowned scholars of native history, immigration law, or racial studies alongside seasoned activists and artists on the frontlines of fights for Indigenous rights, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or against police brutality. We do CC events on Japanese internment and Trump's Muslim ban, the aftermath of deportation for migrants returned to Mexico, North Korea in the age of Trump, fake news since the Cold War, and gentrification in San Diego and beyond. We do CAR events featuring politically engaged artists and activists like vocalist Martha Gonzalez from the band Quetzal, Vietnamese-American artist Trinh Mai, author Jeff Chang, and filmmakers Paul Espinosa and Betsy Kalin. Our partners form an archipelago of extraordinary organizations across San Diego that advocate for youth education, immigrant rights, and social justice. They include Barrio Logan College Institute, Casa Familiar, Alliance San Diego, Jewish Family Service of San Diego, and Environmental Health Coalition. We also routinely co-host events off campus, including at The New Children's Museum, THE LOT movie theater, Maritime Museum of San Diego, and San Diego City College.

Many of these events could be *either* a CC or a CAR event. They blur boundaries between artistic expression and humanistic inquiry, campus and community, and speakers and audience. They help me to disavow "silo" thinking for horizontal thinking. Their point is putting communities and institutions in dialogue – especially those that do not normally engage one another – as much as it is to educate a general audience. Both forums are, to borrow from Daniel Fisher, "an infrastructure of engagement" that powers "exchange between facilitators and participants concerning matters of shared interest" and, in the best of circumstances, "in which higher education faculty and students partner with community members in the creation of knowledge."⁹

⁷ Bell 2019.

⁸ The programs housed in IAH hosted dozens of additional events on a quarterly basis, some of which dovetailed with CC and CAR events.

⁹ Fisher n.d.

By years two and three of IAH, I am able to more tangibly gesture toward such lofty goals. Our cluster of events in 2018 with The New Children’s Museum (NCM), Barrio Logan College Institute (BLCI), and Casa Familiar is a particularly joyful example. In different ways, all three organizations prioritize educating young people from underserved communities. NCM inspires children through contemporary art and creativity. BLCI prepares aspiring first-generation college students in grades 3–12 and their families through rigorous after-school programs. Casa offers immigrant assistance, affordable housing, economic development, green initiatives, and cultural advocacy for low-income folks in San Ysidro near the U.S.–Mexico border. Our partnership blooms from an unsolicited email I receive from Kara Baltazar, the Community Programs Coordinator at NCM. She reaches out with an open invitation to collaborate with IAH, soon introduces me to folks at Casa, and our collaboration is born!

A spirit of reciprocity infuses our partnership from the start. Together, we design several CC and CAR events. “Migrating Imagi...Nations: Conversations with former U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera” includes sibling events at UCSD and NCM with Casa and BLCI students in the crowd. Artist and Culture Strike Director Favianna Rodriguez features in “Art, Power, and the Radical Imagination” on campus before conducting a poster art workshop for BLCI youth in Logan Heights, the oldest Latinx barrio in San Diego. BLCI and Casa youth and NCM staff also trek north to our campus in La Jolla for events on “Singing Our Way to Freedom: A Screening and Conversation with Filmmaker Paul Espinosa,” featuring the documentary about the late, great San Diego Chicana musician and activist Ramon “Chunky” Sanchez, and “We Gon’ Be Alright: Race and Resegregation in Today’s America with Jeff Chang,” hip-hop scholar and activist extraordinaire. Together with artist Rizzhel Javier and UCSD students, we also host a doll-making workshop at Casa and NCM. Kids draw self-portraits on fabric with colored pens, then cut, stuff, and sew them up. Javier tenderly explains that they now have a doll that looks like themselves. I still have the one I made of myself!

The synergy with NCM, BLCI, and Casa stems from a shared desire to diversify our respective spaces, exchange points of view, and take the University to San Diego as much as bringing the city to campus. Our collaboration extends into other initiatives, too, including the Race and Oral History Project (ROHP), a collaboration of UCSD students, faculty, librarians, and community-based organizations dedicated to documenting and sharing the stories of understudied racial and ethnic communities in San Diego.¹⁰

Working with NCM, BLCI, and Casa is also fun! Following meetings with NCM staff in their beautiful downtown museum space, I note what a cool place it is and feel revitalized. It is easy to find inspiration in the buzz of kids and families enjoying the museum. I have similar feelings when I visit BLCI classrooms and The Front, Casa’s art gallery. This is how doing public arts and humanities should feel!

Finding joy in the work continues with our 2019 exhibition of *Reclaim! Remain! Rebuild! Posters on Affordable Housing, Gentrification & Resistance*, borrowed from the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG).¹¹ Located in Los Angeles, CSPG is home to a vast collection of political posters. It is an amazing research archive, learning center, and community nexus rolled into one. During the 10-week run of *Reclaim! Remain! Rebuild!* at UCSD’s University Art Gallery (UAG), we hold several CC and CAR forums. One is “Race and Gentrification: Housing

¹⁰ For more on ROHP, see <https://knit.ucsd.edu/rohpl/>.

¹¹ For more on CSPG and the exhibition, see <https://www.politicalgraphics.org/reclaim-remain-rebuild>.

for the People!” a star-studded panel with San Diego City Council President Georgette Gomez, UCLA urban studies Professor Eric Avila, artist Rizzhel Javier (one of IAH’s many ongoing collaborators!), and Environmental Health Coalition activist Carolina Martinez on different ways to combat gentrification. Another, “UniverCities: How Higher Education Is Transforming Urban America,” explores the gentrifying influence of higher education in urban development, especially in communities of color. Faculty, including me, teach classes in the UAG, and we invite community groups to meet in the space to draw inspiration from the posters.

Hundreds of campus and community members pass through the exhibition. Together we repurpose the UAG as a crossroads for campus and community folk committed to fair housing and racial justice. It is an affirmation of Marisa Angell Brown’s contention that spatial justice and politics matter deeply to public humanities.¹² It is also uplifting. Remaking and holding space to blend university teaching, organizing, and community building reminds me of why I took on the IAH directorship to begin with.

It’s been five years since I passed the IAH torch. It has continued to grow under the steady leadership of subsequent directors, but those first three years were special. The COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of remote events have reshaped how many institutions like IAH do public events. Still, the early years of IAH offer food for thought. Our success was measured not only in the number of events or audience members (those mattered, to be sure!) but also in the community building that grew from such work. It was seductive to think of public arts and humanities in material terms: scholarship, exhibitions, and workshops produced by faculty, students, and community partners, for example. Yet, as Susan Smulyan notes, public humanities is “collaborative and relational, political and personal.” Or, as Mathew Jacobson urges, “public humanities is in the ‘doing.’”¹³ At IAH, the “doing” entailed embracing difference and discomfort, being flexible and ready to alter course, cultivating exchange between communities and institutions, being willing to push beyond the university’s gates, blending arts with humanities, and embracing the possible. This is some of what I learned from the CC along the way.

Luis Alvarez is Professor of History at UC San Diego, where he has also served as Chair of the History Department, inaugural Director of the Institute of Arts and Humanities, Associate Dean for Academic Personnel and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the School of Arts and Humanities, and Director of the Chicana Latinx Studies Program. His publications include *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (University of California Press, 2008), *Chicana Utopias: Pop Culture and the Politics of the Possible* (University of Texas Press, 2022), and co-editor of *Another University is Possible* (University Readers Press, 2010).

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¹² Brown 2021.

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