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Bridging Borders in the Public Interest: La Peña Cultural Center's Advocacy for Intercultural Understanding and Social Justice

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Abstract

To illustrate the interdisciplinary breadth of public interest communications (PIC), this case study explores the societal importance, engagement strategies, and public impact of La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, CA, an internationally known nonprofit organization founded in 1975. It responds to Downes' (2017) advice on what, when, and how to approach PIC investigation and his call for "research readily informed by those 'in the field,'" (p. 34), or those engaged in actual social/cultural changes resulting from PIC consciousness. Drawing from past scholarship on practices in community-based social justice organizations and public interest communications, interviews with La Peña's leaders, the author's own experiences as one of its founders, and source materials from its documentarian, this study encapsulates La Peña's 44-year history of serving as a change agent through amplifying marginal voices.

Introduction

To advance understanding of the interdisciplinary breadth of public interest communications (PIC), this cultural history case study explores the societal importance, engagement strategies, and public impact of La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, CA (*peña* translated from Spanish means "rock"—a word commonly used to designate a gathering spot). The author was one of its founders and remained deeply involved in its development through its early years. Now an internationally known nonprofit organization, La Peña was formed in 1974 and became operational the following year in response to the 1973 military coup in Chile that persecuted

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thousands of peasants, intellectuals, artists, and politicians and sent a wave of refugees into the world.

Founded on the premise that cultural activism can help achieve social justice, from the beginning the cultural center has celebrated and respected cultural differences, embodying a vision that art and culture would build community among diverse populations and help nurture social activism for positive change. La Peña's 44-year history demonstrates that a cultural center can act as an agent of multi-dimensional strategic communications in the public interest. It has hosted musical, theatrical, and dance performances, film screenings, benefits for political prisoners, testimonial panels, roots classes in indigenous music, and photo exhibits. It has offered Latin American foods and the symbolic Chilean empanada in its restaurant and displayed inspirational artwork and protest posters. One poster hung in its entry way for years (Figure 1) shows "CHILE" printed vertically on the left in red and black, with "EL PUEBLO UNIDO JAMAS SERA VENCIDO" (the people united will never be defeated) placed at the top of a photograph taken during the coup. This poster not only reminded the Chilean exiles of their unfinished revolution at home but also called for empathy from their American counterparts passing through the hallway (Yip, n.d.). The symbolic images, sounds, tastes, and visual dynamism in its physical space, and the social justice-focused experiences provided through diverse cultural events, community partnerships, and education programs, align with the principles and practices of PIC.

Figure 1. Poster displayed in La Peña, translating to "the people united will never be defeated."¹



¹ Commissioned by the South Coast Labour Council and Migrant Workers Committee, Wollongong NSW Australia, 1986. Designed and printed by Gregor Cullen.

In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, Downes (2017) presented considerations for building positive social change through PIC. Drawing from a review of the literature in the PIC field, he proposed 10 considerations for scholars contributing to the field's body of knowledge and pedagogy. Relevant to this study is his recommendation for "research readily informed by those 'in the field'" (p. 34). He called for respecting those who do PIC, whom he described as:

those who influence, who generate, who carry out, or who are responsible for, the *actual social/cultural changes* resulting from PIC consciousness. Among these individuals are activists, lobbyists, fundraisers, volunteers, nonprofit CEOs, and others whose daily work is doing/generating PIC outcomes. These PIC practitioners—these field workers—range from the radical to the mundane, from the progressive to the conservative, and from the formally educated to those who learned their crafts on the street, on the ground, or in the community. That is, these field workers are those who do not operate within the walls of academia, but whose work is to *make/do/lead* direct social change. (pp. 34-35)

Downes concluded that PIC scholarship is enhanced "when the living, moving, evolving social/cultural organism outside the walls of academia" (p. 35) informs decisions as to what, when, and how to approach PIC investigation. Thus, this study on La Peña draws from contemporary interviews with principal practitioners of PIC and testimonials from those who benefitted from their work.

Methodological approaches

As case study inquiry is all-encompassing and relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2017), this study explores the cultural history of La Peña Cultural Center, combining the methods of semi-structured interview and rhetorical analysis of testimonial texts. It also relies on autoethnographic recollections based on the author's personal experience as co-founder of the center. It begins by reviewing literature on the social and political forces and conditions that gave rise to La Peña, with some content obtained through personal communication. It then addresses cultural spaces and their role in facilitating social justice, followed by a review of literature on communication in the public interest. Next, the case situation is presented, drawing from interviews with two of the center's long-term leaders and analysis of transcripts of interviews with La Peña participants. The leader interviews were conducted by email and telephone. A pre-established set of questions based on the purpose of the research was asked of both interviewees, with follow-up questions allowing the author to delve deeper into some of the topics and issues and to clarify answers. Both respondents had access to each other's responses, allowing them to embellish or explain details.

A type of rhetorical analysis called fantasy theme analysis (FTA) was applied. FTA is the method of Bormann's symbolic convergence theory that assumes reality is created symbolically (Cragan & Shields, 1995; Foss, 2009). FTA was used to find recurring themes in transcripts of

interviews with the center's publics—customers, volunteers, and workers—many of them members of the Chilean exile community. The transcripts were part of the research undertaken for a documentary film on La Peña. The interviews were conducted by the filmmaker over a 10-year period and were provided to this study's author in 2019 when the film was in post-production stage. As the documentary genre is thought to be strongly connected to reality, use of the transcripts helps to strengthen the accuracy of this study. FTA guided the author to seek recurring themes among diverse rhetors within the transcripts, detect which themes dominated, and identify rhetorical visions—thus discerning the participants' most meaningful collective experiences.

The first-person interviews and interview transcripts allow this cultural history study to center on “the domain of the lived” (Hall, 1989, p. 26), bringing into focus how people actively engage with, experience, and interact with elements of culture within the historical process” (Brennen, 2013, p. 94). The author shared the final case study with the center's two leaders and the filmmaker, allowing them to provide further details or clarifications, if needed.

Historical background

La Peña Cultural Center was started by a diverse group of people residing in the San Francisco Bay Area, as a response to the military coup in Chile that violently overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of Dr. Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. The founders were both non-Hispanic U.S. citizens and Hispanics who had emigrated from South America. La Peña was explicitly created as a form of resistance. Its incorporation one year later, September 11, 1974, was meant as a statement of this intent (E. Leenson, personal communication, April 10, 2019). The following June, La Peña opened its doors to the public under the leadership of a collective comprised of the founders. Like many start-up arts organizations, it is located in a low rent area in South Berkeley surrounded by massage parlors, liquor stores, and drug dealers—and across the street from one of the early Black Panther Party headquarters (P. Chin, personal communication, April 25, 2019). Yet the founders transformed their chosen place, a failed French restaurant, into a triumphant space for cultural activism.

The U.S. movement in solidarity with Chile began developing in 1970 with the beginning of Allende's Unidad Popular government and its strides toward eradicating poverty through a peaceful road to socialism. International solidarity galvanized after the coup when General Augusto Pinochet imposed a dictatorship and imprisoned, tortured, disappeared, and murdered thousands of Allende supporters along with many others including non-political people (Kornbluh, 2003). Governments of neighboring South American countries, European countries, as well as Canada, rose in opposition to the dictatorship and in support of the victims, opening their embassies to shelter and protect those threatened. The U.S. embassy did not. More than 500,000 Chileans voluntarily left or were forced to flee the country (Dona-Reveco & Levinson, 2012).

The U.S. government had actively supported the destabilization of the Allende government through cutting off aid, and the CIA had provided millions of dollars to its opponents in the military (Falcoff, 1987). By doing so, the United States helped to tear down the oldest democracy in South America. It then continued to back the military regime, increased aid to the country, and initially refused to support the resettlement of refugees. However, American universities, non-governmental organizations, religious groups, and certain members of Congress complemented each other to consolidate a broad, public condemnation of U.S. policy and create a well-rounded solidarity movement, which ultimately brought Chilean refugees to the United States. Senator Edward Kennedy in particular, was a positive force behind the eventual establishment of the 1975 parole program for Chileans, which allowed approximately 1,000 refugees into the United States, bringing along fresh energy for the solidarity movement (Falcoff, 1987).

La Peña was one manifestation of that opposition and solidarity. Notably, the same year La Peña opened, outrage over U.S. involvement in Chile pushed Congress to conduct the first hearings ever held on U.S. covert action (U.S. Senate, 1975) and to incorporate concern for human rights into the elaboration of U.S. foreign policy. In its early years, La Peña was a focal point for Chileans who had been living in the United States prior to the coup and who were opposed to the military rule and its persecution of artists and intellectuals. The first Chileans who left after the coup to work at La Peña were not exiles per se, but two sisters who had dual citizenships and, therefore, were able to be in the United States prior to the existence of an official exile program (E. Leenson, personal communication, April 10, 2019). As more Chilean refugees arrived in the United States, their experiences integrating into their host country were difficult due to the challenge of communicating Chile's situation. Yet as they spoke out against the dictatorship, they helped to increase awareness of the repression and their willingness to actively oppose the regime. Officially approved political exiles began arriving in the United States soon after the parole program began, many greatly distressed. Wright and Oñate (2007) stated:

Many exiles were subjected to...human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest and torture...and suffered the death or disappearance of loved ones. The traumas of defeat, sudden and often violent uprooting, shattered lives, truncated careers, and separated families gave exile a distinct psychological dimension. (p. 32)

One hundred exiles and their families relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area. La Peña offered a welcoming and comforting community, as the exiles found a home-like experience there, evoking "their memories and the cultural experiences of having created gathering places for communal art" (Yip, n.d., p. 2). The first official exiles became affiliated with La Peña around 1977 (E. Leenson, personal communication, April 10, 2019). It was a magnet to some as it echoed the sounds and sympathies of La Peña de los Parra, a popular gathering place in Santiago, Chile. The owners of La Peña de los Parra, musicians Isabel and Angel Parra, were children of Chile's acclaimed musician and composer, Violetta Parra, known as the Mother of Latin American folk. It had celebrated "la nueva cancion Chilena" (the new Chilean song)—a

movement pioneered by Violetta that incorporated political lyrics with traditional Andean instruments to advocate social change. It also hosted handicraft and fine art exhibits, dances, theater performances, and a kitchen serving hot empanadas (Rodriguez, 1984). In 1978, Berkeley's La Peña commissioned a massive mural on its front exterior wall to celebrate significant personalities, including Violetta Parra. Called Cancion de la Unidad/Song of Unity (Figure 2), it depicted "poets, musicians, workers and leaders on a multitude of voices raised in songs of struggle, of movement, of social change" (La Peña, 2012, para 1).

Figure 2. The Song of Unity mural on La Peña's front exterior celebrates cultural heroes.²



For many Chileans exiled around the world, the *peña* became a complex symbol of memory and healing. They created informal *peñas* to hold on to and experience their remembered country. Wright and Oñate (2007) described a revered ritual, which involved:

making and selling *empanadas*, the traditional meat-and-onion pies, to raise money and consciousness. Allende had elevated the humble empanada to symbolic status when he called for a revolution *a la chilena* with "empanadas and red wine." Expatriates made it the universal symbol of Chilean exile and the struggle against Pinochet. (p. 39)

Cultural spaces, affect, and social justice

Scholars have researched how cultural spaces nurture a shared consciousness and create networks of participants in, and advocates for, multiculturalism and social justice. Keevers and Sykes (2016) investigated how the interweaving of food and music brought forth a "sense of belonging, participation, recognition and respect between diverse people, thereby enacting social justice" (p. 1643). Higgins (2007) identified shared community experiences as encounters with

² Meaghan Kachadoorian, uploaded to Creative Commons, July 23, 2015.

hospitality. Specifically, he described the community music project PCSB, a samba band, and how it nurtured and socialized the widely diverse participants, young and old musicians, to take pride in their identities as well as immerse themselves in other cultures. Heuman (2015) found recognition and faithfulness in an ethic of speaking with those of diverse backgrounds, requiring some cultural humility to privilege the realities of others' lives.

La Peña's physical and social transformation of an abandoned space in a derelict neighborhood—shadowed by the University of California's flagship Berkeley campus—can be understood through cultural theorist Michel de Certeau's (2011) concept of strategies. He uses the metaphor of a map to envision a government-controlled and unified whole contrasted with the tactics of the walkers at street level, moving in uncontrolled ways, making maneuvers through determined paths, performing an everyday process of exploring the territory of others, and performing a creative resistance to imposed power structures. La Peña gave voice to members and visitors to its community, cutting across mapped borders to cultivate a dynamic thick space (Figure 3).

Figure 3. La Peña's interior spaces reflect Hispanic heritage with archways and murals.³



In his study of place-making in the city of Vancouver, Duff (2010) observed the felt and affective dimensions of place. He explains Casey's (2001) terminology of thick places; they are

³ Janis Teruggi Page, taken March 4, 2019

created through a coming together of “affect, habit, and practice, presenting opportunities for personal enrichment and a deepening of affective experience” (p. 881). Duff’s study proposed identifying thick places through observing how people negotiate and transform place—impacting orientations of self and belonging. This study builds not only on Downes’ call to listen to the voices of PIC workers and to examine their social change processes but also furthers Duff’s work in identifying how affective experiences can be transformative in strengthening community and identity.

Public interest communications

PIC is broadly interdisciplinary, for example sharing commonalities with legal services to the disadvantaged, cultural anthropology’s focus on discursive discovery, and even urban planning for community engagement and capacity building (Johnston, 2017). Fessman (2017) linked the roots of PIC back to an anti-slavery campaign in 1787 and offered a contemporary definition of PIC as planned strategic communication campaigns to achieve social change. He differentiates PIC from public relations (PR), arguing PIC’s primary focus is social good in the public interest with the objective of positive behavior change. He concludes PIC should be seen as a new construct providing opportunities for innovative research. Downes (2017) argues that PIC should encompass the work of activists, fundraisers, volunteers, and nonprofit leadership.

Strategic communication, too, is an expansive area. One way to look at strategic communication is as constitutive communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015) that concerns what happens in the process and how meaning is shaped and co-created—sometimes in face-to-face channels. It is communication that brings about actual change that may occur over long periods of time. This view aligns with the participatory action approach of public interest anthropology research where communities are viewed as subjects of their own experience, providing insider knowledge (Johnston, 2017).

Seyranian (2017) proposed a linkage between social identity framing and PIC. Specifically, social identity insights can help to explain the social influence processes underlying social change. Group leaders, for example, are influential in setting norms in a group and constructing its social identity through framing. The language of this framing is inclusive and also can manifest symbolically in banners, posters, colors, and songs. La Peña’s founding collective led the construction of social identity with its publics. One of the most salient features of PIC, wrote Fessman (2017), is the presence of “specific trigger events that have a significant impact on the issue and allow meaningful, positive behavioral change to occur” (p. 26). Whereas the exodus of Chileans after the 1973 military coup became an issue, the trigger event was the founding of La Peña with a strategy to engage the public and cultivate social justice.

This study is not about a strategic communications campaign with a defined beginning and end. Rather, it is about a public interest initiative that flourished and reverberated from a physical space strategically envisioned and constructed by activists to nurture social justice. In the mid-1970s, to initially advance its mission, it used communication strategies and tools such as media

relations, events, brochures, fliers and posters. With communication technology advancements, a website and social media outreach were added. Almost from the beginning, the diverse people, partnerships, and events bringing the space to life co-created a community that cultivated social change. Ciszek (2017) wrote that activism depends on relationship building among those who share a common goal, as well as on building alliances with organizations that have similar objectives (see Reber & Kim, 2006). Through viewing La Peña's purpose and accomplishments through a lens of social justice advocacy and activism, this study connects the strategic mission of a cultural center with PIC.

Case situation

Cultural expressions and events played a significant role in the United States. Chile's solidarity movement and La Peña provide a case study in cultural activism. Interviews with two significant leaders of La Peña offer insight into the cultural center's history, operations, and impact. One leader, Paul Chin, had a 33-year history with the center beginning in 1977. He served in many capacities: grant writer, volunteer coordinator, special events coordinator, programmer, publicist, and as president of the board of directors for six years until 2019. Chin represented La Peña on several California Arts Council arts panels, several National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) panels, and served on the board of California Presenters. As of this writing, he continues to have a working relationship with the refugees who stayed and worked at La Peña—some as board members and others active in helping maintain the building (P. Chin, personal communication, April 25, 2019).

Eric Leenson co-founded La Peña in 1974 and served on the Board until the early 2000s. He then came back as interim co-executive director during a period of crisis in 2014. After his experience of spearheading and shaping La Peña, a social enterprise, he co-founded Progressive Asset Management, Inc., a pioneering socially responsible investment firm. He served as a strategic advisor to Forum Empresa, a hemispheric organization of socially responsible businesses and is a member of the international board of Instituto Ethos, Brazil. He also leads CANAL—Caribbean North American Laboratory for Social Economy (E. Leenson, personal communication, April 20, 2019).

A third source, documentary film maker Marilyn Mulford, provided transcripts of her interviews with Chilean exiles about the significance of La Peña to their refugee experience. She also shared transcripts of reminiscences of early workers and customers. Mulford conducted the interviews over the past 10 years, 2008-2018, for her documentary film expected to be released in 2020. The time span allowed her to capture voices of those now deceased as well as voices of their children and grandchildren (M. Mulford, personal communication, April 15, 2019). Both Chin and Leenson brought to La Peña their experiences of living in Chile prior to the military coup and witnessing the developing socialist society under the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende. The following summarizes responses by Chin and Leenson to specific questions, illustrated with excerpts from Mulford's transcripts.

The refugee experience

When Chin was hired at La Peña in 1979 via the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a federal job-creation program focusing on public service employment, Chilean political exiles were already working there. Some were members of the Chilean resistance, and some were poorly educated; a few were unable to read or write Spanish. Thus, various refugees had a very difficult time relating to U.S. culture as well as adjusting to the irony of being in exile in a country that overthrew their government. At one point there were 12 to 15 exiles or spouses working at La Peña. This work provided them with income and very importantly created the sense of Chilean culture that permeated the center and made it attractive to many. This atmosphere served as a type of glue in creating a community that would thrive over three generations. It also provided a safety net in protecting the clarity of mission and ideological continuity of La Peña (P. Chin, personal communication, April 25, 2019). The following testimonials and direct quotes were gathered from personal communication with documentary filmmaker Marilyn Mulford and a review of transcripts of her recorded interviews.

My “imagined country”

La Peña became a welcoming family for Chileans without a country, making them immediately feel at home (M. Mulford, personal communication, April 18, 2019). When encountering it for the first time, exile Quique C. marveled at the exterior mural, the music, the foods—all symbols of Chile. Arriving at La Peña soon after his release from three years of imprisonment, he declared it “my imagined country.” Another Chilean exile, Fernando T., revealed, “I imagined La Peña in California, but never like this,” citing the symbols, the mural, the mission, the music—all capturing the essence of *peñas* in Latin America. He developed a deep identification with the center after joining the management collective and learning new skills through working collaboratively with others: “I am a product of La Peña.”

Exiles escaping repression in other Latin American and Central American countries also found their way to La Peña to discover the extended family they had left behind. Monica L., an exile from Argentina, expressed, “When you change countries you don’t have your mom’s home or any relatives’ homes...but I have La Peña.” She said that sometimes it seemed the whole of Latin America came to La Peña, intermingling with Native Americans, Chicanos, people from across the United States, and Berkeley residents—no longer in isolation, but all interested in what each other had to say and their experiences, and ready to help each other.

The diversity of its staff members and volunteers reflected their support for Chilean solidarity as well as a broader affinity with La Peña’s mission to build an inclusive community. One early staff member, Mesi R., a Puerto Rican, has profound memories about the music. Guitarists would often play and sing after meetings or closing time. He talked reverently about the new Chilean song, a revolutionary movement blending folkloric music with lyrics of social

justice: “I never ever in my life will forget the music, the deep music, the meaning of sounds of the Chilean music...that is something that will be there forever.”

Eventually, some of the exiled Chileans returned to Chile—several to participate in the underground movement to overthrow the dictatorship. A few of these returnees died in armed confrontations. Those who stayed in the Bay Area created lives for themselves by going through school and getting degrees. Others were able to get into craft unions and ended up with well-paid union jobs. However, these settled refugees continued to come to La Peña because of cultural ties. One exile, a regular at La Peña for more than three decades, praised it as a source of comfort and fellowship.

“This is what happened to me”

The tortured, the imprisoned, and the terrorized harbor private stories. Chilean exile Hector S. shared how the center facilitated remembrance and healing on the 30th anniversary of the coup (M. Mulford, personal communication, April 18, 2019):

In 2003 (September 11), everybody just walked into La Peña. We didn’t put out an email alert; we didn’t organize anything; we didn’t call anybody. It was something that was really natural. Everybody was bringing things like pictures and candles... We walked into the cultural room, the big room, and we made a huge circle. And this was the first time that Chileans who came to Berkeley, who were connected to La Peña, were telling their personal stories about what happened in Chile. There were a lot of people who were saying, “This happened to me, this happened to me.” (Mulford transcript)

He said they were sharing stories in a way they had never done before; it was a very emotional and important moment for the Chilean exiles. La Peña had become a natural gathering place to mark significant dates, for example in 1998 when Pinochet was arrested. On that day, exiles and others headed to La Peña to discuss and celebrate that finally he would be brought to justice for all his crimes. Chileans also gathered there for Chilean Independence Day, and on New Year’s Day they were drawn to an annual one-pot mixed seafood curanto hosted by one of the founders and first chef, Chilean Hugo Brenni. The curanto is a traditional dish from the Chiloé rchipelago.

“Bridging multiple worlds”

At times it seemed that everyone who came to the United States from Latin and Central America went through La Peña (M. Mulford, personal communication, April 18, 2019). The center’s reputation for welcoming anyone who had escaped or experienced repression drew international visitors, volunteers, and performers. One current board member, Paloma S., daughter of a Chilean exile, praised the center’s strong influence on diversity: “I always use the term ‘bridging multiple worlds’...by bringing diverse programs...I don’t think there is any place like it in the U.S.”

The Puerto Rican staff member, Mesi R., shared his bartending experiences and how Latinos learned about other Latino cultures:

Sometimes I counted 13, 15 nationalities—Algerian, Peruvian, Chilean, Chicano, Puerto Rican—so, with all of those nationalities, the discussions started an education process. I learned a lot about the fight in Algeria for example. I learned a lot about Kenya. I learned about Egypt. People learned about Puerto Rico. They didn't know where Puerto Rico was! It was there we learned a lot.

Chilean exile Feña T. explained how dialogue helped the center's community members learn to challenge stereotypes: "It was an experience that opened our eyes, and in a way forced us to embrace other experiences, other struggles, women's struggles." Long-time worker and Chilean exile Hector S. noted the breadth of artists from all over the world who shared their stories and cultures: Guatemala, el Salvador, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba, to name just a few. He said, "I think that La Peña is a miracle—to be alive...after 40 plus-years...there is something fundamentally good here." Many would point to its persistent hospitality and inclusivity through music, performance, art, and food.

"Second Gen"

In 2019, another generation of young activists is running the center (M. Mulford, personal communication, April 18, 2019). In 2012, a Second Gen group was launched by an important and dynamic group of young people. The group's mission was to express the needs of their generation regarding how La Peña should function in contemporary times. This group was comprised of the children of founders and exiles associated with the organization. It embraced continuity and admiration for the center's values. La Peña may not have survived without the existence of that group. Current co-director Natalia is a daughter of Chilean refugees from Texas. Fellow co-director Bianca, of Puerto Rican and Mexican heritage, got involved through her membership in Second Gen. Both are in their early 30s.

The children of former Chilean prisoners, activists, and exiles have struggled to negotiate their parents' history, along with their own La Peña upbringing, with their identities and contemporary lives—especially with people outside of the community. Growing up with stories of imprisonment, concentration camps, and a politicized life may have traumatized the sons and daughters of the exiles. Thus, as La Peña did for their parents, it offers their children a place of belonging, as Laura S. described: "Not having to explain when you talk to someone because they know; they were there. I love La Peña for that." They also praised the multigenerational aspect of the center and call it a second home with an extended family. Those who have become artists attribute their success to the collaborations possible at La Peña.

Even some third-generation children have been raised to feel at home in La Peña, as they have accompanied their parents to work, meetings, and performances. More so, these grandchildren of the exiles have become world citizens through their exposure to and integration into its international community.

The following three sections draw substantially from personal communication with Eric Leenson, co-founder and former executive director, and Paul Chin, former chair, board of directors.

Funding

Much of the early years were supported by progressive grassroots-oriented people who made small donations (P. Chin personal communication, April 22, 2019). As the organization grew into the 1980s and 1990s, more recognition was paid to it. The country began the discourse of the changing demographics within the growing Latino population. The NEA recognized the value of multi-cultural programming. The California Arts Council began providing technical support in grant writing. In the 1980s the Council awarded La Peña grants to pay instructors (many members of the musical ensemble Grupo Raiz) to teach Andean music and Nueva Cancion Chilena (new Chilean song). The music classes later expanded to Afro-Cuban and Mexican and Afro-Venezuelan.

Major private foundations started funding the center in the 1990s. Into the 2000s, foundations such as Duke, Ford, Rockefeller, S.F. Foundation, Hewlett, and James Irvine were significant donors to La Peña. These donor grants permitted the center to expand into national productions as well as allowed it to book prominent artists. However, foundations change priorities and likewise can change course. The NEA and the California Arts Council budgets were drastically cut in the early 2000s. The 2008 financial crash also brought a cut from private foundations, and in 2012 the center faced the end of major grants. The loss of \$250,000 in grant funding over a three-year span precipitated a financial crisis. Eventually, the staff collective dissolved itself and was unable to come up with a sustainable plan to maintain its staff. A community crisis ensued, and the bulk of the staff was rehired. After reorganizing, an executive director was hired. In 2019, two co-directors and a deputy director were in place with part-timers running the organization.

After 44 years, the center is still financially challenged, with approximately 60 percent of its budget contributed and 40 percent earned. The physical space needs substantial repairs and upgrades, and the center struggles to keep staff in a geographic area where the cost of living is very high. Financial constraints have caused the center to lose some of its political orientation, as funders typically avoid politics and better-healed patrons seem more engaged in cultural aspects. Understandably, the center must now charge more to survive, and this too culls out struggling political organizations. Yet La Peña still merits some large grants. For example, in 2016, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation awarded La Peña, in partnership with Dance Monks, a performance studio for social change, a \$60,000 grant to implement interdisciplinary arts that hear, represent, and honor the needs of the Mexican immigrant community in the East Bay area (Doris Duke, 2016). During an artist-in-residence appointment funded by Duke, Chicano Caleb Duarte figuratively transformed the building into a refugee embassy, adding large exterior panels with murals evoking both Central American and Syrian refugees. One image, inspired by a

riveting news photo, featured the lifeless body of a young Syrian boy washed up on a beach in Turkey.

A revolutionary place called “home”

La Peña has always been a safe space for all oppressed people—and a special place, jointly and uniquely, for many community groups. Berkeley's mayor in the 1970s, Gus Newport, called it “Berkeley's Great Hall of the Peoples” (E. Leenson, personal communication, April 10, 2019). Secondary to its outreach to the Latin American community has been a strong welcoming of international and U.S. groups. From the beginning, the early La Peña collective built strategic alliances with international solidarity groups such as other Latin American groups, the Iranian Students Association, and the Anti-Marcos Coalition. Likewise, it built local ties to the American Indian Movement, Comexas (an East Oakland community group), and the 3rd World News Bureau at KPFA, a Pacifica listener-sponsored radio station that would occasionally live-broadcast from the center and gave it a radio show. The center also was an early adopter of hip hop. Messages of violence prompted internal discussions on its cultural relevancy, leading to a refocusing on hip-hop artists whose mission was aligned with La Peña's—using the art form to further the cause of racial and social justice.

Its most lasting impact has been on the cultural life of the San Francisco Bay Area, where a generation of artist activists has built a culture of resistance and activism through the arts. La Peña's educational classes have mentored and taught music and dance for over the past 36 years, first in the music of Chile and then other Latin American traditions. The music group, Grupo Raíz, came together at La Peña at the beginning of 1980. The group extended the work of two of its members who had been singing Latin American music at *peñas* and solidarity events in northern California for over a year. Grupo Raiz's partnership with La Peña music classes allowed the group to expand awareness of the music and culture of the Latin American people. It also permitted them to give support, through their music, to the resistance movement in Chile and to liberation movements in Latin America and throughout the world (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, n.d.).

Today, the center's Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Peruvian music programs have brought up a generation of young performers who are proud of their cultural heritage and some of whom have moved on to become music and dance teachers themselves. Several students have become stars, performing at SFJAZZ, a prominent music venue in San Francisco. However, although social justice has enveloped La Peña's work throughout its 44-year history, in 2019 its cultural ties—along with its younger staff—are stronger forces than its political ties.

An indelible cultural mark

La Peña has left an indelible mark on the culture of the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond (P. Chin and E. Leenson, personal communication, April 25, 2019). During its long struggle to bring alternative voices to its stage—in music, dance, and spoken word—its work has been admired locally and from afar. In the 2000s, the center was recognized as an outstanding presenter by the national Association of Performing Arts Presenters in New York City. La Peña has brought the idea of other cultures and other languages to the national level through its arts advocacy work: it was a founding member of the National Network of Cultural Centers of Color and also a founder of Latino Arts Network of California.

La Peña's stage has been a proving ground for up and coming artists. Local artists such as Marc Bamuthi Joseph (now vice president and artistic director of social impact at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.) and poet Paul Flores credit La Peña as a place that took a chance with their art. Ariel Luckey received two commissions from La Peña enabling him to create and to present *Amnesia*, an interdisciplinary play that reveals America's forgotten immigrant roots and investigates the role of race at the border. Luckey also was funded by La Peña to create *Freeland*, a hip-hop solo performance about finding one's roots. Lakin Valdez, son of Luis Valdez, founder and longtime artistic director of Teatro Campesino, received a La Peña commission to write, develop, and present *Victor in Shadow*, a play about the life of Victor Jara, the beloved Chilean folksinger tortured and executed by the military junta in 1973.

The center was the first U.S. presenter of Afro-Peruvian singer Susana Baca and also presented, on two occasions, the Argentine singers Mercedes Sosa and Atahualpa Yupanqui, the latter considered the most important Argentine folk musician of the 20th century. In the mid-80s, La Peña brought the famed Chilean folkloric groups, Inti-Illimani and Quilapayun, to the United States for a national tour. The significance of these artists cannot be lost. Both folkloric groups were widely popular in Chile pre-coup as pioneers of the new Chilean song. After the coup, Quilapayun was forced to base in France for 15 years while the Chilean military dictatorship destroyed its record label, banned the new song movement, and “plunged the country into what was called the *apagón cultural*, cultural blackout” (Torres, 2013, para. 3). Inti-Illimani's song *Venceremos* (We shall win!) had become the anthem of Allende's government. Touring in Europe when the coup occurred, the group took refuge in Rome for many years.

La Peña's stage (Figure 4) also has been graced by internationally noted singers, writers, activists, and poets such as Lila Downs (Mexican singer-songwriter), Isabel and Angel Parra (Chilean musicians), Jimmy Santiago Baca (Apache-Chicano writer), Junot Diaz (Dominican writer), Cesar Chavez (who held his 50th birthday party at La Peña), Dolores Huerta (labor and civil rights activists who co-founded the National Farm Workers Association), Eduardo Galeano (Uruguayan journalist), June Jordan (Caribbean-American poet), Ariel Dorfman (Chilean novelist and playwright), Ernesto Cardenal (Nicaraguan priest, poet, and minister of culture), Alice Walker (African-American author), Angela Davis (African-American activist and academic), Juan Gelman (Argentine poet), Pete Seeger (American folksinger and activist), Sweet

Honey in the Rock (all-woman, African-American a cappella ensemble), Holly Near (American singer and activist), Los Papines (Cuban rumba band), Flaco Jimenez (acclaimed Norteño, Tex Mex and Tejano music accordionist), Steve Jordan (American drummer), Lydia Mendoza (guitarist and singer of Tejano and conjunto traditional Mexican-American music; NEA National Heritage Fellow), Margaret Randall (American poet and oral historian), Oscar Hijuelos (American novelist of Cuban descent), and Cuban filmmaker Pastor Vega presenting his film *Portrait of Teresa*, and many more.

Figure 4. La Peña's stage has hosted acclaimed musicians, inspiring dance, and celebration.⁴



Discussion and conclusion

The lived experience of La Peña can be understood through the bricolage of music, politics, arts, and foods that play important roles in allowing diverse people to work collaboratively and respectfully together—with music a part of its larger social narrative. The center is a living example of PIC's most valued objective of serving social good for positive behavior change (Fessman, 2017). For La Peña, social justice is not discretionary but a front-line priority as the purpose of the organization. In response to the brutal dictatorship that forced political exiles to the United States, it served as a triggering event—described by Fessman as one of PIC's most salient features—to facilitate the co-creation of positive behavior change.

This study suggests that cultural spaces such as La Peña can serve as change agents by amplifying marginal voices. It draws from the knowledge of PIC field workers who

⁴ La Peña Cultural Center, date unknown

make/do/lead direct social change, as suggested by Downes (2017). Its leaders, Paul Chin and Eric Leenson, were influential in establishing the center and constructing its social identity to facilitate social change—a linkage to PIC (Seyranian, 2017). It offers direct testimony from political exiles and workers about empowering experiences attributed to the center. Indeed, La Peña presents a stark rebuttal to this historic moment of global backlash against immigration.

La Peña’s incubation of new artists representing marginalized perspectives and its funding of exiled musicians also support this mission, as the center facilitated the artists’ broader reach and influence. One of its rhetorical functions was to welcome and amplify the banned new Chilean song. The center also sought and showcased the authentic stories of poets, playwrights, and songwriters, presenting perspectives from the margins to sensitize and educate members of the La Peña community. Through relationship building and alliances with public interest foundations, advocacy groups, and media outlets, it strengthened its objectives.

To consider La Peña’s work as PIC asks us to not only cross boundaries of disciplines, but also to recognize and appreciate the communicative power of not only dialogue but of performance, space, and community. Drawing from de Certeau (2011), Duff (2010), and Casey (2001), this study goes beyond physical space to consider the emotional and ideological maps imposed on cultures and communities and to acknowledge the deeply affective experience at La Peña that creates a thick, safe, intimate space for strengthening community and identity.

Aligned with the studies of Keevers and Sykes (2016), Higgins (2007), and Heuman (2015), the center has created a sense of belonging, encouraged participation, and recognized and respected diverse peoples—essentially serving the public interest through performing social justice. It has demonstrated an ethic of care, outlined in its mission and values, that has shown hospitality to all and encouraged respect for other cultures. The center also has taken responsibility to assess its outcomes and strategize to respond to changing needs and expectations of its publics. For example, La Peña evaluates its progress, social impact, and goals through strategic planning sessions, focus group research, audience polling, and conversations with volunteers and partners. It regularly revisits its mission at annual board/staff retreats. For funding consideration, it participates in the California Cultural Data Project that collects information on numbers served and demographics such as ethnic groups and ages.

Much of its programming connects with its values. However, with the second wave of a second-generation leadership, more programming focuses on culture without the political/social justice considerations of the past or the ideologies of its founders. “Over the years there has been always been tension between political/cultural goals and the cold hard reality that much of our work is not economically sustainable,” said Chin. He added, however, that much of La Peña’s work remains guided by its mission, “create peace and social justice through cultural arts, education and community action,” its vision of “a world where cultural differences are celebrated and respected and every being has access to life-affirming, creative expression,” and its values, such that “La Peña salutes all of the ancestors whose shoulders we stand upon, and we celebrate the sacrifices made by all of those who have sustained the organization since its humble beginnings in 1975” (P. Chin, personal communication, April 25, 2019).

Chin also notes that, to best preserve the center's history while continuing to evolve, employees and volunteers are expected to uphold several key values. For example, in terms of social justice, Chin said La Peña upholds the notion that “no one is free when others are oppressed.” According to Chin, “We stand in solidarity with all oppressed beings, and we work to actualize universal human rights for all.” Another of these core values is radical inclusion:

We believe that a diversity of perspectives creates the most innovative and resilient community. We actively seek to build bridges between communities representing many races, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, and ages.

Respect is another important value perpetuated by the center. Chin notes, “We honor the different stories, experiences and gifts of every being. We treat every being with the respect we seek for ourselves.” Finally, La Peña values regeneration:

We seek to give as much as we take and to live in balance with the natural ecosystem. We seek to maintain harmony with all our relations and work to ensure the sustainability of this center, socially, environmentally, and financially. (P. Chin, personal communication, April 25, 2019)

Employees and volunteers at La Peña are expected to work cooperatively and collectively to “respect La Peña, its resources, and its staff as if they were your own home and family,” “keep the facility operating and thriving,” and “actively create space for conversations in Spanish and other languages besides English” (P. Chin, personal communication, April 25, 2019).

La Peña has been able to thrive for more than four decades guided by its mission, vision, and values focused on the public interest. It has affected widely disparate publics who expanded their political and social consciousness and built communities for positive change. Chin recalled a trip to Italy in 1985. While walking near the Coliseum in Rome a Salvadoran woman approached him—drawn by his La Peña t-shirt due to her memorable experience back in Berkeley at a La Peña solidarity event for El Salvador. Leenson concluded:

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of La Peña over these years. Thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people attribute some part of their formation and outlook to experiences lived, even briefly, at 3105 Shattuck. Many of us have been struck by how, so many years later and in so many places around the world, memories of La Peña are so deeply reminisced. (personal communication, April 10, 2019)

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Through its focus on the refugee and Latin American experience, this study did not cover La Peña's strong outreach and welcome to the African-American community, the women's community, the LGBTQ community, and others. Inclusive relationships exist with many publics beyond Latinos, relationships extremely relevant to the study of PIC. This study suggests other questions that need attention, for example, how to address the demonization and predicaments of immigrants and migrants—in the United States and globally—or the situations they are fleeing?

In South America, the lingering effects of past brutal regimes continue to impact publics and policies. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires have gathered weekly since 1977 to demand the whereabouts of their disappeared children and their grandchildren abducted by the military during Argentina's dirty war from 1976 to 1983. Brazil, Guatemala, and Mexico are among other countries where dissidents have been disappeared due to governmental impunity. In some Latin American countries, drug trafficking has been responsible for a high number of disappearances. The flow of migrants from Central and South America into the United States has fueled brutal conditions in both human trafficking and detention at the United States border. Addressing how communication in the public interest is serving social justice issues such as these is a critical area of future inquiry.

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Appendix

Exploratory interview questions

1. What years were you involved in La Peña and at what capacities?
2. The filmmaker mentioned she is incorporating the earlier refugee experience into her documentary—“refugees” meaning Chileans who left after the coup. What can you tell me about the refugee experience at La Peña?
3. La Peña has no doubt received some sizable foundation grants throughout the years. Any especially notable—reflecting La Peña’s significance or allowing La Peña to excel in a certain way? What resulted?
4. What significant partnerships has La Peña formed to help carry out its mission of promoting social justice, arts participation and intercultural understanding?
5. Of all its work, what significant impacts has La Peña had?
6. Drawing from your considerations of these questions, is there anything else you can share about how La Peña has fulfilled its mission?