

Building Confianza: Collective Public History in the Time of Distance A joint reflection from the Boyle Heights Museum Team

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Boyle Heights it’s a living poem, that you can feel, that you can touch, that you can hear, that you can dance to, that is Boyle Heights. The place of different flavors and sounds. If we lose that, it loses its soul.

—*Nico Avina (Boyle Heights resident, artist, business owner)*

Abstract

How do you preserve the history of a neighbourhood undergoing change? How do you honor its residents and their legacy of lucha (struggle)? How do you uplift the voices of community members, students and researchers of colour in the museum world? In this joint reflection, members of the Los Angeles Boyle Heights Museum (BHM) reflect on their collaborative endeavors to research, preserve, and celebrate the multi-ethnic history of this Los Angeles (LA) neighbourhood. As a research, exhibition, and educational project led by professors, graduate

students, undergraduate students, and community members, the BHM team uses a horizontal leadership model to uplift and tell the stories of a neighbourhood. The BHM team members discuss the various approaches they use to build *confianza* — trust— among themselves and within U.S. Latinx immigrant communities. By *centring* *confianza* as both a method and a theoretical framework for public history work, the team demonstrates how it builds a more inclusive, family-centred, and intergenerational museum experience. Through *building* *confianza*, the team has been able to pivot their work to address and maneuver new challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Boyle Heights Museum; Los Angeles History; Latinx History; Horizontal Leadership; Building *Confianza*; Community Building; Communities of Colour; Intergenerational Research; Public History; Gentrification

How do you preserve the history of a neighbourhood undergoing change? How do you honour its residents and their legacy of *lucha* (struggle)?¹ How do you uplift the voices of community members, students and researchers of colour in the museum world? In this joint reflection, members of the Los Angeles Boyle Heights Museum (BHM) reflect on their collaborative endeavors to research, preserve, and celebrate the multi-ethnic history of this Los Angeles (LA) neighbourhood.² The BHM is a research, exhibition, and educational

We would like to thank George Sánchez for his continuous inspiration, guidance, and dedication to the BHM and our collective work within the museum. We would also like to acknowledge past and present BHM team members and our community members as they inspired many of the thoughts in this piece.

¹ In this article we incorporate words in Spanish, as many of us come from Spanish-speaking families and Spanish is our heritage language. We also live and operate in a multilingual region with a multilingual history. Thus, in this piece we will provide translations for the Spanish-language terms that we employ, but we don't italicise or put them in quotes as these are terms of equal importance regardless of language. With this practice, we seek to push against hierarchies of language based on race and class which are present in academia and society. For a full history of the Spanish language in the United States, see R. Lozano. *American Language: The History of Spanish in the United States*, (Berkeley, 2018).

² * For more on the Boyle Heights Museum, visit www.boyleheightsmuseum.org.

project led by professors, graduate students, undergraduate students, and community members, using a horizontal leadership model to uplift and tell the stories of a neighbourhood. The authors here consider these introductory questions by discussing the various approaches they use to build *confianza* among themselves, and with the community. As many of the BHM team members are Latinas, the Spanish word *confianza* comes up often in our team conversations. *Confianza* translates as ‘trust,’ or confidence, but for the BHM team members, the word carries a deeper meaning and resonance. Collectively drawing from our different Latinx cultural upbringings we theorise the word *confianza* as bonding, mutual acts and efforts where we empower, uplift, and provide trust within and between each other to tell our histories and the histories of our communities. For us the term *confianza* represents mutual kinship collaboration.³ By centring *confianza* as both a method and a theoretical framework for public history work, the team demonstrates how it builds a more inclusive, family-centred and intergenerational museum experience.

The Boyle Heights Museum is first and foremost a community effort, and thus its organisational structure and divisions of labour mirror community collaborative processes built on our shared sense of *confianza*. The team draws from Indigenous research methods that centre knowledge in the cosmos and position researchers together with community members as co-creators of knowledge.⁴ We draw inspiration from processes outlined by *artistas*: artists who use their art to advocate and fight for social justice in LA. *Artistas* such as Quetzal Flores and Martha Gonzalez begin by making an inventory of ‘cultural treasures’ and map local resources with the understanding that such stories and histories are already part of the community, before starting projects or programmes.⁵ Our team has also strengthened its aims for the museum through participation in ‘Bringing Theory to Practice, Partnerships for Listening and Action by Communities and Educators’ (PLACE), which brings together several institution and community projects across the United States.⁶ Mirroring the community

³ S. Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, (Canada, 2008); G. Rivera-Salgado, ‘From hometown clubs to transnational social movement: The evolution of Oaxacan migrant associations in California’. *Social Justice*, 42, no. 3/4 142, (2015), pp. 118-136; A. Mercado, ‘El Tequio: Social capital, civic advocacy journalism and the construction of a transnational public sphere by Mexican indigenous migrants in the US’, *Journalism*, 16/2, (2015), pp. 238-256.

⁴ S. Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, (Canada, 2018).

⁵ G. Lipsitz and the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, edited by A. Kitchener, B. Marín, and Q. Flores, *SaludArte: Building Health Equity on the Bedrock of Traditional Arts and Culture*, (Los Angeles, 2020).

⁶ The PLACE Collaboratory is a project that brings together educators, students and community partners from eleven academic institutions engaged in community projects. PLACE aims ‘to distill and disseminate models of authentic partnership, engaged learning, and public humanities work.’ From their website, <https://bttop.org/bt2p-initiatives/>.

and co-creating requires *confianza*. Starting with *confianza* allows the team to plan, have a dialogue, and make decisions horizontally and across generations, while inspiring public history that is centred in the community and its desires.⁷

This piece starts with a brief history of the LA Boyle Heights neighbourhood and the BHM. This short introduction will frame our current work, give context for the vision of the museum, and explain our aim to co-labour with the community in its fight against gentrification. In the subsequent three parts, which take the form of reflections from team members prompted by specific questions, we consider *confianza* as a methodological and pedagogical approach that centres care by slowing down and listening. Collaboration and co-creation has become a familiar theme within public history, but we believe that our emphasis on *confianza* introduces new and important aspects. The practice of building *confianza* is central to how the team interacts with one another, and how the team responds to community partners to bring about the mission of the museum, an approach that could be replicated elsewhere. Building from their identities as Latinas, undergraduate researchers reflect on the how their sense of place and connection with the local community manifests in their museum work.

The three reflective parts of this article demonstrate the multiple layers of *confianza*-building that helped us address challenges during the pandemic. In Part II, graduate and undergraduate students discuss how the BHM's collaborative model of research helped them build *confianza* within and among themselves. In Part III, we collectively see how this recognition of their talents and having *confianza* in themselves is translated into building *confianza* with the community. Part IV discusses how, through building *confianza*, the team was able to pivot their work to address and new challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout this essay, team members address how the framework of *confianza* allowed them to think deeply and creatively to create accessible content that translates to the broader public.⁸

⁷ In terms of the division of labour in this essay, the sections that are not part of the roundtable were written collectively. Alex Polt-Gifford generously provided additional editing input for these sections as well. Jorge N. Leal coordinated the general structure of the essay.

⁸ A note on terminology: this essay alternates between the longstanding Latina/o identity label and the newer term 'Latinx,' an evolving gender-neutral term that challenges gender binaries and has gained currency and acceptance amongst US activists and intellectuals of Latin American descent in recent years. Within US Latin American communities, the identity terms Latina, Latino and nationally specific terms such as Mexican, Guatemalan, or Salvadoran are commonly used. In addition, we also employ the term Chicana/o or Chicanx, a political identity developed by Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights movements period of the 1960s and whose use continues to the present in many Mexican American communities in the American Southwest and beyond. Thus, as a collective, we alternate the usage of these terms among ourselves, within our families, in our communities and in our writings. For a longer discussion on the emergence of the term Latinx and its

I

The neighbourhood of Boyle Heights sits just east of the Los Angeles river and a mere three miles from LA's civic centre and surrounding downtown area. Its predominantly Latinx population is divided between those who are US born and those who have migrated from Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Given the migrant composition of Boyle Heights residents, the average annual income is about \$33,000, effectively making it a working-class/poor neighbourhood. This helps to explain why only a quarter of residents are homeowners, and about 75 per cent are renters.⁹ The revitalisation of LA's downtown in the last decades, coupled with the interest of real estate developers and speculators in acquiring properties that are potentially cheaper and centrally located, has made Boyle Heights vulnerable to gentrification.

The fear of gentrification mobilised the community, which during the 2010s organised against the opening of art galleries as well as new housing projects that would cater to an outside clientele while displacing community residents. As a result of this sustained activism, Boyle Heights received national and international media attention as a stronghold of resistance to gentrification.¹⁰ Nonetheless, polarising debates about gentrification often frame Boyle Heights activism as area residents versus outsiders.

Simplified media portrayals of local activism fail to capture the larger structural conditions of gentrification based on class and the agency of Boyle Heights residents in gentrification processes. This is especially true for economically upwardly-mobile Latinxs whose social capital has contributed to the displacement of long-standing renters and businesses in the neighbourhood. Therefore, in our exhibits, we seek to ask questions about both gentrification and 'gente-fication,' a process that describes the return of middle-class and educated Latinxs to working-class neighbourhoods, including Boyle Heights, which in turn has increased housing prices and causes the displacement of residents and their businesses.¹¹

lineage to other political identity terms such as Chicano, see R. T. Rodríguez, 'X marks the spot', *Cultural dynamics*, 29/3, (2017), pp. 202-213.

⁹ 2010 US Census Bureau and the Los Angeles Times demographic profile, see U. S. Census Bureau. (2010). 2010 Census. <http://www.census.gov/2010census/data> and 'Mapping LA: Boyle Heights Profile.' The Los Angeles Times. N.d. <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/>.

¹⁰ For more on the anti-gentrification activism in Boyle Heights, see K. O'Brien, L.Vilchis, and C. Maritescu, 'Boyle Heights and the fight against gentrification as state violence', *American Quarterly*, 71/ 2, (2019), pp. 389-396.

¹¹ For more on the gente-fication and Boyle Heights see A. Huante, 'A lighter shade of brown? Racial formation and gentrification in Latino Los Angeles', *Social Problems*, 68/1, (2021), pp. 63-79.

In response, the Boyle Heights Museum was established in 2017 by George Sánchez, Professor of History and American Studies and Ethnicity and Director of the University of Southern California's (USC) Center for Diversity and Democracy, and award-winning playwright Josefina López, who had long been working on joint community projects in the district. Growing up in Boyle Heights, Sánchez and López both recognised the importance of representing and uplifting the myriad histories of the migrant struggle and social activism that shaped their community. Throughout the decades, the neighbourhood's racially diverse residents—including its Jewish, Japanese, Armenian, Italian, Mexican and African-American populations—have forged strategies of solidarity that sought to address many forms of political and social inequality throughout the twentieth century.¹² Currently, this legacy of activism continues to thrive as residents today organise and push against gentrification, deportations, and other injustices.¹³ Recognising the value of multi-layered Boyle Heights histories, López and Sánchez aimed to showcase this legacy of solidarity and activism to a wider public including the current immigrant community that calls this neighbourhood home.

While López and Sánchez had been long-time collaborators, their vigour to create the museum was ignited by the election of Donald Trump in 2016.¹⁴ Both having grown up in migrant households, they wanted to create a museum that challenged the destructive narrative that the former president perpetrated, as he publicly portrayed Mexican migrants as 'rapists' and dangerous criminals.¹⁵ In the autumn of 2017, the Boyle Heights Museum opened in the lobby of the CASA 0101 Theatre with its first exhibition and with hundreds in attendance: 'Aquí Estamos y no Nos Vamos: Fighting Mexican Removal since the 1930s'.¹⁶ This first exhibition was a collaborative project between López, Sánchez, and a cohort of graduate and undergraduate students. Using archival documents, photographs, and oral histories, the exhibits told the tragic story of Mexican repatriation in Boyle Heights during the 1930s and the community's fight against state-sanctioned removal. The pieces contextualised the community's current struggle against the deportations of its large undocumented populations. An exhibition about repatriation in the context of Trump's criminalisation of the Mexican community set the tone for the museum's future exhibitions, which would not shy away from recognising persistent injustices against racialised communities.

This first exhibition highlighted various strategies that Mexican communities utilised to resist mass banishment and repatriation during the 1930s and invited visitors to recognise the current struggles in these same communities. Moreover, the team planned public programming that encouraged visitors to share their own stories of struggle and resistance. For example, we hosted a young California State LA undergraduate student

¹² G. Sánchez, *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*, (Berkeley, 2021).

¹³ G. Sánchez, 'A community decides who belongs', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 39/4, (2020), pp. 60–74.

¹⁴ G. Sánchez, 'Bridging the divided city: preparing students for a new Los Angeles'. Public Presentation (2019).

¹⁵ D. Trump, 'Presidential bid', speech, (2015).

¹⁶ 'Aquí Estamos y no Nos Vamos' *Boyle Heights Museum*, (2017),

<https://www.boyleheightsmuseum.org/1930-s-mexican-repatriation>

who was fighting against the deportation of her own mother. At another public event, an expert in the era of repatriation, Marla A Ramirez, engaged visitors in a process of highlighting resilience through sharing testimonies and mapping community resources. In this way, the museum was not just a collection of displays, but also an organising site of resistance. All contributors, coming from migrant backgrounds themselves, understood the importance of producing an exhibition that presented archival materials not just as evidence of the past but in dialogue with the neighbourhood's current struggles.¹⁷

Thus, the museum's debut simultaneously explored the past while recognising how we still live with its legacy. In doing so the museum's curators created an exhibition that 'dared to resist and confront the unjust immigration practices' that the residents of Boyle Heights were still seeking to change.¹⁸

The results of the first exhibit influenced how the museum would develop its future exhibitions, organisational structure and mission, as a place for creating historical exhibitions that recognise the radical potential of presenting archival materials and stories from the community as strategic tools of resistance against displacement and marginalisation.¹⁹ In our latest exhibition, 'Traditions of Innovations', we highlighted the

¹⁷ An example of this is the museum's display of telegrams between city leaders that demonstrated the violent scare tactics against the Mexican populations in the 1930s in order to 'get rid' of them. This display and its accompanying captions helped visitors contextualise Donald Trump's xenophobic commentaries within a longer pattern of hostilities against immigrants. Telegram from Woods to Visel, Jan. 6, 1931, George P. Clements Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁸ M. Vasquez Ruiz, 'Public scholarship: strategic lessons for resistance', *Imagining America* blog, (2018), <https://imaginingamerica.org/public-scholarship-strategic-lessons-for-resistance/>.

¹⁹ Past exhibits include: 'Student Power: Walking out for Justice' focussed on student walkouts of 1968 in East Los Angeles. The exhibit paid particular attention to how youth created lasting change in an educational system that denied them civil and human rights. This exhibit made connections to student power movements in 1994, 2006 and 2016. 'Roybal: A Multi-Racial Catalyst for Democracy' focussed on Edward Roybal's campaign for City Council in 1949. He became the first person of colour to be elected to council. This exhibit was particularly focussed on highlighting how his campaign was a coalitional effort between differing racial and ethnic groups of the Boyle Heights community. The exhibit challenged visitors to think about the role of electoral politics within multiracial communities. For more about these exhibits visit the museums website: <https://www.boyleheightsmuseum.org/>

history of entrepreneurship and innovation in Boyle Heights. As a neighbourhood that has welcomed newcomers from around the country and the world, Boyle Heights has always reflected the dynamism found in migrant communities. Our focus on community-based businesses seeks to challenge gentrification narratives and the notion that all effective social capital must come from outside the neighbourhood. At the heart of this exhibition is a message about the perils of *el olvido*, of forgetting. Since advocates for gentrification largely assume that social and economic capital must come from outside, we instead centred the past and present migrant entrepreneurs in Boyle Heights who display their ingenuity, resourcefulness, and innovative business talents to provide for their families and root themselves in LA. The long-standing tradition of home-grown entrepreneurship in Boyle Heights shows a commitment to the Boyle Heights community, as business leaders adjust and innovate to meet neighbourhood needs and tastes.

The exhibition focussed on these themes throughout its five sections, spotlighting the energy, drive and passion embedded in working-class and poor families that generate income for survival. Much of that energy can be witnessed in its vibrant street culture, in the street-front ethnic businesses that have always dominated the neighbourhood and in the street vendors who invested in selling their goods directly to customers on the pavement.

The museum design team deliberately highlighted how these traditions of migrant innovation keep Boyle Heights alive and its families prospering. The exhibition began with a brief history of the neighbourhood, when in its earlier years it was known as the ‘Ellis Island of the West Coast’ for the many migrants that called it home. Then followed two sections that centred the themes of innovation: ‘Incubators for Progress’ and ‘Incubators of Art and Entrepreneurship’. There, we presented the go-getters who have settled in Boyle Heights, and their innovations rooted in their own cultural traditions combined with their new Angeleno experiences.

The sections ‘Entrepreneurial Streets,’ and ‘A Taste of Boyle Heights: Perseverance in the Neighborhood,’ celebrated the various traditions of innovations that came from home-grown entrepreneurs in Boyle Heights. Throughout the second part of the twentieth century and into the present, Boyle Heights has continued to be an incubator for progress in multiple areas. Politically, it was the epicentre of the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 1970s, while in the 1980s and 1990s it saw grassroots efforts to improve the neighbourhood led by mothers and community members. In the twenty-first century, community members advocate for more welcoming uses of public space by and for the community. In the entrepreneurial aspect, the elote and tamal street vendors have long revolutionised the meaning of so-called ‘street food’. Both their mobile vending and stands located throughout the neighbourhood have provided access to Latin American food staples not only for the community, but also for LA food critics.

The latter sections of the exhibition that featured twenty-first century businesses included and honoured the efforts of individuals and families whose businesses continue to endure the difficult confluence of health and political crises, with the pandemic, protests against systemic racism, and the power grab attempts by former president Trump in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. LA’s Latinx communities, including those living in Boyle Heights, have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 with infection and death rates triple that of white residents.²⁰ While Boyle Heights entrepreneurs face myriad challenges, their presence in the

²⁰ R. Lin, and L. Money. ‘As COVID Ebbs, L.A. Latinos See Disproportionate Devastation’, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-02-16/covid-19-declines-los-angeles-latinos-devastation>.

community and survival during this pandemic represents progress, not just for themselves but also for LA. The important stories and the precarious situation of some of those featured in the museum, combined with our desire to have a long-standing presence in the community, demands that we take a slow, listening approach to build confianza and create an exhibit that responds to our community.

II

In a typical museum or research setting, students are frequently regarded as assistants. In contrast, the experiences of undergraduates and graduate students who are BHM team members differs little based on any hierarchy. They are curators, researchers, writers and publicly engaged scholars. In this section, graduate and undergraduate BHM team members reflect on their participation in creating public history work.

As a graduate student, what has working with the museum taught you about research and your role as a future educator?

CASSANDRA FLORES-MONTAÑO, graduate student: For me, as a graduate student committed to producing community-centred research, the Boyle Heights Museum has illuminated the many shapes that this can take. As someone who grew up outside of Los Angeles and was unfamiliar with Boyle Heights, the archival research that I conducted helped provide a solid foundation for understanding the change in demographics, legacies of activism and in identifying key historical actors that have shaped outcomes for the neighbourhood today.

More importantly, the dialogue and interchange with community members provided me with critical insights into understanding the nuances of the present-day neighbourhood, in a place where community stories are in conversation with the archival research.²¹ Our approach to knowledge creation is a collective and communal process. Interviews and casual conversations with current residents have informed my methodological approaches and pedagogical commitments. The stories we tell are co-created with community members through interviews. Our work is as much by community members as it is for them. This is because we are not simply rehashing scholarship for the public, but rather we are interested in creating public history alongside community members as they reappraise their own history in the community.

In the exhibition ‘Roybal: A Multi-Racial Catalyst for Democracy’, I was a part of the team which translated all of our exhibit text into Spanish. Ensuring that the translation embodied the appropriate tone was a process of careful consideration, and we had frank conversations over what might be the right words and what connotations they carried in Spanish. Appealing to African American voters in 1949, Edward Roybal argued, ‘Our skin is also brown – our battle is the same. Our victory cannot but be a victory for you, too’. As a team, we discussed how we should translate the word ‘brown’ to Spanish, as the simple translation ‘café’ did not carry the same connotations about skin colour as ‘brown’ might in English. We eventually decided on ‘trigueña’ as an appropriate descriptor given its established ties as an adjective for hair and skin colour in Spanish. The goal was ultimately to make the exhibit accessible to the local community members. Given the current demographics of the neighbourhood as predominantly Latinx there are many community members whose first language is Spanish. Ensuring that histories of previous oppression and activism are shared with younger generations is important, but what is also critical is sharing this knowledge with more recent migrants to the neighbourhood.

²¹ D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham, 2003).

Translating these materials, which illuminated the historical precedent for rent strikes and protesting anti-immigration policies, can embolden recent immigrants to advocate for their rights.

As a grassroots museum, the narratives we share are not constrained by larger institutional priorities. As graduate students, we have the autonomy to put forth histories and stories that we feel are essential for Boyle Heights community members to know. We encourage community members to be open and share their experiences of race, gender, gentrification, and power, while also taking care to protect their well-being. In shaping the list of entrepreneurs we wanted to highlight in the exhibition, I learned of a three-generation family of women who had sold tamales in Boyle Heights for several years. When presented with the idea of being featured in our story of long-standing entrepreneurship, they declined for fear of compromising their safety as a family with mixed-immigration legal statuses. We as museum professionals have to respect the decisions of the community, and understand that by respecting their material realities we still uphold the mission of the museum. Our constraints do not come from above, but are set by the community members with which we engage. These engagements have deeply informed the approach I take in my own research outside of the museum context. As a graduate student, I take seriously the powerful role that public history and community memories play within communities of colour. I feel a great responsibility in my role as a researcher to centre not only the voices, but also the needs of the community.

While the museum is primarily concerned with telling important histories, we are also concerned with looking to the future. In an age of enduring racism, xenophobia, gentrification, Covid-19, Black Lives Matter, and the climate crisis, we recognise that our work is important for encouraging ongoing community empowerment.

MICHELLE VASQUEZ RUIZ, graduate student: Academia is a tough space to navigate, but it was especially scary to decipher during my first year as a graduate student. I joined the museum the summer I enrolled in 2017. I was already very nervous about my decision to go to graduate school as it was after the election of Donald Trump, and nothing felt certain. The explicit xenophobia and increased visibility of racially motivated violence made me feel anxious and unsafe everywhere. I was deeply questioning whether getting a PhD in American Studies and Ethnicity was a worthwhile endeavour when this field's pillars were being bitterly debated and eroded. As a woman of colour, I questioned whether my perspective even mattered. I felt completely disempowered.

And yet joining the museum was one of the best experiences that helped turn that around for me. While I had some experience working in archives and exhibitions, the museum world had always felt alienating; it was not for me. I did not grow up going to museums. They were not accessible, they were not available in our local communities, they usually existed in wealthier neighbourhoods, they did not present materials that felt relevant, and for the most part, they were never bilingual. I could never take my family to one. Therefore, I had my hesitations. This all changed once I began working on the museum's first exhibition which centred on the repatriation/banishment of Mexicans in the 1930s. Here was a story of a Mexican community, much like my own, living through crisis, experiencing the pain of having families separated, of losing their homes, of feeling perpetually unsafe. Although researching these stories felt incredibly painful, something about seeing myself in these histories also felt liberating. I knew I could help present this story because I was living it.

This experience helped to inform how I see myself and the kind of researcher and educator I want to be. In building this exhibition, I realised that my experiences as a first-generation student, a daughter of migrants, and as a woman of colour prepared me extremely well to take on a curatorial role. Through this experience, I had the opportunity to work with other graduate and undergraduate students who came from similar backgrounds. In one way or another we have all always been engaging in 'bridge work'. We have always had to navigate and build bridges between our communities, our families and school. Some of us had always worked as translators, either translating from English to Spanish for our parents or translating big cryptic theories into

everyday conversations. Some of us, through our experiences, have become specialists in asking questions, creating and presenting visuals or organising materials. All of these were the skills that we realised were the essential parts of creating an exhibition that was accessible to the communities we came from. We utilised our experiences and skills as bridgeworkers to think through this exhibit and ask ourselves at every step of the way: would my abuelita understand and connect with this caption? Would my little niece find this image compelling? How does this exhibit reflect and connect with the people we come from and love?

Through this practice, we began creating a philosophy of education and research that was not centred on teaching the community but on working with the community. We are not ‘academics’ bringing in knowledge; we are bridgeworkers brokering histories, between academia’s resources and the knowledge that the community already holds. Digging into the archives in preparation for this exhibit made me feel like Robin Hood or a decolonial Indiana Jones, as I felt like I was retrieving treasure that had been stowed in faraway lands: the university archives in which these materials were stored. Gathering materials meant using my time and privilege as a university student to locate sources that had been produced in Boyle Heights, but somehow made their way into a labyrinth of university libraries. It was empowering because I felt a kinship with the materials I retrieved. I knew that these treasures would also resonate with our collaborators and primary audience: the residents of Boyle Heights. And they did. I remember one woman stopped and held my hands for a second as she left the museum one day. She explained that her family had been separated by Mexican reparation/banishment in the 1930s. I did not know her, but in this single moment we bonded over a very similar anxiety we were simultaneously experiencing. It was at this moment that I could see the bridges that the exhibition had built. We had created a bridge that was both responsive to the community’s immediate circumstances, and was attuned to the legacy of struggle the community had generated, and connected our roles at the university with our lives as people of colour. This philosophy of bridge-building was something I would see the team utilise time and time again as we worked on the following exhibits.

As I see it, this practice is one of the strategies we used to pivot our work in 2020. You see, bridges move in two directions. While our previous work had made me feel like Robin Hood finding treasures in institutional archives, the pandemic suspended that. This made me realise that the knowledge was not contained exclusively behind the doors of these repositories. It simply meant that we had to cross the bridge in a different direction. Instead of travelling far away, we looked inward to the community. During the pandemic, we turned around and really embraced the idea that Boyle Heights and its residents were also repositories of knowledge. Just as this experience had previously taught me that I had skills and knowledge worth sharing, this philosophy further allowed me to highlight how the community, how Boyle Heights and its residents, were full of knowledge worth sharing. For our exhibit, ‘Traditions of Innovations’ we recorded more oral histories and digitised photographs and art our participants already owned. This philosophy of research and pedagogy allowed us to highlight the skills we already held and to share the powerful histories the community already knew.

What has been your experience as an undergraduate in the Boyle Heights Museum team?

ISIS GALENO, undergraduate student: My personal experience working with the Boyle Heights Museum is something that I have yet to experience at any other job or internship. Through the museum I have had the opportunity to work alongside other undergraduate students, graduate students and professors, and engage in activities including interviewing prominent Boyle Heights community members, applying for grants and helping establish working relationships with organisations in the community. The exclusivity and elitism which is synonymous with academia has traditionally kept undergraduate students from working in museum settings in meaningful ways, but the BHM offers space for us to accurately tell our own stories, as well as the stories of other members of marginalised communities. Giving students of colour such as myself the opportunity to work closely with individuals who look like me, who come from similar backgrounds as me, and who share similar experiences with me, in this capacity and in this professional setting is something I had not experienced before. I am sure this is also the case for most, if not all, of our fellow undergraduate researchers. The BHM

actively works toward the decolonisation of academia by creating a non-hierarchical environment accessible to historically marginalised students.

ROSA NORIEGA-ROCHA, undergraduate student: My contribution to the BHM started when I was a sophomore in college and was barely getting introduced to research. From the very beginning, I had the opportunity to interview a long-standing business and a student-led newspaper outlet in Boyle Heights. Though at first I was unsure of how to approach this type of research, other members provided me with substantive feedback. They encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and, most importantly, to follow my intuition, which has always been grounded in the community. As an undergraduate student researcher, the work that I have done alongside the Boyle Heights community has been rooted in actively centring the narrative that people from Boyle Heights are the experts in their community. This is because oftentimes in academia, scholars tend to forget that theory without praxis can reproduce colonial ways of thinking. The community that we have built at the BHM has allowed me to learn about the importance of conducting oral history in a manner that gives agency to the very people that I work *alongside*, to preserve and document their histories. This has been invaluable to my own development as a scholar.

The willingness of the BHM team to incorporate undergraduate students like myself, who comes from a historically underrepresented background is rare. Participating in a project like the BHM not only prepares students for academia, but also engages them with the act of producing public knowledge that is accessible to folks in and outside of the academy. This practice is indicative of the relationships that we as a community of intellectuals want for future generations. To root ourselves in community and public scholarship, we must actively work to deconstruct and question hierarchical leadership expectations that were meant to exclude students like ourselves.

Regardless of their status as undergraduates or graduates, students participate in various roles within the work of the museum. In so doing, students not only learn and put into practice different skills, but they also have a say in the public life of the work. Inviting students of colour, and students from the community or from similar communities, is more than a training opportunity, it is a core value of the BHM team, because students keep the work grounded in community. They guide the work and the final product so that abuelas and new community members can understand the language and see themselves in the local histories. These lessons are not only learned but taught by each of the students and the final project is much stronger because of this.

III

How does your cultural identities inform your approaches in the BHM work?

NORIEGA-ROCHA, undergraduate student: As a young woman of colour who has experienced the struggles that come with growing up in a city of working poor folks, my positionality has allowed me to view Boyle Heights as an extension of my own community. Like Boyle Heights, my own community in Watsonville in California's central coast region, is undergoing intense gentrification at the hands of outsiders trying to 'better' the community by displacing folks and attempting to eliminate our community traditions. As seen with many politicians, it is no secret that even those who claim to represent the Latinx community have a hard time advocating for their own people, especially where they can advance their own capital gains. Thus, the perspective that I bring into this intellectual community has always been to integrate community members as active creators of knowledge in all of our anti-gentrification work. This is important to me, to work against replicating a 'white saviour' approach in which outsiders – like me - become convinced that they know best, and thus displace community members.

Through my oral history interviews, I have actively worked with local business Candelas Guitars and members of community news project Boyle Heights Beat to create a narrative that accurately reflects their work. Although I have a background in Contemporary Latinx Studies and am Latinx myself, when edits are made to my pieces I gratefully accept them and welcome all constructive feedback. This is because I understand the importance of humbling myself: even though I come from a community similar to Boyle Heights, I have never experienced the life of folks from Boyle Heights. This level of humility is absent in a lot of public scholarship that claims to be rooted in community. Nonetheless, it is distinctive of the way we produce public history at the BHM.

GALENO, undergraduate student: Being able to work with the Boyle Heights Museum is something that I will forever be grateful for. I have always had personal ties to Boyle Heights, so being granted the opportunity to work so closely with this museum feels like a way to give back to a community that has given me so much. I view the museum's work as an important tool used to help members of the community tell their stories and have their voices heard by wider audiences.

As a young, poor Latina being brought up by two hard-working Mexican migrants in South Central LA, I realised from a young age how hostile the world can be towards low-income, working-class people of colour. Growing up five minutes away from USC, I quickly became accustomed to the community displacement and gentrification led by the university, a private higher education institution. This led me to hold a great amount of disdain towards the same university I would, ironically, one day come to attend. My negative experiences have heavily informed the ways in which I have interacted with community members through the museum. Like my beloved South Central, Boyle Heights has also become a hotbed for gentrification in recent years; the displacement of Boyle Heights residents has only intensified with the outbreak of Covid-19, disproportionately affecting working-class communities of colour.

Because of Covid-19, many residents continue to experience dangerous health issues, struggling businesses, job loss, eviction, and numerous other challenges. This paired with the prevalent notion that working class communities are being 'fixed' by gentrification means that it is imperative that the stories of these individuals are archived and shared with broader audiences, now more than ever. While it is unfortunate that it often takes a team of 'academics' for outsiders to listen, by working closely with our interlocutors and hopefully giving a greater platform to their businesses, our team can bring awareness to what is happening in these marginalised communities. Ultimately, my work through the Boyle Heights Museum has shown me how powerful working closely with community members can be, and the extent to which education and research can create positive social change.

How have confianza and family informed your work with the museum?

IVONNE RODRIGUEZ, community curator: As a non-traditional student and community servant, I have fundamentally learned that an institution can simultaneously benefit and harm a community. I am a lifelong resident of the South Central neighbourhood near the USC University Park Campus and primarily serve families near USC's Boyle Heights community. Through experiencing the honour of listening to and working with and for the community, I have recognised that harm and disruption to local residents are likely to occur when community engagement is not centred on reciprocity. Although I expected my campus experience to be intimidating as a first-generation transfer student, I was determined to immerse myself in and build spaces that would eliminate transactional, self-serving relationships and partnerships.

I remember the overwhelming joy that I felt when I officially became a USC staff member and received acceptance to attend USC - both happened within a year. I had set my intentions for employment and acceptance to USC a long time ago and manifested those blessings. I am still incredibly grateful that I was able to share

those events with my three children. These milestones came with an opportunity to learn about the university's culture and explore the benefits that my new work and academic spaces on campus would provide.

During the employee orientation, the facilitator made a disparaging comment about living near the university while discussing the employee homeownership programme. When I attended my transfer student orientation, the Department of Public Safety representative commented on their surveillance of the local neighbourhood and generated a roar of laughter inside the auditorium; I sat indignant instead of amused. During the small group exercises that followed, one of the admissions guides warned about the potential dangers of travelling south of Exposition Boulevard. As a proud member of South Central, I was highly triggered by the language used to describe my home and the community that helped to raise and shape me. I recognised that the university's culture advanced ideas that my beloved community was dangerous, undesirable and required constant surveillance. I was learning to embrace my role as a staff member and non-traditional undergrad student at USC, accepting that I would have to learn to hold on to the discomfort of knowing who I am at my core, and that this may not be welcomed on campus. It was hurtful to encounter these feelings because I had always dreamed of studying at USC, and I acknowledged my privilege of gaining employment in service to first-generation scholars and families near USC's Boyle Heights campus, a culturally rich, hard working-class community similar to mine.

As I adjusted to campus life, my academic advisor strongly encouraged me to reach out to tenured professor George Sánchez, as she held him in high regard. I did my research, purchased his book *Becoming Mexican American*, and requested an appointment. During our enjoyable meeting, he gave me beneficial advice, which included engaging my children in as many campus events and academic spaces as possible. I am usually a strong supporter of taking up space in higher education institutions to allow my young scholars to build a strong connection to campus life and personal placemaking, to inform their innate power and ability to succeed. However, I was very skeptical about introducing my children to spaces where they might feel belittled, as I had during my campus orientations.

My roles felt in contradiction, as I was a representative of the university *and* a student navigating unwelcome academic spaces. A dichotomy was forming between these positions, and I had to be prudent of how I straddled them within the university when expressing my reactions to the hostility that I felt in some spaces. Fortunately, George Sánchez remains a staunch supporter of my academic success and fight against microaggressions on campus. He welcomed me to the BHM team, where I was introduced to the robust history of Latinx and Chicax leaders' contributions in Boyle Heights and other communities of colour. The BHM team and meeting space became a haven where I could be open, convey my feelings and share ideas to curate exhibitions and events for and with the community it served. My participation allowed me to work alongside other first-generation Latinx scholars to perform archival research, search for images, collect oral histories, translate, curate public programming events, and receive constructive criticism and support.

I remember the BHM's first exhibition opening. Having my children with me produced unmatched joy. It was empowering to form part of a team that cultivated a safe and inviting space for knowledge-sharing, where families like mine could visit and enjoy, in sharp contrast to my introductory experiences on campus. The work at the BHM naturally extended into my professional work. The BHM developed a thoughtful collaboration with the college access and success organisation where I serve.

As predominantly first-generation scholars, the BHM team recognises the significant educational gap that deepens between first-generation college-bound scholars and their parents. As young children, most of us become representatives, translators, and advocates for our parents and learned to barter and negotiate space for our families. Thus, we intentionally set out to promote intergenerational knowledge sharing among community members, healing divisions. We recognise that the stories in our exhibits hold strong potential to impact action and further learning.

Our team was invited to introduce the historic background of the exhibitions to the parents and family advocates of college-bound scholars residing in and near Boyle Heights. We created an event in the museum for these families, with music and food, where the parents served as the exhibition's docents for their children. Some even shared their own lived history, such as milestones and fears as they migrated to this country. We hoped this work would create collective interest in local history and community contributions that are too often absent in grade-school history books. These community members welcomed our efforts and partnership and extended an invitation for further collaboration.

IV

How did the team respond to Covid-19 while maintaining our mission and practices?

ARABELLA DELGADO, graduate student: The Covid-19 pandemic forced the Boyle Heights Museum to shift to an exhibition format that could remain accessible even in a time of physical distancing. While the move away from the traditional physical exhibit at CASA 0101 was not ideal, the already-established confianza, both within the team and with the community, facilitated this transition. We decided on two digital projects: an online exhibit, which was not new to the museum, and a set of curated walking tours, which will be the focus of my reflection.

I joined the BHM in September 2020, which was one month into my first semester at USC and my first time working in a museum setting. I brought with me an interest in developing walking tours as an alternative museum practice to engage a wider audience in public history. Drawing from scholars including Dolores Hayden, whose work centres on the impact of historic preservation on public history, I think the urban landscape itself can act as an alternative museum space.²² Walking tours can tie community history and stories to the everyday environment. This interest aligned with the conditions created by Covid-19 and allowed me the opportunity to develop this method for sharing community history.

Confianza is absolutely essential to this process. Within the BHM team, the horizontal organisational structure means that we all rely on and support each other. Even though I am relatively new to the team, I have support from my peers to take this interest and 'run with it'. While I check in with the team and use their feedback to make any necessary changes, I have creative control to experiment with different ways to share the team's work. This structure facilitates the confidence, creativity and collaboration that allows for new and engaging museum methods.

The confianza between the BHM and the Boyle Heights community is also central to curating exhibitions in and about Boyle Heights. Walking tours, or community-based work in general, cannot be effective without the support of the community. Although Covid-19 has limited my personal ability to make new connections, the BHM team had cultivated these relationships long before I joined. Confianza therefore becomes two-fold: I rely on my peers and their existing relationship with the community to curate effective walking tours.

The walking tours for 'Traditions of Innovations' serve a dual purpose: to share history within the landscape, and to increase foot traffic to local businesses. There are two primary tours associated with the exhibition. 'A Walk Down First Street' starts in the iconic Mariachi Plaza. Along the way, you'll see Casa Fina, a restaurant you might want to stop at after the tour, and Espacio 1839, a community-based incubator of innovation, where you can check out new artists and entrepreneurs. 'A Walk Down Cesar Chavez' takes you

²² D. Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge, 1997), p.9.

past street vendors, from whom you might purchase a snack to fuel yourself during the tour, and the former site of Phillip's Music Store, causing you to reflect on the places that no longer exist. The goal of these tours is to share history while placing it directly in the context of the restaurants, stores and other businesses that continue to serve the neighbourhood of Boyle Heights.

Walking tours place history in the everyday. They use the places we already know to showcase community history and create an 'inside out' museum. Even though the shift to this practice was born out of Covid-19, I don't intend for it to end when Covid-19 restrictions end. When curated with confianza at every step, walking tours offer engaging, effective, and accessible means to showcase history to a wider audience. Covid-19 has forced us, and other museums, to reconsider what the museum looks like and how it can serve a wider audience. These adjustments serve as a gateway to increase accessibility and public engagement in museum spaces in the future.

How has working with the BHM community through a pandemic shaped the teaching and learning culture for the team?

YESENIA NAVARRETE HUNTER, graduate student: The BHM community consists of community partners, undergraduate students, graduate students and professors, and many of us on the team are women of colour. Our work has largely been voluntary, and we are responsive to our community partners, the community of Boyle Heights at large, and to those who fund part of our efforts.²³ Working with this community through the pandemic has impacted our activities and our pedagogical approaches. While we have always been focussed on assuring our exhibitions serve as a teaching resource by offering tours in the physical space and teaching guides for local educators, the pandemic slow-down has allowed us to sharpen and articulate the educational pedagogy within our team. For me, there are three ways in which working with this team through this pandemic has shaped my teaching philosophy: by highlighting *responsiveness*, *resonance*, and *reflectiveness*.

As soon as the pandemic shutdowns began, our team *responded* by slowing down and shifting our work towards community needs. As a woman of colour and first-generation graduate student, this was not an easy task as I recall specifically feeling the pressure to be productive and meet deadlines. We began with an intention to map our resources to the needs of the community, an approach that honoured our dedication to the work but centred community needs.

For example, a member of the community had contacted our team regarding what he understood to be an important local archive at the historic Casa del Mexicano, a cultural centre and performance venue in Boyle Heights. The building had recently changed ownership and the archives were in danger of being displaced or even destroyed. Prior to the pandemic shutdowns, our team documented the historical significance of the approximately 108 linear feet of materials, which included business documents, memoranda, and photographs from the 1930s to the 1980s. I had been awarded a grant that allowed us to begin the process to archive the materials, a process we began during the pandemic. Additionally, because we wanted the archives to remain in East Los Angeles and be available to the community in perpetuity, our team leader, Michelle Vasquez, began the process of finding a home for the materials. Based on relationships she had built, Michelle prompted dialogue with various institutions to place the archives in a new home. In the same spirit, our undergraduate

²³ The BHM has received generous support both through funding and a community of partners from the Bringing Theory to Practice, PLACE Collaborative. They have also received generous funding and support through the Mellon Fellows Digitisation Fund at the University of Southern California.

students implemented a plan during the pandemic to help local businesses gain contracts with the university, and for the BHM to hire local partners for work needed in the museum wherever possible. As a result, we hired a digital media expert from Boyle Heights to update our website, and partnered with Las Fotos Project, a program that trains and inspires young women from East Los Angeles in photography and community engagement, to both work with students and support their efforts.

Our team has also been intentional about being *reflective* and *resonant* in our working environment. In short, we aim to extend the same ethos of engagement with community towards one another. As public and oral historians we are trained to deeply listen, to be self-aware as co-creators of narratives, to read bodies and not just hear words, and to be mindful of our position as partners in the performance of memory and place.²⁴ The slowness gave us an opportunity to use that same spirit and practice with one another. Specifically, we intentionally allowed for distance and space to bloom between us without any debt to the project or to one another. This might seem counterintuitive. Our natural response in a time of distance is to draw closer and create more opportunities for connections, but we often mis-place these desires onto projects that are not central to our being and belonging. What I mean is that in the moment, the museum and our work did not matter the most. Though it remains a high priority for many of us as a mode of expression, of connection to the community, and of intellectual work, the world around us demanded a shift in our priorities. Just as we gave our communities the time, space, and support to shift during the pandemic, we also made space within our team, reflecting that same grace inwardly. This gave us the freedom to restructure priorities and allowed team members to take breaks and return to the work they desired.

Working through rupture is deeply embedded in my own work ethics. The hidden messages that women of colour and first-generation college students receive along the way are often tied to questions of our worth and belonging in academic spaces. They get us to believe erroneously that we have to work harder to get a seat at the table, and even harder if we are trying to make place for our communities. The pressure to work can also create a hero mentality, which operates against community desires and disbalances power in our working dynamics. Working horizontally and building on *confianza* allows me to disentangle worth and belonging from labour and more freely commit to slowing down and adjusting, which creates a lasting impact on my teaching philosophy.

In our pedagogy, we aim to address power dynamics and hierarchies that are hard-baked into museum and academic projects. Our approach positioned us to address these issues head on. The systems, timeframes, funders, and institutions we work within measure our impact with power-centred tools such as budgets, deadlines, and identifying key players. To be clear, horizontal, and relational co-creative work does not mean there is no power at play, it means that power and labour are shared and redistributed often. As a team we choose to be what Wayne Yang calls ‘scyborgs’ or ‘subversive beings’ who ‘retool and reassemble the colonizing university into decolonizing contraptions’.²⁵ And we are inspired by scholars and practitioners who use participatory engagement, including Martha Gonzalez who uses *convivencia* and *confianza* both to ‘build

²⁴ K. Anderson and D. C. Jack, ‘Learning to Listen: Interview techniques and analysis’, in R. Perks and A.

Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader, Third Ed.*, (New York, 2016), pp 179-192; M. Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom*, (Chapel Hill, 2016).

²⁵ K.W. Yang, *A Third University Is Possible*, (Minneapolis: 2017), p. 11.

community [and] challenge academic paradigms'.²⁶ I came to my scholarship because I experienced my mentors in community spaces, engaged in relational work.²⁷ I seek to mirror that work as a public historian and engagement scholar by moving from being interlocutors to co-conspirators and intentionally sharing power, labour, and resources.

V

As we have discussed, the work that we do as part of the Boyle Heights Museum has a deep commitment that arises from our positionality as Latinxs and people of colour in academic spaces, working on public history exhibits in our community. To be able to collaborate among ourselves and with the community, we take *confianza* as the guiding principle that shapes our work. With our methodologies and practices, we aim to interrupt established hierarchal and exclusionary practices in academic and museum spaces. In their place, we build relationships horizontally with each other and with the community.

Furthermore, *confianza* is a critical concept when working within migrant and communities of colour. These communities are besieged by the prevalence of systemic racism and anti-immigrant policies that impact the economic, social, and environmental lived experiences of their residents. These are adverse conditions that Boyle Heights and other marginalised communities have to withstand daily. The museum started in 2016 as a response to proposed anti-immigrant policies. Therefore, working on a new exhibition during a pandemic that affected the Los Angeles Latinx community much more adversely than other racial and ethnic groups called for us to continue the work alongside community members who have to live, work, and endure during this confluence of crises.

Hence, there have seldom been ideal circumstances in which the BHM has worked to collect and share the enriching history of Boyle Heights. While other museums might create exhibits post-crisis, we must contend

²⁶ My own intellectual genealogy is rooted in co-creative and collaborative work specifically stemming from the work of Martha Gonzalez and Quetzal Flores and the Seattle Fandango Project, and the Women Who Rock Community in Seattle. Martha defines *convivencia* as the deliberate act of being together and the spirit of conviviality that emerges from participation. M. Gonzalez, 'TEDx Talks: Fandango Without Borders', (Seattle: 2010) [w.youtube.com/watch?v=qPR4GXIUy-M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPR4GXIUy-M), accessed 2/10/2021; M. Habell-Pallán, S. Retman, and A. Macklin, 'Notes on Women Who Rock: Making Scenes, Building Communities: Participatory Research, Community Engagement, and Archival Practice', *Nano*, 5/5 (2014). <https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue5/notes-women-who-rock-making-scenes-building-communities-participatory-research-community-engagement-and-archival-practice>

²⁷ 'Convivencia on Campus: An Interview with Yesenia and Amaris Hunter of Seattle Fandango Project', Carrie Lanza, (Seattle, 2011), <https://vimeo.com/11665983>.

with the ongoing crises that affect Boyle Heights and Greater LA. Museum team members acknowledge that a central part of the museum's mission is to collect and share the history of struggle from Boyle Heights, and to reflect how its residents continue to do so in the present. Yet, we also understand that we would be remiss if we were only the chroniclers of adversity. The determination of the residents heartens us, and we are inspired by the resourceful entrepreneurship and ingenuity of Latinx vendors during times of duress such as the pandemic. We are moved when ice cream trucks become mobile grocery stores and even mobile hot dog dispatchers. We see resourcefulness when barbers set up in the streets' open-air corners to work in safer ways. We see inventiveness as street vendors began to sell face masks and then sell their snacks and goods to the people queuing to get their Covid-19 vaccines. We acknowledge the difficulties faced by community members, but we also commemorate their determination and reflect on how to best extend our solidarity in affective and material forms.

Before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, we have learned that building *confianza* and maintaining it requires us to be present, to listen with the community, and to be responsive; to come through for the community by adjusting, as necessary. Most significantly, we have learned that this work is part of a larger rhythm of being in the community. Though some of our partnerships started and continue to be in some form transactional, we have found that being responsive to community helps to build relationships of all kinds. We invite consideration of our experiences by other institutions and initiatives working on public history with migrant communities, communities of colour, indigenous communities, and gender non-conforming communities, that museum institutions have at times overlooked. While our experiences with Los Angeles Latinx communities might be particular, they may also be valuable for the work that many public-facing practitioners are undertaking in the midst of the current confluence of crises throughout the world.

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