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Brave New World: Nurturing the Arts in New Immigrant and Refugee Communities

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Our organization, the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council (MRAC), serves the St. Paul-Minneapolis area and the surrounding multi-county region. We provide both organizational development training and project support for small arts organizations (annual budgets must be under \$300,000) and community based arts projects. Although MRAC is a 501(c)3, we operate with a public funding model that includes public grant review panels because the majority of our funding comes from the Minnesota state legislature. For this reason, it is important that our board, staff and panels question some of the myths about our target constituencies. I've selected four myths that have tried to derail some of our grantmaking efforts in new immigrant and refugee communities.

Myth #1 **New immigrants live primarily in central cities.** The stereotype says that immigrants go first to "gateway" cities, relocate later to other major cities across the nation and congregate in inner-city neighborhoods with "others of their culture." Then, as economic fortunes rise, families relocate to better neighborhoods and suburbs as they achieve "the American Dream."

It doesn't work that way any more. Data from Census 2000 shows new immigrant and refugee groups now go directly to *many* different geographic areas with 7% locating in rural communities and the balance locating in equal numbers in core cities and suburbs. Minnesota is not an area that one would normally think of as a gateway, but we are home to the largest Hmong population in the United States as well as one of the largest Somali populations and most of these individuals came directly to Minnesota after entering the U.S.

Myth #2 **Every immigrant and refugee group is homogenous.** We know so little about our new community members that we are often unaware of the centuries of rivalries, ethnic/religious conflicts and wars that have often precipitated their immigration. Or we naively expect that all of these differences will disappear when newcomers set foot on U.S. soil and we can treat them as a homogenous group (i.e. *we funded one East African cultural center, can't they program for everyone?*).

Myth #3 Another myth that is alive and well in my home state as we anticipate the arrival of 5,000 Hmong refugees this summer, is that **new immigrants suck up public dollars and put a strain on education and community** systems. This lopsided view fails to recognize the assets our community gains and the contributions of new immigrants including entrepreneurship and a strong work ethic and it erroneously assumes that all immigrants are poor or stay poor for a long time.

Myth #4 That myth feeds into a fourth - **immigrants and refugees have limited educational attainment.** Like most of your communities, Minneapolis/St. Paul has extraordinarily educated taxi drivers and nursing home attendants because their degrees do not translate or barriers such as language, transportation and discrimination prevent them from using their education and training. The fact that an immigrant has limited English proficiency does not mean they lack education. Others establish themselves quickly. Did you know that in the Silicon Valley during the dot-com boom, 25% of the dot-com entrepreneurs were foreign born?

Some Strategies for Funding Immigrant and Refugee Artists and Communities

MRAC has had success funding the projects of new immigrant communities through our regular funding programs as well as through a special initiative specifically targeting new

immigrants. The first has worked well because three of our six grantmaking criteria tend to level the playing field for new immigrant applicants. These criteria ask the applicant to articulate community need and support, diversity and access. In our grant reviews we have found that culturally specific groups have a far easier time answering these questions than do some of our mainstream arts organizations that have traditionally not had to think about who it is they serve.

We've found that new immigrant groups that come to us on their own initiative generally are requesting funds for the same kinds of projects as those who are not foreign-born. These requests tend to fall in two areas. First would be what we call artist-driven projects - visionary artists have an idea that they want time and resources to make happen. For the artist the quality of the art is paramount. Most of these groups would not want to be classified in "grant language" such as "*cultural bridging*" or "*cultural bonding*" labels¹ frequently assigned to new immigrant programming. The artists involved in these projects would likely say, "*You can go ahead and apply any term that you want, especially if it helps us get the grant. But that's your language. We're not here about bridging and bonding, we're here about creating art and sharing it with audiences.*" These artist-driven projects are in all disciplines but literature, dance and music dominate the artistically driven grants that MRAC has awarded. For example, we have helped produce wonderful literary journals done by Hmong American Institute for Learning (HAIL) and *Mizna*, a journal of Arab-American writing. We also recently funded *Hmoob Teen*, a magazine produced by and for Hmong teens.

The second category of MRAC's grant requests is for "community-based" projects where engagement and direct participation of families and children in the creative activity is the most important aspect. Many of these projects use art as part of a larger whole. For example, we funded a group of Hmong women to embroider a *paj ntaub* (story cloth/tapestry) for a

community health clinic to communicate cultural and western health practices. Many of the projects we have funded have been a powerful means for building self-esteem for youth and reclaiming a sense of self and a reconnection to culture for elders. Dr. Pia Moriarty, an anthropologist who recently completed research on participatory arts within immigrant communities in Silicon Valley, made a similar point in a recent presentation to the Council on Foundations. She noted, “No matter whether their dislocations are a career choice or one forced by tragedies of poverty and war, immigrants and refugees share a common challenge. They must reclaim and continue to shape their cultural traditions if they are to attain full membership in American society as whole and healthy persons.”²

An essential element of the projects I've referred to is that the groups have "evolved" to a point where they can focus beyond survival needs and issues. These groups tend to find MRAC through our regular outreach efforts and through word of mouth from other artists.

Working under the Radar and the Role of Cultural Brokers

MRAC has also looked for ways to fund projects for groups that are not yet "ready" to apply to our regular funding initiatives. We have challenged ourselves to be proactive in funding immigrant and refugee communities that practice and value what we call "under the radar" activities—that is, those activities that are *of* the community, *by* the community, and solely *for* that community.

We learned a lot when we developed two small initiatives focusing on the Liberian and Somali communities. We found it was essential to have what we call a cultural broker. Brokers

served as a bridge between the funder (MRAC) and the community group, and between the group and the larger community.

In one case we funded a group of Liberian artists to provide art classes for Liberian youth. When transportation became an issue, the broker helped work out transportation. Later the broker ran interference with the city and arranged for a showing of the student's artwork at city hall along with information about the Liberian community so that the larger community could become acquainted with the city's new residents. Brokers were the ones who knew how to go to the framing store to get pro bono framing for the kids' artwork. They helped provide access to needed resources that the community did not have. It wasn't as if the group was having everything done for them. They had their hands full managing the artistic end of the project and working with parents who required many personal visits before they were trusting enough to allow their children to participate. In their community, you never put your children in the care of strangers.

For many of these under the radar activities, what is needed is a very small amount of money. Groups need money to purchase art supplies, to gain regular access to a meeting/gathering space, or to pay for bus cards or gas to transport families to the locations where activities are happening. If we were looking at the economic development world, we would be talking about the impact of micro-loan funds in generating self-sufficiency and community activity. Because the needs of under the radar groups are frequently small or unusual, they often don't fit in either arts or human service funders' program areas. For example, MRAC received a request from a human service agency for gas reimbursement to allow families to get their children to rehearsals of a young people's cultural dance troupe. Without this assistance, participation in the troupe was inaccessible to many of the youngsters because the families

couldn't afford the bus cards or gas required for transportation on a regular basis. Access to very small grants to use as they really need would make such a difference to new immigrant groups struggling to keep their cultural traditions alive.

What We've Learned....

In the course of our work, we have learned several lessons about what our agency can do to minimize barriers to funding for newcomer populations.

- **Eliminate the 501(c)3 requirement.** For years we have not required 501(c)3. We let groups work with fiscal agents of their choosing and that has really opened our doors to many different activities and groups.
- **Focus on community value rather than what I call capital “A” art.** We need to trust that the community knows what art is of value to them, particularly with "community building" arts activities - it's about participation, about the doing.
- **Fund where new immigrants and refugees are served.** Allowing arts funding through non-traditional organizations such as human service agencies is how many new immigrant and refugee arts organizations begin. We also work with neighborhood development groups, housing complexes, and health providers. And we need to be open to the art happening in non-traditional venues—a hotel ballroom, a busy market/shop, the community room at a housing complex, a church, a coffee shop or a playground.
- **If we want to fund activities that are priorities for new immigrant artists/groups, we must get comfortable with activities by and for the group/community without requiring that *all* activities serve the majority culture.** Many newly arrived immigrant and refugee

groups require a period of time to gain a secure footing in their new home. Later, as groups become more established, they can more effectively be involved in "bridging" kinds of activities such as community festivals or other activities that are open to more diverse participation. When groups are ready for bridging, MRAC has also been able to help make connections between the groups and established community arts organizations, groups that are happy to be a part of the bridge to the larger community.

- **If we want to serve new immigrants and refugees effectively, we need to commit for the long haul and to a labor-intensive process.** If we want to work at the grassroots level, it takes good watering and attention and we can't keep pulling up the plant to see how the roots are developing. We need to nurture long term relationships built on trust and then see what happens.
- **We need to plan for language issues.** The obvious point here is that potential grantees may not be English language speakers. We need to provide a way for guidelines and information to be language accessible. This doesn't mean that guidelines need to be printed in every possible language; it *does* mean that my agency needs to know where to go to find translators when needed to help minimize language issues. But there are also other equally important language issues—that is, many of our words or questions simply don't compute or have meaning to other cultures and we need to be aware of how that inhibits groups from applying or affects decision makers who read the applications.
- **We need to maintain flexibility.** Again, grantmaker categories for art often don't make sense to immigrant and refugee newcomers and we aren't always welcoming to "their" art forms (hair braiding, tattooing, food art). We need to make the application process easier for people and to be more flexible about waiving the rules. We need to be comfortable making

smaller grants; sometimes the micro-economic development model is just what groups need. Currently MRAC is looking at regranting to another community organization that can administer a "closer to the ground" grant program.

- **In a public panel process like MRAC's, we must make certain that decision-makers (our panels and board) have the information they need to make informed decisions about different cultural communities.**
- **MRAC needs to limit the "extra" demands upon culturally specific groups.** When someone "surfaces" as a leader from a new immigrant community, he or she is often overwhelmed with invitations to serve on grant review panels, boards, advisory committees. emergent leaders in newcomer communities frequently feel obligated to accept (particularly when the person requesting is a funder). For the groups we serve, unpaid volunteer commitments can become overwhelming and it is not where groups should be focusing their energy.

As my organization evaluates whether community arts activities are successful we need to let go of questions like *"In what ways has artistic quality improved or has the organization institutionalized or grown?"* and start asking, *"In what ways is this community stronger or a better place to live because of this arts organization or activity? What value does this group and its activities add to community life?"* Artistic production in this context is about cultural and community creativity and it needs a different language than words like *professionalism, organizational development* or *strategic planning*. At MRAC, we are always learning and still looking to answer - *What is the language that best encapsulates the richness of community cultural activities and civic engagement?*

A Coda: More Questions and Answers

When I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 2003 Grantmakers in the Arts conference in Seattle, three questions from the audience have remained with me that deserve further discussion here:

1. Aren't we as funders interfering with a cultural process? "They" are already practicing their cultural and artistic traditions and we would be imposing a structure. Wouldn't "they" need to change some of the things "they" do to meet our guidelines?

My Response: I need to decide whether as a grant maker I wish to deliberately/proactively serve new immigrant and refugee communities. Maybe the question to ask is—how can a funder be more accommodating? It would be interfering if I offered money but expected the potential grantees to fit our institutional construct by requiring 501(c)3 status, a diverse board of directors, or a three-year strategic plan. Not asking the latter question may mean never reaching or serving part of my constituency.

2. With limited funds, wouldn't funding new immigrants and refugees decrease funding available to existing cultural resources and have a "potentially negative impact on established mainstream arts by funding community based arts activities?"

My Response: That's one way of looking at it. For my organization, it is part of our mission to ensure that all people have opportunities to participate in the arts. If we wish to fulfill this mission, we cannot continue to serve only our mainstream institutions, regardless of how hard those institutions work to be inclusive. When we look at MRAC's criterion of "community need"

and apply it to an analysis of our own grantmaking, we must ask ourselves "what audiences are *not* being served by the organizations we currently fund?" And then we must find ways to broaden our grantmaking portfolio to ensure greater reach of our funding resources.

3. If "they" don't reach out and attempt to be inclusive of the majority community, why should we fund their programs?

My Response: If our funding priorities are clear, it will help us answer whether this is a significant issue or not. If the funding request is about preserving culture and/or helping the group to transition to a new culture (i.e. "bonding" activities), then it should not be an issue. If the proposed activity is about "bridging" then looking for ways the group intends to partner with its larger community or involve those outside the cultural group is important. And we as grantmakers can assist in this process.

¹ Bridging and bonding are terms coined by Robert Putnam in his study *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) to describe different types of social capital or community engagement generated by any given community. Bonding forms of social capital refer to more inwardly-focused forms of community building that strengthen the distinctive identities of a particular group. Bridging social capital is more expansive and leads to broader forms of civic engagement across multiple groups.

² Dr. Moriarty's research on immigrant participatory arts was conducted in 2003 for Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley and is now available as a monograph. See Moriarty, Pia. *Immigrant Participatory Arts: An Insight into Community-Building in Silicon Valley*. San José: Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2004. Part of the *Inquiries into Culture Series*.