

ILI: ORGANIZING FOR OUR COLLECTIVE LIBERATION

BY CARLTON TURNER

The Intercultural Leadership Institute is a collaborative effort that has grown out of the work of four peer organizations: Alternate ROOTS, a member-based arts service organization working at the intersection of arts and social justice in the US South; First Peoples Fund, a Native organization that honors the Collective Spirit® of artists and culture bearers; the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture, an organization dedicated to the promotion, advancement, development and cultivation of Latino arts; and the PA'I Foundation, which works to preserve and perpetuate Native Hawaiian arts and culture for future generations.

Within this cohort I am Little Brother. Lori Pourier says that when she and María De León met me I was about 12. Actually, I was almost 30, but I was brand new to the world of nonprofit arts, culture and social justice organizations. It was New Orleans in 2004 at a Ford Foundation convening of the New Works Cohort, a mixture of arts and culture organizations that ranged in size from really small – like Alternate ROOTS, First Peoples Fund, and NALAC – to really big, like Theater Communications Group, Creative Capital and Americans for the Arts.

I started working for Alternate ROOTS in October 2004, so this was probably my first funder driven convening. I don't remember a lot about that meeting, but I do remember feeling like I was sitting at the kids' table at Christmas dinner. It was a strange new world that felt both distant and interconnected.

Over the next decade I would find myself in many rooms with María and Lori, many of which were orchestrated by the curatorial practices and vision of Ford Foundation program officer Roberta Uno. Roberta stressed how important it was that our organizations work together and take advantage of the convening power of philanthropy to organize and collectively strategize for the maximum impact of our work. We listened. It didn't take long for us to realize that, more than money, we needed each other – our communities' survival depended on it.

In 2010, we met Vicky Takamine of the PA'I Foundation, also through Roberta Uno. Together the four of us would experience professional development in our careers and growth in our organizational capacity. However, we often found ourselves trying to fit our organizational culture, mission and community intent into models not designed for us.



Each of our organizations provides leadership development to our members, artists and communities. We knew our communities and organizational models didn't quite relate to the one-size-fits-all context being offered in the field of arts and social justice professional development; we also realized what our communities *did* need wasn't being offered either. It became clear that there was a need that we could and should fill. We couldn't wait or expect the field to design and deliver a program with the cultural context and people-centered impact our communities need and deserve, so the Intercultural Leadership Institute was born.

We have been organizing ILI since 2012. We began with small meetings whenever and wherever the two, or three, or four of us were gathered. But this work would not have happened without the development of our relationships to each other and trust needed to step out and work together to develop a practice with a vision that is greater than any of our singular organizations. We have been working together for more than a decade. Over that time, we have visited each other's communities and homes and learned from each other in ways that only time permits. There is a sincerity and generosity in our approach to this work and we are planting those same seeds into this cohort. We hope that you find in your fellow cohort members a sense of community, and that you invest in long-term relationship building as a pathway to collective liberation.



ILI

THE MEANING(S) OF OUR NAME

In Native Hawaiian, 'ili means skin – the outer layer that holds together something vital. The ethnobotanical meaning alludes to the skin or bark of the Hau plant (hibiscus). The traditional mele **Ka 'ili hau pa kai o 'Alio** (the hau bark wet by the sea sprays of 'Alio) is a reference to a strong shore-dweller, indicating that salt air and sea sprays made the bark of the hau trees on the shore stronger than those of the upland. The hau plant is useful in a variety of ways crucial to Native Hawaiian culture: as cordage to sew kapa sheets or tie sandals and hula skirts; as wood for outriggers and floats for fishnets; and as medicine.

Like the Native Hawaiian 'ili, our ILI intercultural approach to leadership cultivation, too, aims to hold together a space for resiliency and resourcefulness.

