

Let's Talk podcast episode 9

[00:00:00] **Emma:** My name is Emma Grover, and I am the program and communications coordinator at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, known also as OACC. Today we are sharing the ninth episode of our Let's Talk Audio Series. Let's Talk is part of OACC'S Open Ears for Change Initiative, which was established in 2020. With this series, our goals are to address anti-Blackness in the APIA communities, discuss the effects of colorism and racism in a safe space, and highlight Black and Asian solidarity and community efforts specifically in the Oakland Chinatown area. Today's episode is a round table discussion with Elena Serrano, Susanne Takahara, and Aubrey Pandori of Eastside Arts Alliance.

[00:00:53] **Aubrey:** Hello everybody. This is Aubrey from Eastside Arts Alliance, and I am back here for the second part of our Let's Talk with Suzanne and Elena. We're gonna be talking about what else Eastside is doing right now in the community. The importance of art in activism, and the importance of Black and Asian solidarity in Oakland and beyond.

So I am the community archivist here at Eastside Arts Alliances. I run CARP, which stands for Community Archival Resource Project. It is a project brought on by one of our co-founders, Greg Morozumi. And it is primarily a large chunk of his own collection from over the years, but it is a Third World archive with many artifacts, journals, pens, newspapers from social movements in the Bay Area and beyond, international social movements from the 1960s forward. We do a few different programs through CARP. I sometimes have archival exhibitions. We do public engagement through panels, community archiving days. We collaborate with other community archives like the Bay Area Lesbian Archives and Freedom Archives here in Oakland and the Bay Area. And we are also working on opening up our Greg Morozumi Reading Room in May. So that is an opportunity for people to come in and relax, read books, host reading groups, or discussions with their community. We're also gonna be opening a lending system so people are able to check out books to take home and read. There'll be library cards coming soon for that and other fun things to come.

[00:02:44] So Suzanne, what are you working on at Eastside right now?

[00:02:48] **Susanne:** Well, for the past like eight or nine years I've been working with Jose Ome Navarrete and Debbie Kajiyama of NAKA Dance Theater to produce Live Arts and Resistance (LAIR), which is a Dance Theater Performance series. We've included many artists who, some of them started out here at Eastside and then grew to international fame, such as Dohee Lee, and then Amara Tabor-Smith has graced our stages for several years with House Full of Black Women. This year we're working with Joti Singh on Ghadar Geet: Blood and Ink, a piece she choreographed, and shot in film and it's a multimedia kind of experience. We've worked with Cat Brooks and many emerging other artists who are emerging or from all over, mostly Oakland, but beyond. It's a place where people can just experiment and not worry about a lot of the regulations that bigger theaters have. Using the outside, the inside, the walls, the ceiling sometimes. It's been an exciting experience to work with so many different artists in our space.

[00:04:03] **Elena:** And I have been trying to just get the word out to as many different folks who can help sustain the organization as possible about the importance of the work we do here. So my main job with Eastside has been raising money. But what we're doing now is looking at cultural centers like Eastside, like Oakland Asian Cultural Center, like the Malonga Casquelord Center, like Black Cultural Zone, like the Fruitvale Plaza and CURJ's work. These really integral cultural hubs. In neighborhoods and how important those spaces are.

[00:04:42] So looking at, you know, what we bring to the table with the archives, which serve the artistic community, the organizing community. There's a big emphasis, and we had mentioned some of this in the first episode around knowing the history and context of how we got here so we can kind of maneuver our way out. And that's where books and movies and posters and artists who have been doing this work for so long before us come into play in the archives and then having it all manifest on the stage through programs like LAIR, where theater artists and dancers and musicians, and it's totally multimedia, and there's so much information like how to keep those types of places going is really critical.

[00:05:28] And especially now when public dollars have mostly been cut, like the City of Oakland hardly gave money to the arts anyway, and they tried to eliminate the entire thing. Then they're coming back with tiny bits of money. But we're trying

to take the approach like, please, let's look at where our tax dollars go. What's important in a neighborhood? What has to stay and how can we all work together to make that happen?

[00:05:52] **Susanne:** And I want to say that our Cultural Center theater is a space that is rented out very affordably to not just artists, but also many organizations that are doing Movement work, such as Palestinian Youth Movement, Bala, Mujeres Unidas Y Activas, QT at Cafe Duo Refugees, United Haiti Action Committee, Freedom Archives, Oakland Sin Fronteras, Center for CPE, and many artists connected groups.

[00:06:22] **Aubrey:** Yeah, I mean, we do so much more than what's in the theater and Archive too, we do a lot of different youth programs such as Girl Project, Neighborhood Arts, where we do public murals. One of our collective members, Angie and Leslie, worked on Paint the Town this past year. We also have our gallery in between the Cultural Center and Bandung Books, our bookstore, which houses our archive. We are celebrating our 25th anniversary exhibition.

[00:06:54] **Susanne:** And one of the other exhibits we just wrapped up was Style Messengers, an exhibit of graffiti work from Dime, Spy and Surge, Bay Area artists and Surge is from New York City, kind of illustrating the history of graffiti and social commentary.

[00:07:30] **Elena:** We are in this studio here recording and this is the studio of our youth music program Beats Flows, and I love we're sitting here with this portrait of Amiri Baraka, who had a lot to say to us all the time. So it's so appropriate that when the young people are in the studio, they have this elder, magician, poet activist looking at him, and then when you look out the window, you see Sister Souljah, Public Enemy, and then a poster we did during, when Black Lives Matter came out, we produced these posters that said Black Power Matters, and we sent them all over the country to different sister cultural centers and I see them pop up somewhere sometimes and people's zooms when they're home all over the country. It's really amazing and it just really shows when you have a bunch of artists and poets and radical imagination, people sitting around, you know, what kind of things come out of it.

[00:08:31] **Aubrey:** I had one of those Black Power Matters posters in my kitchen window when I lived in Chinatown before I worked here, or visited here actually. I don't even know how I acquired it, but it just ended up in my house somehow.

[00:08:45] **Elena:** That's perfect. I remember when we did, I mean we still do, Malcolm X Jazz Festival and it was a young Chicana student who put the Jazz Festival poster up and she was like, her parents were like, why is Malcolm X? What has that got to do with anything? And she was able to just tell the whole story about Malcolm believing that people, communities of color coming together is a good thing. It's a powerful thing. And it was amazing how the festival and the youth and the posters can start those kind of conversations.

[00:09:15] **Aubrey:** Malcolm X has his famous quote that says "Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle." And Elena, we think a lot about Malcolm X and his message here at Eastside about culture, but also about the importance of art. Can we speak more about the importance of art in our activism?

[00:09:35] **Elena:** Well, that was some of the things we were touching on around radical imagination and the power of the arts. But where I am going again, is around this power of the art spaces, like the power of spaces like this, and to be sure that it's not just a community center, it's a cultural center, which means we invested in sound good, sound good lighting, sprung floors. You know, just like the dignity and respect that the artists and our audiences have, and that those things are expensive but critical. So I feel like that's, it's like to advocate for this type of space where, again, all those groups that we listed off that have come in here and there's countless more. They needed a space to reach constituencies, you know, and how important that is. It's like back in the civil rights organizing the Black church was that kind of space, very important space where those kind of things came together. People still go to church and there's still churches, but there's a space for cultural centers and to have that type of space where artists and activists can come together and be more powerful together.

[00:10:50] **Aubrey:** I think art is a really powerful way of reaching people.

[00:10:54] **Elena:** You know, we're looking at this just because I, being in the development end, we put together a proposal for the Environmental Protection Agency before Donald (Trump) took it over. We were writing about how important popular education is, so working with an environmental justice organization who has tons of data about how impacted communities like East Oakland and West Oakland are suffering from all of this, lots of science. But what can we, as an arts group, how can we produce a popular education around those things? And you know, how can we say some of those same messages in murals and zines, in short films, in theater productions, you know, but kind of embracing that concept of popular education. So we're, you know, trying to counter some of the disinformation that's being put out there too with some real facts, but in a way that, you know, folks can grasp onto and, and get.

[00:11:53] **Aubrey:** We recently had a LAIR production called Sky Watchers, and it was a beautiful musical opera from people living in the Tenderloin, and it was very personal. You were able to hear about people's experiences with poverty, homelessness, and addiction in a way that was very powerful. How they were able to express what they were going through and what they've lost, what they've won, everything that has happened in their lives in a very moving way. So I think art, it's, it's also a way for people to tell their stories and we need to be hearing those stories. We don't need to be hearing, I think what a lot of Hollywood is kind of throwing out, which is very white, Eurocentric beauty standards and a lot of other things that doesn't reflect our neighborhood and doesn't reflect our community. So yeah, art is a good way for us to not only tell our stories, but to get the word out there, what we want to see changed.

So our last point that we wanna talk about today is the importance of Black and Asian solidarity in Oakland. How has that been a history in Eastside, Suzanne?

[00:13:09] **Susanne:** I feel like Eastside is all about Third World solidarity from the very beginning. And Yuri Kochiyama is one of our mentors through Greg Morozumi and she was all about that. So I feel like everything we do brings together Black, Asian and brown folks.

[00:13:27] **Aubrey:** Black and Asian solidarity is especially important here at Eastside Arts Alliance. It is a part of our history. We have our bookstore called Bandung Books for a very specific reason, to give some history there. So the Bandung Conference happened in 1955 in Indonesia, and it was the first large-scale meeting of Asian and African countries. Most of which were newly independent from colonialism. They aimed to promote Afro-Asian cooperation and rejection of colonialism and imperialism in all nations. And it really set the stage for revolutionary solidarity between colonized and oppressed people, letting way for many Third Worlds movements internationally and within the United States.

[00:14:14] Eastside had an exhibition called Bandung to the Bay: Black and Asian Solidarity at Oakland Asian Cultural Center the past two years in 2022 and 2023 for their Lunar New Year and Black History Month celebrations. It highlighted the significance of that conference and also brought to light what was happening in the United States from the 1960s to present time that were creating and building solidarity between Black and Asian communities. The exhibition highlighted a number of pins, posters, and newspapers from the Black Liberation Movement and Asian American movement, as well as the broader Third World movement. The Black Panthers were important points of inspiration in Oakland, in the Bay Area in getting Asian and Pacific Islanders in the diaspora, and in their homelands organized.

[00:15:07] We had the adoption of the Black Panthers 10-point program to help shape revolutionary demands and principles for people's own communities like the Red Guard in San Francisco's Chinatown, IWK in New York's Chinatown and even the Polynesian Panthers in New Zealand. There were so many different organizations that came out of the Black Panther party right here in Oakland. And we honor that by having so many different 10-point programs up in our theater too. We have the Brown Berets, Red Guard Party, Black Panthers, of course, the American Indian Movement as well. So we're always thinking about that kind of organizing and movement building that has been tied here for many decades now.

[00:15:53] **Elena:** I heard that the term Third World came from the Bandung conference.

[00:15:58] **Aubrey:** Yes, I believe that's true.

[00:16:01] **Elena:** I wanted to say particularly right now, the need for specifically Black Asian solidarity is just, there's so much misinformation around China coming up now, especially as China takes on a role of a superpower in the world. And it's really up to us to provide some background, some other information, some truth telling, so folks don't become susceptible to that kind of misinformation. And whatever happens when it comes from up high and we hate China, it reflects in Chinatown. And that's the kind of stereotyping that because we have been committed to Third World solidarity and truth telling for so long, that that's where we can step in and really, you know, make a difference, we hope. I think the main point is that we need to really listen to each other, know what folks are going through, know that we have more in common than we have separating us, especially in impacted Black, brown, Asian communities in Oakland. We have a lot to do.

[00:17:07] **Aubrey:** To keep in contact with Eastside Arts Alliance, you can find us at our website: [eastside arts alliance.org](http://eastsideartsalliance.org), and our Instagrams at Eastside Cultural and at Bandung Books to stay connected with our bookstore and CARP, our archive, please come down to Eastside Arts Alliance and check out our many events coming up in the new year. We are always looking for donations and volunteers and just to meet new friends and family.

[00:17:36] **Susanne:** And with that, we're gonna go out with Jon Jang's "The Pledge of Black Asian Alliance," produced in 2018.

[00:18:29] **Emma:** This was a round table discussion at the Eastside Arts Alliance Cultural Center with staff and guests: Elena, Suzanne and Aubrey.

Let's Talk Audio series is one of OACC'S Open Ears for Change projects and as part of the Stop the Hate Initiative with funds provided by the California Department of Social Services in consultation with the commission of Asian and Pacific Islander American Affairs to administer \$110 million allocated over three years to community organizations. These organizations provide direct services to victims of hate and their families and offer prevention and intervention services to

tackle hate in our communities. This episode is a production of the Oakland Asian Cultural Center with engineering, editing, and sound design by Thick Skin Media.

[00:19:18] A special thanks to Jon Jang for permission to use his original music. And thank you for listening.

[00:19:32] **Music:** Life is not what you alone make it. Life is the input of everyone who touched your life and every experience that entered it. We are all part of one another. Don't become too narrow, live fully, meet all kinds of people. You'll learn something from everyone. Follow what you feel in your heart.