

CALIFORNIA LOOKING FORWARD

Fostering Creativity to (Re)frame the Cultural Narrative

Danielle Brazell | January 20, 2017



Anita Contini (Bloomberg Philanthropies), Danielle Brazell (Department of Cultural Affairs), and Ashley Jacobs (Mayor's Fund for Los Angeles) at a press conference for 2016's Current:LA Water. | Photo: Jorge Vismara

*The following **commentary** is one in a series from KCET and Link TV writers and contributors reflecting on how the incoming president will shape, change, and redefine the future of California.*

At this moment, the world is on edge, and for good reason. The president-elect of the United States, soon to be the most powerful and influential individual in

the world, continues to demonstrate seemingly erratic “divide and conquer” strategies that drive wedges into our civil discourse.

The barrage of misinformation, inflammatory tweets, threats of building walls, and the fear of deportation of thousands dissuade people from fully participating in constructive discourse. It perpetuates false narratives and triggers widespread fear. But it can also serve as a catalyst for community action in alignment with progressive and inclusive values.

Unlike the culture wars of the 1990s, we now find ourselves in the midst of the information wars. Disrupting perception and belief systems, this rhetoric is designed to influence behavior and erode trust.

For many this struggle is not new, people of color, undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ have been fighting on the margins for survival for years. It is time for the mainstream to stand behind those who are the first to be targeted and stand up for our democracy in ways we may not have ever thought or experienced before.

Artists, poets, writers, storytellers, and media artists all tell stories and (re)frame the narrative. These artists and change-makers create movements and mobilize people into action. Rooted in the endless pursuit of truth and fearless in the commitment of self-expression, artists unabashedly reflect what they see, hear, and feel. Artists inspire people to gather, reinforce or expose belief systems, and uplift spirits against all odds.

Similarly, cultural presenters, producers, and curators are uniquely positioned to bring people together who otherwise would not engage in a conversation on democracy. These artists — and Los Angeles is fortunate to have extraordinary artists and curators — use stages, galleries, and public spaces to engage audiences in these conversations. They create the platforms that reinforce the value system around the creative voice in Los Angeles. At this moment in our shared history, creativity must be fostered at every level to combat the global dialogue fueled by fear and divisiveness.

Los Angeles is home to a progressive electorate who recognize that cultural diversity is what makes our region strong. Together, artists, creative practitioners, and cultural producers are critical partners, bound by a shared belief that the arts foster community cohesion and true family values, breaking down racial, socio-economic, and geographic borders.

We have a unique opportunity to double down on our city’s investment in creativity and cultural expression. And as we venture into unknown territory,

our city and its leadership are eager to amplify and expand cultural programming throughout every neighborhood.

I also take great solace in recognizing that we have a formidable and knowledgeable civil servant class at the local, state, and federal levels, ready to uphold the integrity of the very public agencies that comprise our public sector. Our civil servant class is protected from political influence and short-term agendas, and we need to bolster our support of this civil servant class. They are the brain trust and their institutional knowledge is critical to our public agencies: the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Department of Education (DOE), etc. Our duty as public advocates, civic leaders, and cultural practitioners is to help ensure this system does not erode and has adequate support to progress free from political influences.

The issues have surfaced. Artists respond. Communities unite. Local elected leadership provides legislative and budgetary support. Civil servants uphold the integrity of their agencies. Together, we stand boldly in our conviction, rooted in the value system that anchors our constitution.

We hold our leaders accountable for the words they use, because *words matter*. And we inspire the masses to join our cause. As Paul Krugman recently said in a New York Times op-ed, “truth and freedom of speech is an act of patriotism.”

For me, poetry has become a source of perspective and prayer, and dance has become a source of joy and release. Art and creative expression continue to remain vital components of my life in a deeply personal way. And in my role as the general manager of the Department of Cultural Affairs, I am fervently committed to fostering creativity everywhere — in our neighborhoods, in our city, across our state, and at the national level.

Onward!

Top image: Michael Parker, "Ides." | Courtesy of the L.A. Department of Cultural Affairs for Current:LA

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Danielle Brazell is the general manager of the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), reporting directly to the mayor and leading a full-time staff of 64 and a part-time staff of 80. Brazell directs and works with the progressive arts agency's Public Art, Grants Administration, Community Arts, Performing Arts, and Marketing and Development Division directors to oversee a \$42 million portfolio of facilities, programming, and initiatives providing arts and cultural services in Los Angeles.