jesikah maria ross works at the intersection of art, education, and community action, collaborating with communities to generate change. Not only has she been instrumental in the founding of such initiatives as the Bioneers Reel Change Agents Program and the Media Arts Institute, she has launched participatory youth media programs in South Africa, Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan that have addressed equity issues worldwide. Her award-winning independent media projects have brought environmental justice issues to PBS and NPR. In her collaborations, residents engage in citizen storytelling and public dialogue or students partner with community members to create social issue documentaries. Before founding The Art of Regional Change (ARC), a joint initiative of the Davis Humanities Institute and the UC Davis Center for the Study of Regional Change, jesikah codirected Saving The Sierra: Voices of Conservation in Action (savingthesierra.org), which documents community efforts to conserve the culture, economy, and environment of the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

I first encountered jesikah at the 2008 ARC launch. She stood on the parapet of a fountain in a courtyard, spread her arms wide, and enthusiastically described her model of using place-based media projects to bring about community self-empowerment and personal transformation.

She’d begun her love affair with video in college, and the activism she also began there carried her into the world of alternative media. She equipped herself further through graduate work in Community Studies and Development and day jobs in television production. With the university, she forged a dream job that blended being a community media facilitator, project director, and documentary media maker.

I began to work directly with jesikah at the start of her most recent poly-vocal, multimedia, multi-ethnic, intergenerational project, Restore/Restory.

Laurie Glover: As I understand it, ARC has done a whole series of amazing university-community collaborations. Tell me about your latest project.
jesikah maria ross: *Restore/Restory* is a collaborative public history project that tells the story of California by examining one small place here in Yolo County, the Cache Creek Nature Preserve.

Glover: I think when people hear “public history,” they think of something that involves people who have some training going out and getting information from other people, collecting oral histories as data, essentially, that gets gathered into an archive. Then other people with training use it somewhere down the line.

ross: There are many ways to do public history. One is in the way you just described, which kind of follows a resource extraction model: professionals go into communities to extract resources that are then taken away and used by others. It’s a model that you wouldn’t necessarily associate with knowledge production; academics wouldn’t see themselves as being part of a corporation that does resource extraction.

Glover: Adding the collaborative component makes it into a completely different sort of beast altogether.

ross: Yes. But you can see why it’s important to create reciprocal projects. You’re doing something to benefit you; once you actually involve other people, you have to ask, how will they benefit? Finding that out usually means you need to have a dialogue and some shared decision-making.

My drive to have communities represent themselves comes from deep experience of being left out of the frame myself, being misrepresented or unacknowledged. Not just me, but the issues I was working on. So it’s important to me that the people who give their stories feel like they are receiving something as well as giving and have some editorial control.

Glover: Did you push against that resource extraction model while you were working in the university?

ross: Definitely, and I did that by using a counter-model of collaboration, cocreating projects with a local community-based organization and designing every project based on their needs. I had to stay very clear about how to bring students and scholars in to work with residents in a way that was respectful and supportive and built on what the residents were interested in as well. The question I kept asking was: how do we create something in line with the university’s land grant mission and with old-school community development principles?

In that spirit, in *Restore/Restory*, we brought stakeholders together to design and implement a project that would gather a wide range of stories about very different peoples’ experiences, understandings, and uses of the land that is now the Cache Creek Nature Preserve.

Glover: Let me just back up a little bit. I think it would be useful to say what the Preserve is, so we get a sense not only of how small a piece of land it is, but how fraught.

ross: It’s a 130-acre parcel, not big, right on Cache Creek, which starts up north in Lake County, flows down through Yolo County through the Capay Valley and ends up in the
Sacramento River Bypass. Along the way it’s feeding agriculture and ranching, recreation, and, of course, many other uses the people have for water.

Glover: And the Preserve is one section on it, sort of like a quarter-inch on a yardstick.

Ross: Exactly, on the lower part of the creek. The Preserve came about at the end of what is referred to as the Gravel Wars, a twenty-year battle that was really messy and acrimonious, as were many environmental struggles in the seventies and eighties, where jobs were pitted against the environment. In Yolo County, the top industry was agriculture and the second was mining aggregate—gravel—out of Cache Creek. Until legislation in the mid-seventies, mining companies weren’t required to do squat after extraction. Anyone living in that area, whether environmentally focused or not, saw moonscapes, trashed landscapes, because there was no requirement for the companies to do otherwise.

Most people in the environmental community wanted to stop the mining altogether. But the mining companies didn’t have to stop, they had the extraction rights, but they were willing to move their operations outside of the creek channel. Some agricultural community members wanted this because they had aggregate on their land, and they were going make money off of it. But they were also concerned about the effect on the land. And then you had a lot of people whose jobs and livelihoods depended on mining: the County who got huge revenue from it and all the businesses that support it.

The County was trying to figure out a policy that would take into account all the different needs, but you know, government works just a little bit faster than erosion.
Such grievances were mounting that a group of activists came up with the idea to have a referendum, a public vote. That seemed like the best strategy to put the issue into the public consciousness and to force the mining companies to come to the table.

**Glover:** But something happened.

**Ross:** Yes. Between the plans that the County ratified and a public referendum to stop mining, an understanding arose that there needed to be an umbrella organization to bring the fighting parties together to find common ground. That was one impetus for starting the Cache Creek Conservancy. Another way I’ve heard it said is that the Cache Creek Conservancy was built into the planning process as the organization that would oversee creek restoration.

**Glover:** And along the way, the mining companies said, “We’ll pay this amount of money on the ton to provide for restoration,” right? That’s what funds the Cache Creek Nature Preserve.

**Ross:** Right. So the Cache Creek Conservancy was founded in the mid-nineties; but it didn’t even have a formal office. Around 1998, one of the mining companies, Teichert, had this piece of land that was right on the creek with an incredible variety of habitats: some of the oldest oak groves in Yolo County, some grassland. It had, of course, the riparian corridor.

**Glover:** And some beautiful historic buildings.

**Ross:** It had the historic barn, yes. Teichert wasn’t going to mine the property anymore. It was an ideal site for the Conservancy to manage, and the preserve would be a great example of restoration of a mining site.

**Glover:** People who are a little more skeptical call it a poster child for the mining companies.

**Ross:** True enough, and it has received a lot of funding and attention. But I have to tell you, when we started *Restore/Restory*, everyone, including me, thought we would focus on the Gravel Wars because it was such a bitter episode here in Yolo County. What became clear to me with basic research was that if we only focused on the Gravel Wars, the story would only be about the conflict and collaboration between industry and environment. I realized that if I really wanted to tell the story of a place, we needed to go way beyond that.

This place, as far back as we know, was the homeland of the Wintun Nation. They would be left out. And how would we tell the story of Spain and Mexico and the fur trappers and European explorers who also were on this land?

**Glover:** What you’re saying now takes me back to something that you said before. You spoke of telling the story of California through telling the story of this site. But you actually didn’t start there.

**Ross:** Right. I didn’t start there. But in any project, when you get into research and development, you learn a lot more. When I looked at the larger story, when I looked at the people who had been on that land, how they used the land, I saw the different views on what that land is for and on the people who’d been there.

**Glover:** And, maybe, whose presence has been erased?
ross: Yes. I wanted to try something that was not really centered on a galvanizing issue but instead on a humanities question. The most compelling story was not about the Gravel Wars; it was what’s the story of this place?

Glover: How did you choose a community partner?

ross: For all sorts of reasons, the Cache Creek Conservancy seemed like the most appropriate collaborating partner. I worked with them to form a project advisory group that would be representative of the different stakeholders on the creek, people who have different views of the creek and track back to different histories. We had native California leaders, miners, educators. We had policy makers; we had local historians. I wanted to be sure that we had a project that was tapped into academic expertise but grounded in community experience while being aesthetically compelling. So the Advisory Group, who had specific knowledge and experience with the creek, generated and prioritized a list of themes that we might want to explore and named a range of people to speak to those topics.

Glover: And while that was happening, you put out a call to UC Davis faculty?

ross: Yes. We had funding, which meant that we could involve university faculty in a way that advanced the project, filling a need of ours and meeting some need the faculty had—for conducting community-based research, for example, or teaching courses connected to a live project. We also funded community historians and culture keepers to work alongside the faculty.

Glover: And in addition, you became the instructor of a UC Davis Technocultural Studies class.

ross: I did. In other projects, my role has been teaching community members to make their own media. In this project, the university students made the stories and I
worked with them on the fundamentals of community-based media making.

Glover: And they made stories not about themselves, but about other people.

ross: Correct.

Glover: So you’ve got an Advisory Group identifying storytellers and, and meanwhile, you’ve set up this class. Then these two things converge: the students in the class attend community storytelling days and record the stories. Give me an idea of what went on.

ross: We had a series of five story days, all held at the Cache Creek Nature Preserve. Students worked in teams, rotating positions. They did a very quick interview: 20–30 minutes usually, and took photos. We staggered the interviews, scheduling storytellers every 45 minutes. Sometimes we had fifteen people recorded in something like four hours.

Glover: Let’s get back to all these collaborations. You’ve got your community collaborator, which is the Conservancy. And you’ve got the advisory group coming up with names of the storytellers, and students are being equipped to record the stories. And then you’ve got writing students who have their role.

ross: The broad brushstroke way to say it is that from all the range of people involved, we collectively generated a story map of community memories, audio pieces with photos, and written profiles of the storytellers. We created an audio tour, a kind of multi-poly-vocal history of the Preserve given through five very different views of that land. And I created a series of digital murals—a combination of archival images and contemporary landscape photos that depict the different habitats on the Preserve—with audio stories embedded in them.

Glover: What happened after everything was gathered, edited, and live, in media terms?
The story map created for the Restore/Restory project. Online, a viewer can click the red buttons to link to storyteller photos, audio clips and profiles. PHOTO COURTESY OF JESIKAH MARIA ROSS.

One of the digital murals celebrating the peoples and habitats of the Cache Creek area. From left to right: Former slave Basil Campbell, a Wintun elder, original land-grant recipient William Gordon, and local historian Joann Leach Larkey. PHOTO COURTESY OF JESIKAH MARIA ROSS.
ross: It was run through various people to be authorized, approved, revised. And authorized for sharing, which is a really important piece.

The project debut and story showcase event was held at the Cache Creek Nature Preserve on a Saturday afternoon in late October 2012. It was designed so that there was a series of different activities through which people would come together and engage with the project stories and each other on the site. One activity was a series of nature and culture walks, where I paired together a humanist and a scientist who have some kind of shared background or shared interest but come at it from very different points of view. Another was the debut of the audio tour, guided by a graduate student who worked on the project. There was a story circle in the amphitheater. There were the basket weavers and seating around them. And finally, in the barn, there was a media exhibit, with two of the Technocultural Studies students acting as docents.

Glover: Also, through all of this, there was music.

ross: Yes, and I picked a band that could play different musical styles so that different people would resonate, be inspired, be interested. So if you were Latino and you came, you might hear something and think, “Oh wow! That’s mine!” Or you were Hawaiian, or you know, liked bluegrass. They played a huge repertoire.

Glover: Okay, so there were all these events going on—

ross: —at the same time—

Glover: —up to a certain point, and then the multiple stuff stops, and then there’s the showcase event.

ross: Right. Everything stops.

Glover: And then everybody’s invited to come and sit at the tables, where there’s food.
ross: And then I kicked off a series of six speakers, who gave brief presentations. Each selected a story that they wanted to share and then talked a little bit about why they picked that story. After the speakers finished, table guides I had organized used a series of very loose prompts to help people respond to the stories, and through that, make meaning of the experience together.

The ultimate goal of the whole day was this: when people have the opportunity to engage with each other and stories and place, they have the opportunity to forge stronger connections across people and place and with place. That will actually manifest in social benefits that we can talk about.

Glover: Everyone’s attention was drawn to one thing that they were doing together. All of that stuff about activities is what happened. But then there’s what happened. The net experience was far greater than the sum of its parts.

ross: Right. One community development concept that I love is “spillover effect”: There are many things you can plan; but so much more will happen that is unplanned. “Spillover” conjures up for me a big beautiful vessel that is so abundant and full of water that it spills over. That’s what I was aiming for. I can map out and produce and plan and curate a really kick-ass program and have some real clear ideas of the kinds of experiences and outcomes that will happen, but a ton of things will happen due to the constellation of different variables that come together in different moments—like who’s sitting at a table or what somebody says. Those will spark and galvanize and ignite other impacts.

Sometimes those are the ones I hoped for; sometimes they’re not. There’s a certain level of outcome you’re striving for and then there’s a level you hope for. You know something will happen on top of that.

Glover: But you don’t know what it’s going to be.

ross: Yes. You just hope it’s good.

Glover: It was! Let’s go on to invisible things being made visible. We touched on this when you talked about how this one spot became the story of California, a California involving a lot of people whose experiences generally don’t register.

ross: Right. They become legible at a certain moment. All sorts of things became legible, or registered, at the event. The biggest one, I think, for a lot of people was that we were sitting on the homeland of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation. We all know that all of California was Native California. But there was a moment, in the way that stories were framed and presented and by whom and discussed, that it became very clear that we were actually sitting and having this amazing party on their traditional homeland.

Glover: Yes. And some of the Wintun were there. We were all there. We were all there in relationship. Maybe there was some tension around it, but we were, by being in the same place, in that place—

ross: —having a shared experience. That was key.

Glover: And, at the same time, while that registered, Joe Farnham’s wonderful old voice, his story, comes on. He’s talking about his granddad and clearly his heart is also in this place.

ross: In a nutshell, what got made visible was that there are different histories of this place, and that for a lot of us, hearing those different histories will call into question what we know and what we don’t know, and why.

Glover: In the audiotape, a person is responding to the question, “What does this place mean to you?” And then you’ve got someone else who’s standing before a crowd of 100–200 people who are sitting around picnic tables with food, saying, “This story is meaningful to me for this reason.” And every one of us sitting at the tables is listening. One way or another, each of us was then put in relationship to the place and to each other. Some of that relationship was conflicted, but because we were all sitting there and because of this listening and because of the structure that you gave to the whole program, there was an ‘us’ created. The “what does this mean to me” was doubled and then geometrically increased so that we were all sitting there in this kind of reverberation of listening about what this place means to us. Even though the answers were really different—it’s our homeland, it’s our grandfather’s property, it’s where I come for school, it’s where I learned from jesikah how to do audio recording—right in the middle of all that, it turned into “it’s meaningful to us.”

ross: You nailed it. On the other hand, I also remember everyone listing to former Conservancy Director Ann Brice talking about what it was like both to be an environmentalist
and to be called names for being willing to collaborate with the County and the mining companies. We are listening to her even while the Conservancy representatives were not at the tables, were standing around the periphery. How they were standing and how they all wore the same color made very clear their structure and their response.

Glover: Right. That also became visible. And at the same time, what became visible to them was everybody else, also in relationship to “their” place.

ross: A fundamental problem in the project was that they did not, in fact, have ownership.

Glover: Well, they had ownership of the Preserve. The mining companies’ fees-per-ton support the Preserve, and the Conservancy oversees the administration of it.

ross: Right. Maybe I should say they had ownership of a particular type of outcome.

Glover: Yes.

ross: And it was a very limited piece. They were only focused on the audio tour, and they imagined the audio tour to be pretty promotional and Cache Creek Conservancy-oriented. So there was a lot of tension because the tour wasn’t like that. Had they owned the project, in the wider sense of having multiple outcomes benefiting the different groups involved, they would have realized there was so much more to it than the audio tour.

I said something earlier about this project offering an alternative to resource-extraction-style public history through intentional community collaboration. But, you know, you never get what you expect. What we ended up with, to some extent, was a demonstration of what happens when you pick a collaborating organization that isn’t fully representative of all the communities involved in that place. It’s also a good example of a collaboration going astray when you are using terms that you don’t have a shared meaning for until you’re very far along—for example, “outreach and education.” The Conservancy articulated a need for an audio tour that would serve their outreach and education goal. The Conservancy meant by the term whatever would enhance their K-6 field trip program. But I took the term to mean “outreach” and “education” in the widest possible sense: from K-12, to college students, to continuing learning, to migrant worker education, to nature buffs, to families.

Glover: Yes, and what they conceive of as ownership isn’t what you mean by ownership. For tribal people, this place is
homeland. For farming people, this place is where their great-grandfather put down roots and where their family’s been. Those are different kinds of ownership.

Certainly the farming families who have deeds on the land would say that they own the land. The people for whom it is homeland may not own it in the same kind of legal document trail kind of way, but the reference that anybody at the basket weaving table made to where they gathered or where they resided was always in terms of “I gather this in my homeland,” or “I don’t live in my homeland, but I live in this other place.” That whole way of talking about place came right up against all the other kinds of ways of talking about place.

ross: I love how you just put that together. In these kinds of collaborations, you have these collision points. But out of those not-always-feel-good moments, each participant grows. I ended up with a much better understanding of so many things I would not have thought of, and I really feel that the Conservancy, too, saw possibilities they hadn’t thought of before: how many kinds of people would come to the site, a deeper understanding of the power of media. One of the things about a messy, tension-filled project is that if people can stay in it together, they both learn and grow.

When I think about the experience I try to create and facilitate, that I can plan for and hope that there’s spillover from, it is that all the participants have a stronger and deeper connection to each other, whoever those others are, and to this place.

Glover: We have that because . . . ?

ross: We have that because of three things. An environment’s been created which has helped us become open and
comfortable. We’ve had an opportunity to engage in something that we have, in some way, chosen. We chose to do an activity. We chose to ask a question. And then, third, you’re sharing that experience with a range of people who are probably different than you and you are hearing things that you may not have heard before.

Glover: And may not even agree with.

ross: Yes. So, being comfortable, open, trusting, willing to engage, being given an opportunity to decide what you want to do within that. And then sharing that experience with people different from you in a way that is engaging and fun allows you to make meaning of it with other people.

Glover: And it’s all very intentionally focused on just the 130 acres of the Cache Creek Nature Preserve. So the “what does this place mean to you?” gets changed to “what does this place mean to us?”

ross: Exactly.

Glover: And then what the word “place” in that statement means also changes. It’s no longer what does this place, this 130 acres, mean to you? It means, what does this county that you live in mean to you? Or what does California mean to you?

If I were in a classroom and writing on the board, I would have written, “What does this place mean to you?” and I would have to start crossing out terms. I’ve crossed out “you” and put in “us” because we’ve realized that everyone becomes engaged in the question of “What does this place mean to us?” And then you have to cross out “place” because—

ross: —you zoomed out.

Glover: Yes. You need multimedia because suddenly each term is a whole bunch of interchangeable things.

ross: I think that’s why I end up using “shared” in front of a lot of words: “shared vision,” “shared experience,” “shared geography,” “shared humanity,” because people aren’t going to care for places or other people unless they have some kind of connection with them, unless they have some kind of regard. And it’s hard to develop a connection and regard unless you have some physical contact.

My goal was to create a story of “us” that would have social benefits in Yolo County. We would have a stronger sense of a collective identity. We would have a better sense of what our watershed is, how it works, and what the challenges and tensions are in a natural environment. That would be a very healthy, functioning, democratic, inclusive, and just community.

Note
jesikah maria ross would like to acknowledge the funders who took a bit of a risk in providing monies to a project and program that was a bit outside of the box: the Quitalpás Foundation, the UC Institute for Research in the Arts, and the UC Humanities Research Institute.