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Equity

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Radical Mentorship and More: Community Arts as a Pathway to Equity

by Nikki Shaffeeullah

I want to talk about the state of community arts practice through a lens that centres equity for artists and communities who have been marginalized through colonization and systemic oppression. It's a challenging thing to talk about, because embedded in the culture of the field is a belief that the work we are doing is inherently progressive, which is a barrier to having deeper conversations about the ways in which our work might be harmful.

I grew up in Tkaronto,¹ born into a community of Indo-Guyanese immigrants. My ancestors were coercively brought from India to Guyana, traditional territories of the Carib and Awarak, many generations ago through the British system of indentured labour; following the political decolonization of Guyana and the subsequent civil turmoil, my parents immigrated to Canada. As a descendant of colonized people, living in double diaspora, who has through both forced and voluntary migration become a beneficiary of the ongoing colonialization of Turtle Island, I bring to this conversation a sincere effort to challenge myself, and you, to continually assess how colonialism is impacting our ability to see how power and inequity operate in our work. This cognitive dissonance, the way we romanticize our progressiveness in rhetoric yet reproduce colonial harm in action, is a distinctly Canadian pastime. Current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau campaigned on promises to engage in nation-to-nation processes with Indigenous communities and has now spent billions of taxpayer dollars to buy the country a pipeline that Indigenous communities oppose. Polite fictions enable systemic violence. Canadians are not good at transformative equity, especially when those kinds of conversations and actions call into question the legitimacy of our own work.

I wonder how we can (or whether it is even possible to) manifest the radical social, environmental, and economic justice that the world needs through the state-regulated channels of funded non-profits, registered charities, and educational institutions. All of the most accessible and visible systems for engaging in arts-based activism are outgrowths of the colonial project: simple models of charitable giving that do not redistribute wealth but maintain class stratification; moral frameworks rooted in European world-views, political directives steered by funders and not communities. How do these systems contain and limit the

potential social, environmental, and economic justice that could be affected by our work as community-engaged artists? How are we complicit? Would you (I, we) still be practising community arts (in the ways that bring us together in journals and at conferences) if we were challenged to do so in ways that challenged our own relationships to capitalism, white supremacy, and power? So, readers, I invite you, especially my fellow community arts practitioners who benefit from colonialism in myriad ways, to join this conversation with an open mind and heart.

For me, as a theatre artist invested in equity within the theatre sector, and as a community artist interested in the development of that sector, I see that these two discursive areas as not only being mutually informative, but being two points on the same continuum. However, as the community arts sector continues to be formalized through grant programs and university training spaces and so on, I see community arts being moved farther away from the arts equity imperatives that could, and should, drive it.

An evolving community arts sector

The evolution of the professional community arts sector has not been linear. Our current community arts sector can be traced to several movements and modes of practice, three of which are particularly salient in my context of Toronto and Ontario. The first is what we could call rural arts—arts in smaller communities, or communities where there is not a critical mass of people for there to be an active cultural sector. The Ontario Arts Council, for example, has funded arts projects in this way through various iterations since as early as the sixties. In 1968, the council held a Community Arts Conference exploring questions such as what value does art have in community lives, what is the role of arts in community development and planning, and so on; and in the following year, they offered a “regional arts program.”

A second impetus for present-day community arts is the movement of professional artists working in Western traditions who shifted their artistic work to include or centre social practices—Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed, Bread and Puppet Theatre and giant puppet parades, Anne Jellicoe and the British community play model, and the Canadian contemporaries

of these seminal figures. In my experience, these sets of practices have tended to be the most institutionally valued and most directive in the shaping of the present-day professional community arts sector.

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The third influence on present-day community arts, and what I believe has been the easiest and most obvious for institutions to let go of, is its roots in arts equity for historically marginalized communities, particularly those who have been colonized. To their credit, the Ontario Arts Council recognizes this in *Framing Community*, their workbook on community arts:

In modern Western societies, artists have been seen as specialists who are separate from and not accountable to their communities. In Canada, the separation of art and social function was forcibly imposed on Indigenous peoples through colonialism. Indigenous cultures have always understood that artists can make important contributions to public life as visionaries, healers and educators. Today, Indigenous artists are leading the way in making art that is relevant and accountable to their communities and to public life. The relationship between art and community is slowly coming back into focus. (Hutcheson 6)

For colonized cultures—surviving settler colonialism, enslavement, displacement, and forced migration; living in diaspora or contained by the state on their own land; and otherwise working to recover old and create new cultural practices—community arts has the potential to offer a radically transformative platform for the artists and communities who have historically been disenfranchised from Canada's cultural sectors to access resources to enable collective, community-engaged artistic work that could truly shift systems.

But the community arts sector has been developed along a trajectory that has privileged that second stream of influence: professional artists—professional in the Western sense of “specialists who are separate from... their communities” deciding to do something that was unusual in Western artistic practice: engage with communities in their artistic creation (Hutcheson 6). Throughout the decades, the sectoral initiatives that have emerged have been in response to this world-view of community arts: how do we professionalize as community artists, how do we train new generations of community artists, how do we legitimize ourselves as community artists. Additionally, the aesthetics derived from these influencers continue to prevail in the sector—the community play, forum

and image theatre, giant puppets, and so on. While I am not calling into question the artistic merit of these aesthetics or the social value of these seminal artists, I am concerned with the level at which they are centred, and the extent to which community arts as a pathway to equity for marginalized communities is not. In a 2005 article reflecting on her work as a community arts granting officer, Melanie Fernandez names this same concern about the professionalization of the sector, encouraging it to not “foreclose on the importance of understanding the ways in which community arts are grounded in their cultural contexts” (14).

Eurocentric models and access to equity

It is clear to me that the growth of the community arts sector has led it to reproduce the same issues of inequity that exist both in the main arts sector and in the non-profit sector in general. Like elsewhere in the arts sector, community arts is limited by still-present Eurocentrism that privileges Western-derived aesthetics as more meritorious than other forms. And like in other fields, community arts organizations are subject to the same issues of inequity perpetuated by operating grant systems: longer-running organizations are held to much lower standards than new applicants—a barrier that, of course, excludes newer artists and younger generations but also furthers the exclusion of artists from marginalized communities, who were even less likely twenty years ago to be helping an organization that could access operating funding.

Community arts is also subject to issues that equity-seeking communities have long resisted in the non-profit industrial complex of the community service sector. There is a prevalence of white leadership in organizations that work in racialized and Indigenous communities, an ensuing tokenization of racialized staff, a lack of culturally competent programming, a deference to the priorities of funders instead of those of the communities, and a prioritization of relationships with “community leaders,” whose input becomes more shaped by their relationships with and to non-profit staff than by their relationships to the community itself. Ultimately, institutionalized community arts organizations are not well positioned to disrupt the status quo; instead, as suggested by Paul Kivel, non-profit organizations

may be intentionally or inadvertently working to maintain the status quo. After all, the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) wouldn't exist without a lot of people in desperate straits. The NPIC provides jobs; it provides opportunities for professional development. It enables those who do the work to feel good about what we do and about our ability to help individuals survive in the system. It gives a patina of caring and concern to the ruling class which funds the work. While there is always the risk of not securing adequate funding, there is a greater risk that if we did something to really rock the boat and address the roots of the problems, that we would lose whatever funding we've already managed to secure. (130)

“The legitimization discourse”

One conversation that comes up often in the sector and in research is whether the “community” in community arts devalues the “art,” whether the “applied” in applied theatre devalues the “theatre.” This is a classic conversation within the field, and a central talking

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point in what Rikke Gørgens Gjørsum categorizes as “the legitimization discourse” in her audit of applied theatre scholarship from 2000 to 2013. There is a preoccupation with arguing the legitimacy of the practices and methods of applied theatre as being art, as being equal in its artistry to other kinds of art. This argument happens, of course, with funders, at universities, with larger arts organizations, with critics, and with those who already have been afforded a voice in the cultural sector.

But this whole conversation, the very idea that applied theatre is a more engaged, more on-the-ground, even more radical version of what happens inside institutions, erases an entirely different possibility: that work like that which we are calling community arts, calling applied theatre, might already exist in communities, never having been born in institutions in the first place; it was born from community cultural practices or grassroots movements.

As an artist working in the field, who runs a community arts organization and sits on community arts juries and committees, I encounter many practitioners who arrive at the work without any previous experience working in communities, having conducted little or no social justice analysis, and sometimes, especially in the case of recent university graduates, without even much of a record of personal artistic practice, private or public. These are mostly white, middle- or upper-class, cisgender, and able-bodied people, who are empowered to take the roles of producers and facilitators of community arts work, carrying out projects in various communities that they come to through a confluence of tepid reasons that may include intellectual curiosity, charitable sympathies, logistical convenience, and an eagerness to align with the priorities of external funders.

The conversation shouldn't be the “Is this art or not art?” of the legitimization discourse but, rather, “Is this in service of equity or not?” Community arts conversations about equity cannot just be about access and inclusion for participants. While of course it is important that projects are accessible to a diverse range of participants, if we focus on equity only as it relates to participation, then we perpetuate the patronizing idea that the place in community arts for marginalized groups is as consumers of services, and not as architects of our own communities. Building the capacity of the community arts sector is a valuable project, but there is and has been a reticence to engage with an overall structural analysis of what social groups have power in the field and what value we give or don't give to qualifications like lived experience in the community, long-term investment in the community, and commitment to the community beyond the financial and/or career capital that one gains from doing work therein. Instead of uncritically working to expand and professionalize the sector, funders and training spaces should focus capacity-building initiatives on better

enabling and supporting people from identified priority groups to lead work. This will support us on our quest to become architects of our own liberation.

Parallel Tracks

I articulated this gap to the Canada Council for the Arts via the Cultivate Sector Development stream and received funding to run my proposed program in the summer of 2017: Parallel Tracks, a pilot version of a free, barrier-free, equity-based community arts training that brought together Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour artists from across Canada in a week-long series of workshops where participants were supported to develop artistic projects to lead within their own self-defined communities. As it was a pilot project, I attempted to be modest about our call for applicants, not disseminating it broadly but instead reaching out directly to well-positioned outreach partners across Canada. Despite the intentionally limited outreach, within the eight-day application period, we received over 230 applications for twelve spots. Many applicants commented in their applications on how rare this opportunity seemed to them; others, while having active artistic practices and experience working in their communities, were unaware of or otherwise felt disconnected from the community arts sector. These testimonials, combined with the sheer volume of interest, which greatly outpaced the resources of this small initiative, speak to the need for more capacity-building spaces that explicitly centre marginalized groups.

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The AMY Project

I just wrapped up a five-year tenure as Artistic Director of the Toronto-based arts organization The AMY Project and continue to stay involved in smaller capacities. AMY's core programs match each participant with an individual artist mentor who works with them one-on-one throughout the year, and, the participants all work as a cohort with me and a team of directors to develop original performance material based on stories from their lives. Our work functions in three different equity-building ways:

We know that the larger performance houses who avoid artistic risk in their programming in order to serve their white, class-privileged subscribers grow stale and artistically uninteresting. When community arts endeavours are more about charity and conviviality than about social transformation, they too falter artistically.

- 1) As a pre-professional training program, we recognize that potential students from marginalized groups face access barriers to mainstream training institutions. So we conduct a rigorous outreach process in order to connect with creative youth who have had little or no opportunity to develop their creative voice, including people facing barriers due to economic circumstances, race, gender identity, ability/disability, issues, and so on.
- 2) As a community arts program, we prioritize youth who demonstrate the need and desire to be in an affirming community space. We work with community partners to connect not just with youth who are on the lookout for theatremaking and training opportunities but also with those who stand to benefit from a space to tell their stories. Our rehearsal-room culture takes care to build containers for safety, creativity, and community building, and I actively draw from my training from queer and trans social justice activists and facilitators of colour to inform these processes.
- 3) As a theatre company invested in arts equity, we use our gender-based mandate (to prioritize young women and non-binary youth) as a starting point: we prioritize individuals who face multiple other systemic social barriers to access, that is, youth who are from low-income/poor families; Indigenous, Black, and/or People of Colour youth; LGBTQ2S; youth with disabilities; and those navigating mental illness. We also prioritize hiring professional artists from these communities, not only because we believe mentors who share lived experiences with their mentees are well positioned to do their jobs with empathy and excellence, but also simply because we are invested in creating more paid opportunities for such artists within the sector.

Radical mentorship manifesto

Mentorship is at the core of our work and weaves through all parts of the organization. I have come to position our approach to mentorship under the name ‘radical mentorship’ and train all new participants, lead artists, and mentors in this practice; I also make efforts to dialogue with funders about these social and political imperatives. For me, radical mentorship means using mentorship as a pathway to equity. I’ve begun to sketch some of these ideas into a manifesto, for The AMY Project, and for others:

The AMY Project is Artists Mentoring Youth; but we are also much more. Yes, youth are the future. Yes, we need to invest in younger generations, for their sake and for everyone’s. But we wish to take a more critical and proactive approach to mentorship. Everywhere, especially in the arts sector and in community development work, people love championing

‘youth.’ Indeed, everyone who is not a ‘youth,’ was at least once a ‘youth’—it’s a relatable identity, and thus can be easily understood (or co-opted) as an apolitical one. But it’s not simply ‘youth’ we want to lift up. While all youth deserve education, attention, and access to creative expression, it is youth from certain communities and experiences who face systemic barriers to these things, and that is who we prioritize in our mentorship models. We are interrupting systems of colonialism, racism, classism, transphobia, queerphobia, ableism, misogyny, etc, and our point of intervention is by working to uplift young people living at the intersections of these experiences.

We have experienced, learned, and observed that artists seeking mentorship look for it from those whom they feel connection to for reasons beyond disciplinary commonalities; mentorship relationships are often enriched when the mentor and the mentee share experiences, identities. Indeed, ‘artistic excellence’ is not an absolute and definitions of it are informed by many intersecting cultural norms and lived experiences. This reality coexists with another: because of systemic barriers, many groups are underrepresented in the professional arts industry. . . . This means that professional artists from these communities are often doing more mentorship and caretaking than their counterparts. It’s an inequitable distribution of emotional labour. As energizing and generative as mentorship can be for the mentor, too much of it can of course overtax the mentor, take too much time away from their own art practice, interrupt their livelihood and more. One way that communities and organizations can support such mentors is by creating strong and sustainable frameworks to support mentorships. At AMY, this includes providing mentors with fees for their time, producing creative processes for mentors and mentees to collaborate, and creating easy and accessible creative spaces for mentors and mentees to get together (free group meals, free tickets to theatre outings, etc). It also includes working to support the popular understanding of mentorship as an incredibly valuable contribution to the industry, and a high-status role, in a wider patriarchal society where teachers, nurses, social workers, and other caretaking roles are invisibilized and seen as low-status.

Conclusion

Of course, The AMY Project is not a perfect organization. We are also a non-profit that requires funds and resources and complicated partnerships in order to do what we do; we are a registered charity whose activities must stay inside what the state considers permissible and are thus as susceptible to the compromising of ideals as anyone else. But we are fiercely committed to an equity-based approach, to identifying and resisting the depoliticizing pitfalls of the contemporary community arts sector, and to carrying

out our collaborative theatrical practice in ways that are by and for our marginalized communities.

I will end with a thought about aesthetics—we are, after all, talking about art. While my conversation here centres the social, political, and ethical necessities of an equity-based approach to community arts, I also know that doing work in this way will serve its aesthetics—just as equity measures in mainstream performance forms enhance artistic merit. Indeed, without a commitment to challenge the status quo, work becomes depoliticized. We know that the larger performance houses who avoid artistic risk in their programming in order to serve their white, class-privileged subscribers grow stale and artistically uninteresting. When community arts endeavours are more about charity and conviviality than about social transformation, they too falter artistically. The community arts sector needs to take up equity as a core part of its mission, and the time to do so is yesterday.

Note

- 1 Tkaronto is the name in Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) for the place that is colonially known as Toronto.

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About the Author

Nikki Shaffeeullah is a theatre-maker, facilitator, equity worker, and community-engaged artist. She was Artistic Director of The Artists Mentoring Youth (AMY) Project from 2015–2019. Past work includes serving as Editor-in-Chief of *alt.theatre* magazine from 2012–2016. Nikki believes art should disrupt the status quo, centre the margins, engage with the ancient, dream of the future, and be for everyone.