

MANGOS WITH CHILI:  
TWO-SPIRIT, QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOR PERFORMANCE  
AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT BUILDING

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## ABSTRACT

Mangos with Chili (MWC) is a two-spirit, queer and trans people of color (2-QTPOC) performance arts cabaret based in the San Francisco Bay Area. This research focuses on MWC performance content and personal interviews with four of MWC's artists: Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Landa Lakes, Micha Cárdenas and Manish Vaidya. The author examines three aspects of MWC to consider: the economic context of precarity of cultural work; spirituality and healing in performance; and the politics of vulnerability and interdependence. By examining the challenges MWC faces and the methods MWC offers for social justice movement building, the author argues that MWC offers a politics and set of practices that hold difference affirmatively while leaving enough space to imagine and enact new worlds.

This work is dedicated to  
José Esteban Muñoz  
&  
the many invaluable feminist of color theorists who haunt our souls,  
and to those of us who continue to navigate the thresholds of life.

“If magic is political potentiality, the transcendence of space/time, and paradigm-shifting love, then José Muñoz taught me that magic is real. He taught me that the power of queerness is felt, enacted and imagined. That this potential is within and all around us.

That it is ok to spend your whole academic life writing about how great your friends are. That transformation is more than resistance. That surrendering to let yourself feel the pull of a better world in the making is far from naïve, but rather necessary to a queer of color futurity that is about more than survival.

The passing of José Muñoz weighs down so hard on my heart today. But it also reminds me that the sweetness and brilliance of someone dedicated to the "not-yet-conscious" that will lead us to a "not-yet-here" will live on in the shivers, shimmers, glistenings and glowings that imbue our bodies, environments, and expressions.

This is where magic thrives; at the horizon, at the edge, in between each heart beat. This is where José Muñoz will continue to invite us toward our immanently pleasurable, beautiful and badass queer futurity.”



(Anabel Khoo, December 4, 2013)

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## Introduction

When I was sixteen, in my hometown of Montreal, my friends and I accidentally got caught up in a public rally downtown one day. It was a march in protest of the deportation of an Algerian non-status family, organized by the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist migrant rights group No One Is Illegal Montreal. It was 2003, and when I ended up seeing our faces on the evening news as part of the rally it just seemed like a funny incident, but it was the beginning of an over a decade-long personal journey in trying to figure out how exactly movements for social transformation are made possible, how they fail or succeed and how they evolve.

I was politicized during the era of anti-globalization, just after the “Battle of Seattle,” the series of protests in Seattle against the neoliberal economic policies of the World Trade Organization convening there. George W. Bush had been recently elected for the first time in 2001 and the Iraq War had sparked a new wave of anti-war organizing in Canada and the US. In my final year of high school, I wrote my English class speech on the struggle of the Zapatistas and I was a regular member of our lunchtime Social Justice Club. Throughout the rest of my teen years, I went to every demonstration against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) in the city. I went to radical leftist conferences like the Anarchist Bookfair in Montreal, the National Conference on Organized Resistance (NCOR) in Washington, DC, and the Trans and Women Action Camp (TWAC) in Bloomington, Indiana. Eventually I found my place in political activism through alternative media and radical queer politics. I became deeply involved in community radio and independent news journalism. The Indymedia-inspired culture of uncensored news, along with

the do-it-yourself zine of radical punk culture had me really excited about the circulation of ideas and stories as being revolutionary.

Then in 2009, I attended the Allied Media Conference (organized by Allied Media Projects (AMP)) in Detroit<sup>1</sup>, an annual gathering that brings together people interested in media-based strategies for social transformation, for the first time. The AMC and the Detroit organizers I met there introduced me to a way of organizing that sought to build movements that were as deeply personal as they were politically expansive. The youth-led and community-based organizing in Detroit I witnessed blew me away as it was so intentional about being “part of the paradigm shift in how people view our ability to create power, rather than [...] directly confronting power,” as Executive Director of AMP Jenny Lee describes (Nieves 24)<sup>2</sup>. My time at the AMC led me to approach political work as a generative process of “creating power” and made me curious about the subtleties of relationship and community building within political work. I became keen to explore what was possible within initiatives that combined political activism, artistic creation and aesthetics, and collective methods of visioning liberation from systemic oppression.

By 2012, at the start of my Master’s, when I was introduced to queer of color theory in relation to performance and mediation, I was drawn to the intersection of queerness and racialization as I was developing my own identity as queer woman of color. The work of queer of color theorists like José Esteban Muñoz, Jasbir Puar, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, and E. Patrick Johnson felt very personal and dear to me. In the meantime,

since I moved to Toronto in 2010, I became part of radical QPOC communities through my own friend networks. In my experience and informal conversations with friends, it seemed like there was a need to talk about the complications and contingencies of kinship, healing and spirituality among two-spirit, queer and trans people of color. Through these conversations and common friends, I heard about Mangos with Chili, a two-spirit, queer and trans people of color (2-QTPOC) performance arts collective, currently based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

To understand and affirm the complexity in media production for the purposes of social movement building, I turn to the cultural work of Mangos with Chili (MWC) to explore the media texts and performances showcased at MWC shows, as well as the politics articulated in my interviews with select artists from MWC. In doing so, I hope to show how their performances tune in to the embodied knowledge and relational experience necessary to the evolution of a politics that is committed to complexity and contingency as much as it is invested in pragmatic goals for libratory futures.

**Mangos with Chili: “the floating cabaret of queer, trans and two spirit people of color bliss, dreams, sweat, sweets & nightmares”**

Founded in 2006, by Cherry Galette and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Mangos with Chili (MWC) calls itself: “the floating cabaret of queer, trans and two spirit people of color bliss, dreams, sweat, sweets & nightmares” (Mangos with Chili). MWC aims to produce “high-quality multi-genre performances,” including dance, theater, vaudeville, hip-hop, circus arts, music, spoken word and film that “[reflect] the lives and stories of queer and trans people of color and

[speak] out in resistance to the daily struggles around silence, isolation, homophobia and violence that QTPOC face” (Mangos with Chili). While MWC began an annual touring cabaret, over the years it has “developed the work of over 150 queer artists of color, produced national tours and created an annual season of Bay Area programming consisting of productions that run for several consecutive nights for Bay Area audiences three times a year” (Mangos with Chili). In their “Mission, Vision and Impact,” on their website, MWC emphasizes its commitment to having their shows be integral to community building beyond entertainment:

More than a performance incubator, we are also a ritual space for two spirit, queer and trans communities of color to come together in love, conversation and transformation. Our goal is to present high quality performance art by [2-QTPOC], but so much of our work is also about creating healing and transformative space through performances that are gathering places for community. (Mangos with Chili)

When I interviewed MWC co-founder Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha about what brought her to want to start MWC, to my surprise, the story began in Toronto, when Leah lived on the very same street as I do now and where we were during the interview. Leah moved to Toronto around 1997 from New York when she was drawn to the city because of the queer of color cultural production and activism that was happening in Toronto in a way she had not encountered in New York. There was Sister Vision Press, a Canadian queer women of color and two-spirit publishing house who put out books and did cultural organizing, and the queer South Asian arts festival DeshPardesh, the first place where she met other queer and radical Sri Lankans in the diaspora. The sense Leah got from queer of color arts organizing at the time was that it had a “really broad vision of what being a black or person of color or indigenous person was that was really radical. For [Leah] it was really mixed race inclusive, there was a lot of talk



about decolonization and cultural work as political [...] and there was a great class consciousness” (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha).

In the early 2000s, Leah moved out of doing a lot of grassroots activism and “just trying to survive” to emerge as the writer she always knew she wanted to be. According to Leah, there was still a lot of activism, but culturally there was a lack of momentum following the queer of color cultural production that drew her to the city. Leah noticed that there was on the one hand “a really really white, very like queer hipster radical scene of poetry and performance [...] and then on the other hand, there was a people of color spoken word performance scene that often felt really homophobic” (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha). Nevertheless, Leah continued to pursue writing when she met Cherry Galette. In their own words, Cherry and Leah describe how they connected about their vision for something better for queer of color artists that they were not seeing:

Below is our story in our own words, the way we want to tell it. [...] Once upon a time in an era long ago, in the time of Friendster and before cell phones or GPS, Leah and Cherry met one fated summer in unsunny San Francisco when they were both attending a retreat for writers of color, and visiting their then boos. Mangos with Chili was a dream hatched on corner store phone cards, Fruitvale tienditas selling the snack that is our namesake, and big visions of taking queer and trans people of color performance art to big stages. We knew that our community of artmakers, our craft, and our beautiful stories of resilience and survival, deserved to be witnessed. We knew that our community deserved to come to spaces where they could feel home, be fully held, be celebrated, and see stories similar to their own reflected in creative work. (Mangos with Chili)

## Methodology

This project is my way of creating a moment of reflection on the political possibilities of media and creativity that comes from almost a decade of experience with mediated forms of movement building, culminated in my time as an artist, independent journalist, media justice advocate, community organizer, and trainer/educator. Over the years, I have witnessed first-hand how media production does not simply constitute forms of resistance or mere survival, but it also engenders deep transformation. Whether through poetry, digital storytelling, tech hacking<sup>3</sup>, music, dance, or zines, making media can be powerful because of its generative process that conjures the contradictions among the personal and collective, trauma and healing, imagination and material reality, to form something new *with* these paradoxes, rather than *despite* them. As a queer of color media maker, this work is intimately fueled by my personal investment to the potential of media to facilitate more creative, accessible, and accountable movements for justice and liberation. As I explore a politics beyond a simple oppositional stance I do this in an effort to focus on the quality and processes of social transformation rather than a mere content analysis or discursive reading of 2-QTPOC performance art.

I hope to convey that movement building requires an expansive and generative ethics that explores how we can think of creating conditions that foster transformation that engenders collective healing as much as it propels actionable strategies of social justice. Without discounting the importance of identity politics, it is also about being able to think and feel

outside of categorical boundaries to invest in understanding how we may internalize, perpetuate and change our means of connection and communication.

I chose to conduct a small series of interviews with these artists, which I consider to be conversations waiting to be continued, in addition to interpreting how the style and content of their performances informs the politics of social movement building at large. In addition to the interviews, I had firsthand experience as an audience member at their Toronto show in March 2013, video footage of the same MWC show, and the history of MWC posted on their website. Unfortunately the parameters of the project only allowed me to interview each artist once, and for this reason the data is lacking in more extensive details that may have been available if there was more time and space to delve into more questions flowing from the thesis chapter themes. Further, there are also countless other artists who have performed with MWC with whom I did not have the chance to speak who could have offered valuable insight to the MWC story and cultural activism.

Ideally the interview formats would have been video or audio recordings that would allow for most of the detail in our conversations to come through, but due to the format of the thesis and timeframe, I could not do so. However, I intentionally kept most of the direct quotes longer than a few lines to allow as much as possible the rhythm and the spirit of their words to come through. In a lot of ways they stand on their own. My interpretation of their meaning provided by my analysis is present in this research, but I also wanted the reader to participate in feeling

and imagining what affects their words might also conjure that may be unexpected or unknown.

Through this project the four artists and I began conversations that I hope to continue beyond this project. In being part of this research, we have become witnesses to each other's creative and political processes. It is with gratitude that I wish to honor their work as situated within a generative realm of 2-QTPOC media and cultural production, as well as highlight how this kind of political and performance work extends much more beyond a show. I see these conversations as a way to not only forge different forms of creative expression, but to engage in creating working schemas for living in new worlds. The conversations that shaped this work served as grounds for reflection of the evolution of 2-QTPOC cultural production in relation to social justice movement building, but also as a way to draw strategies of survival transferable to more liberated ways of living beyond any pre-conceived notion of "revolution." While I believe that the conversations presented in this thesis have generative power on their own, I nevertheless hope to continue to develop these ideas with the artists featured here as well as other media makers dedicated to collective liberation that can grow from a politics that reaches toward creating conditions for political potential through changing conditions, through the intimacy of desire and with a willingness for interdependence.

The purpose of this research is to foster new paradigms for understanding mediation and movement building together, considering both the epistemological and pragmatic issues involved, while resisting a move toward categorical totalization. At the intersections of queer,

feminist of color, affect, radical disability, and decolonization theory, the sources that I hope to bring together challenge the neoliberal, rights-based identity politics that can often dominate movement building, while gesturing toward an affirmative and generative politics beyond the traditionally oppositional stance of critical theory.

Based on these artists' performances and personal reflections, I argue that building social movements can be based on a politics that is relational, affirmative and visionary by focusing on three related yet distinct aspects of 2-QTPOC media making as movement building. Through negotiations among non-normative identity, histories of colonialism, and spirituality, I argue that MWC offers a complex politics and a set of practices that hold difference affirmatively while leaving enough space to imagine and enact new worlds.

In Chapter One, I begin with the story of how MWC formed and situate it (and distinguish it) within the ongoing histories of anti-capitalist political organizing in North America/Turtle Island.<sup>4</sup> Through the history of MWC, I highlight the challenge of cultural production for the purposes of collective liberation by asking: How do the artists conceive of their work as movement building that does not pit political militancy against creative and pleasurable forms of expression? Because the economic environment that MWC must navigate is one where political resistance can be easily co-opted in neoliberal discourses of freedom, I argue that MWC articulates a creative and adaptive energy that works to transform what resources are needed to sustain 2-QTPOC cultural work.

In Chapter Two, I turn to the theme of healing through MWC's performances that affirm the experiences, memories and sensations that haunt these artists in both their personal lives and creative processes. I highlight how MWC demonstrates how healing and creation can be co-constitutive, as their performances uphold trauma and pain, not as flaws to correct, but rather powerful guides towards building political movements that are more attuned the embodied affects of political struggle and survival. This chapter closely focuses on these artists' individual performances for both their content and the politics that emerges from each artistic work. I argue that MWC articulates healing as an ongoing yet necessary process for collective liberation.

In Chapter Three, I bring to attention the relationship building work that MWC engages in through their performances. Referring to the notion of "love" as a political organizing principle, I attempt to decipher the political paradigm MWC develops for movement building, particularly on an interpersonal dimension. I refer to the qualities of relationality and "love" to understand the schemas MWC develops for ways of interacting and relating to one another based in a politics of accountability, interdependence, and mutual support.

## **Artist Bios**

### ***Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha***

Leah is a writer, performance artist, curator, teacher and an arts organizer. She describes herself as "a queer cis-gendered femme mixed race, mixed heritage Sri Lankan person born in

North America/Turtle Island, and with a disability” (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *About Leah*<sup>5</sup>). Among her other writing work, she is the author of the Lambda Award winning *Love Cake* and *Consensual Genocide* and co-editor of *The Revolution Starts At Home: Confronting Intimate Violence in Activist Communities*. With Cherry Galette, Leah “co-founded Mangos with Chili, North America's performance incubator for Two Spirit, queer and trans people of color performance artists, and is a lead artist with Sins Invalid. She has taught, performed and lectured across North America, Sri Lanka and Australia and co-founded Toronto’s Asian Arts Freedom School” (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *About Leah*).

### ***Micha Cárdenas***

Micha is an artist or "artist," hacktivist, poet and dancer. For over seven years, she has been doing “socially engaged art” that deals with technology, politics and movement, inclusive of both physical and social movement. Growing up poor, she spent a lot of time reading as an escape strategy. Then, after getting good feedback on her writing at a young age, she kept pursuing media making across film, playwriting, and photography and completed a computer science degree. Micha started to do media activism as the war in Iraq was starting, generating independent media from the grassroots of the anti-war movement in the US. In addition to media production as a form of activism, Micha makes media for her own healing and survival including the project Local Autonomy Networks.<sup>6</sup> (Cárdenas)

### ***Landa Lakes***

Landa Lakes is a performance artist and painter. Landa is “the current president and former Grand Duchess 36 of San Francisco. The Ducal Court is a fundraising organization that has been raising funds for and within the LGBT community for the last forty-one years. She is a former Miss Gay Indian Nations, Ms Osage Hills and has been known to perform all around the city from the unconventional like Tshack or Charlie Horse to the traditional such as the International Court System. She is the Matron of the Brush Arbor Gurls (the Native American drag troupe), the mother of the House of Glitter and the current reigning Miss Northern California Panache” (Mangos with Chili, *Next up*). Landa uses a multi-media through a mix of live performance, dance, costume, and visual displays of facts, quotes and historical footage to convey political messages concerning colonization and Native history.

### ***Manish Vaidya***

Manish is the artistic director of a group called Peacock Rebellion, a queer people of color centered project. Made up of an artistic core of people who are all cultural workers, activists, and healers simultaneously, Peacock Rebellion focuses on trying to support building a culture of collective liberation in daily practices of social, economic and environmental justice. Manish joined MWC in 2010, and has since been in eight MWC shows. Manish, who performs comedic (and tender) spoken word poetry and prose, started writing as a survival strategy as one of the only people of color in a small town in New Hampshire. Manish later became involved in political activism community organizing work by doing fundraising and communications work



for groups that were involved in prison abolition, reproductive justice, worker rights, union organizing, queer liberation, gender self-determination. With this experience he wanted to use his writing to support movements for social justice. After taking a weekend-long writing workshop in San Francisco with Carnie Street Workshop, the oldest multi-disciplinary, Asian and Pacific Islander arts organization, Manish was invited to submit work to the MWC Valentine's Day show, *Whipped: Queer and Trans People of Color Recipes for Love, Sex and Disaster* (Vaidya), where Manish first performed his piece "Love Letters," discussed in Chapter Three.

## **Chapter 1: Growing Cultural Work in Changing Conditions**

### **Strategies for sustaining MWC and navigating the NPIC**

Through the sharing of personal stories through performance, MWC is committed to engaging in cultural work as a testament to the resilience of 2-QTPOC and our survival strategies in the face of historical and ongoing oppression of 2-QTPOC. While I am excited to explore the details and affects in the content of the performances themselves, I want to first contextualize the MWC among a broader landscape of social movement building. MWC not only deals with the subtleties of daily struggle for 2-QTPOC in their storytelling, but as a cultural production project, it exists among an ecology of political activism in North America that is anti-capitalist, and yet nevertheless involves negotiating financial resources.

After witnessing the lack of performance events that intentionally aimed to allow 2-QTPOC to develop and be celebrated as artists beyond one-time events, MWC co-founders Cherry and Leah launched MWC with an epic tour. In the telling of MWC's history on their website, Cherry and Leah speak to the issue of financial sustainability as one of the major challenges MWC has had to face over the years in different ways and how they have managed to continue their work over the last eight years. In 2007, their breakout show featured eight "queer and trans performers of color working in different artistic genres [in] cities and stages throughout the Northeastern United States and Canada" (Mangos with Chili):

With no core funding and mostly grassroots publicity, Mangos with Chili was a phenomenally successful project. We raised our budget through grassroots fundraising and door revenue, and were able to pay artists a fair wage, in addition to covering all travel and housing costs. The show packed world class theaters, underground performance spaces, and campus halls, including Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto, C-Space in Cleveland, Swarthmore College, Cattysack in New York, The Black Repertory Theater of Providence, Theatre Juste pour Rire in Montreal, rural Northeast stages and more. Audiences everywhere thanked us for both the high caliber of work and the life-saving importance of the testimonies we shared through our art. (Mangos with Chili)

Cherry and Leah were “completely blown away by the tour’s unexpected success—how night after night community and university spaces were packed to capacity with folks who had learned about the shows from word of mouth and were hungry for more” (Mangos with Chili):

In our early years not only did we have no core funding, we barely had working computers. During our first two tours we relied on a huge paper atlas of North America to find our way around (the atlas has now moved on to become part of our archives!). We paid for gas out of pass-the-hat donations as gas prices began to soar. But we did it. We found a way. We made magic happen. We made shows that are gorgeous healing spaces that people talk about years later. (Mangos with Chili)

The first MWC tour began as a journey based on faith and community support, but questions of sustainability continued. When the financial crash of 2009 happened, it prompted MWC to reconsider their long-term vision. When Leah and I sat down to talk about the history of MWC, one of the stories she told me was of how MWC grew amidst negotiating finding resources to produce high quality performances among economically precarious conditions:

I think the thing is with all artwork—I would say especially for QTPOC art or any marginalized art, [is that] it’s so much about money, it’s so much about economics. Like I would say [in] ’07, ’08...it was my first year in the Bay and I was like “Wow, there’s money in America” and there are all these queer people or queer people of color making these middle class livings and they totally will spend twelve to twenty dollars on

a show with eight people [...] and I was like “Wow we can afford to pay for all these things,” and then the financial crash happened.

I remember the first night that [I thought] “Wow we made like two thousand dollars at the door,”—with hustling—but it wasn’t a thing, and of course we sold out. And I was like “Wow we’re paying everybody,” and we can get props, and sushi and all this shit. And then the crash happened and then we had our Fall show and we didn’t make door. We had a conservative door projection that we were paying people out of, and we made two thirds of it, because a third of the people who came used our “no one turned away” policy. Before that [I thought] “Ok, we’re just gonna keep doing this, and we’ll get more famous, and we’ll get more grants, and me and Cherry can quit our day jobs and we’ll buy a theatre, and we’ll have this budget,” and then [I realized that] that’s not going to happen that way unless we really kiss up in a lot of ways, and we water down our vision to one that’s more comfortable. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

The conditions and parameters of financial viability Leah describes is characteristic of a model of resource scarcity and economic austerity of late capitalism that puts pressure on artists and activists to conform to the political mandates of a limited number of cultural funding sources that are often depoliticized. In the book *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-profit Industrial Complex*, edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, critical ethnic studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez describes this system of funding as the “non-profit industrial complex,” (NPIC), which emerged alongside the increased privatization of charity foundations throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the dissolution of the social safety net in the US in the growth of neoliberalism in the latter half. Rodríguez defines the NPIC as “a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements, since about the mid-1970s” (21-22). According to feminist scholar Andrea Smith,

The NPIC manages and controls dissent by incorporating it into the state apparatus, functioning as a “shadow state” constituted by a network of institutions that do much of what government agencies are supposed to do with tax money in the areas of education and social services. The NPIC functions as an alibi that allows government to make war, expand punishment, and proliferate market economies under the veil of partnership between the public and private sectors. (8-9)

This reality means that MWC is a project that has to navigate the politics of funding cultural work in addition to developing the content of their shows. The context of the NPIC poses significant pressures to MWC, because the NPIC functions to govern the political purview of activism through funding contracts. Therefore, as an outlet for political storytelling through performance, it is difficult for MWC to conform to parameters of what counts as worthy of funding, when the criteria is often based on government-sanctioned notions of so-called democratic participation, civic engagement and freedom that do not address the root problems of inequity and marginalization, such as US imperialism locally and overseas. MWC resists the depoliticization of the NPIC through its refusal to conform to standards of legitimization that function to neutralize threats to the state and condone the deprivation of resources to those who do not and cannot fit. The MWC website states that they want to be very transparent about “the fact that [MWC has] had very little core funding over the years and operated on a very sparse budget” (Mangos with Chili):

We feel that our work does not neatly fit into the visions of funders who operate under the white supremacist hetero[-sexist] ableist patriarchy. We refuse to be tokenized. We refuse to filter or tame our work. We refuse to shift our message or description about who we are or who/what we are here for to appease those with power. We are unapologetic about this. (Mangos with Chili)

MWC's explicit push back against the NPIC highlights key questions about marginalization and difference, such as: What does it mean to not or never "fit"? How does a refusal or struggle to fit and compete for resources under these precarious conditions play out among people invested in producing politically-conscious cultural work? Manish Vaidya, who has performed at MWC shows since 2010, is also part of an artist collective called Peacock Rebellion, as previously mentioned. Peacock Rebellion's first show, "Agen(c)y: Nonprofit Dreams + Disasters," was about the NPIC and its perpetuation of violence by governing political imperatives. When Manish and I spoke, he told me about the negative feedback the show received:

I got [...] a lot of criticism from people either who are so badly burned out from our nonprofiteer jobs, and want some kind of ideal model to still work within those jobs. Or people who have been in these jobs for like twenty five years, who are so invested. One person [said to me] "ok so basically what you're saying is that everything I've done for the last twenty five years of my life has been a waste of time." And I think if people go to that place... I think that that's ego, and it's attachment to right wrong thinking and that actually limits radical potential. (Vaidya)

Manish's experience brings to the fore the emotional distress that the NPIC produces and that feeds back into it—the more energy invested into the NPIC, the more people who depend on it form attachments to the illusion of a stable model for sustaining activism. Furthermore, the NPIC produces attachments especially within our contemporary moment, where crisis has shifted from being exceptional to ordinary. Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant claims that our present is "an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (8). The NPIC thrives within this impasse between a state system which fails to offer the means to achieve

social justice on one end, and the fantasy of a better world despite this failure on the other end. Competing for economic sustainability within this impasse becomes part of what Berlant calls the “cruel optimism” that has “prevailed since the 1980s, as the social-democratic promise of the postwar period in the United States and Europe has retracted” (back cover). According to Berlant, “an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it: but its life-organizing status can trump interfering with the damage it provokes” (227). In this context, because the NPIC creates a set of relations that bring purpose and structure to politically progressive work, it also organizes and governs ways of living and organizing. The daily investment and work of persisting under the pressures of the NPIC and economic precarity generates a longing to participate in making social change, or the “desire for the political” (Berlant 227) that ironically ends up impeding radical social transformation. For Manish, the reactions to critiques of the NPIC signal a need for what he calls “shapeshifting”:

Nobody is perfect, we’re making mistakes and we’re learning. And we’re making theory as we go...like Third Wave Feminism didn’t just like pop out of the sky or whatever. Things are constantly evolving, shifting. So I think the biggest challenge [to movement building] has been the resistance to shapeshifting. Which I understand. I understand the fear of a scarcity mindset, a like “oh god, things are crumbling.” There’s a lot of discomfort in not knowing. Capitalism provides that whole thing of like, “there’s one set way to make this widget.” Thinking outside that takes a lot of work. So I can understand that the stakes are very high. (Vaidya)

In Manish’s experience, it is the embodied and affective dynamics of “fear” and “discomfort” that signal the depth of the NPIC’s pull. Manish affirms these affective attachments to the NPIC

as part of survival, and yet also proposes “shapeshifting” as a way of making room for an expansive paradigm of resourcing movements that do not rely on a scarcity mindset.

MWC’s commitment to finding funding without compromising their political values or from community-based ways of sustaining their work is part of their cultural activism. MWC’s willingness to take such risks invites a kind of politics that embraces changing conditions and strives to be creative in its sustaining strategies as much as in their performance art.

What would it be like to take up 2-QTPOC cultural activism within a politics that embraces change? In what ways do our creative practices relating to the concept of change itself also shift? What political possibilities unfold when realities of impermanence and indeterminacy are honored/taken up? How does a politic of striving beyond mere survival inform strategies for sustaining this cultural work financially? Leah emphasizes the importance of an adaptive approach to survival that is not necessarily invested in predictability:

[Seven years since MWC began], I [now] know so many 2-QTPOC performance artists and groups. I mean everything from like Couleur in Montreal, to Unapologetic Burlesque and all the things happening in Toronto, and like so many things in the Bay, Chicago, Detroit...I mean everywhere it feels like there’s something going on. And that feels really good, at the same time I’m like “and it could all end the minute we stop paying attention.” Or we’re gonna hit some kind of snag as a movement where like the things we’ve been doing don’t work. [...]

I was just thinking about all our brilliant survival strategies, and how like they work until they stop working, and so we just have to keep innovating and using that...trickster energy and that creative adaptive energy that we have to keep figuring out new ways of making our art happen. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

The financial crash of 2009 highlighted the importance of developing more emergent, adaptive strategies to sustain 2-QTPOC cultural production in a volatile economic climate. In the face of



the precariousness and unpredictability of late capitalism, MWC has refused to compromise their political mandate, and yet has managed to sustain itself over the years through a few start up, capacity building grants, and commissions from the Horizons Foundation, the Astraea Foundation, and the Queer Cultural Center (Mangos with Chili). Regardless, their shapeshifting is more apparent in the support they have received through networks of friends—as a community practicing a culture of support that arose often informally, moving away from linear, hierarchical, competitive and outcome-oriented strategies of sustaining cultural work:

We are also deeply thankful for our beloved community members, who have filled passed hats and Paypals, given us venues, videography and places to sleep, given us hugs and encouragement when we felt like giving up, and been our most consistent source of support. We have always said that capitalism doesn't love us, but our communities do. We have been able to keep operating due to this support, as well as the support of countless community members. (Mangos with Chili)

The value of community is more than what they can offer in resources. It is the potential for adaptive strategizing that can only happen as an intentional shift beyond the NPIC and its limited paradigm of sustainability. MWC's focus on collectivity is another reason why MWC is significant and necessary to social movement building. MWC's investment in "shapeshifting" is apparent in their description that articulates their cultural work through a legacy of 2-QTPOC artists and grounding their work in a commitment to constant change and collective evolution:

In our 8 years of existence we have also made mistakes. We have learned from our mistakes. We have paused when we needed to reassess our personal and professional relationship, and there are times when we have questioned our financial, emotional, and energetic capacity to continue. During times of struggle we have reflected on the legacies of the [2-QTPOC] artists and cultural workers who have come before us. And we have been determined to keep going for the ones who will come after us. And most importantly, we have learned, grown and survived. We have committed to, and grown

our commitment to disability access, moving towards only having shows that are in wheelchair accessible spaces and stages, with captioned videos and fragrance free seating. As two cis queer women of color, we continue to grow our commitment to work against trans\* misogyny. And while we have produced a lot of solid and exceptional work over the years, we are also humble enough to acknowledge that not everything we have created is brilliant. We are a work in progress. We embrace our evolution. (Mangos with Chili)

### **Transformative Media: Cultural Work is Movement Work**

MWC is not only significant as a producer of 2-QTPOC art and performance, but also as a political endeavor working towards collective liberation. While the cultural work that MWC produces exists within what has been generally referred to as our contemporary “networked society,” characterized by the “democratization” of information and creative expression, the political potential of cultural work is also enmeshed in neoliberal rhetoric of “participation” and “transparency” that does not account for the root causes and conditions of oppression more broadly.<sup>7</sup>

These notions are co-opted and folded into what cultural studies scholar Jodi Dean describes as “communicative capitalism,” which “instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence [and] enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for more of the world’s peoples” (3). In response to these conditions where the feeling of democratic participation precludes radical social change, Dean calls for a “neo-democracy” that requires a commitment to the precise naming and fighting of an enemy to

reign in a more strategic and rational approach in order to achieve a kind of democracy that is more justly representative of every citizen in a liberal civil society. However, Dean's approach still risks remaining trapped in a purely oppositional militancy that dichotomizes "action" and "reflection." Dean's call for the precise identification of enemies to counteract the affective pull of "communicative capitalism," implies that political activism redefines public participation through a more rationalistic lens. However, MWC reminds us that the risks and terms upon which what comes to "count" as political must be continuously reconsidered. In our conversation, Micha emphasized the need for new strategies that can be found through art and cultural work:

I don't know if we need less action and more thinking, but I think we need more thinking about political strategies. Old political strategies don't work, because capital is really good at changing rapidly. So I see this work of making political art as a way of thinking [...] that can both be a kind of political action, but also lead to new kinds of political action. (Cárdenas)

By fostering an environment for intimate connections to be made in the sharing of stories and lived experience, MWC does not produce media simply for the sake of "participation;" nor is it necessarily invested in developing the neo-democratic framework for activism Dean calls for. What MWC does differently than Dean's proposal is that it exemplifies how 2-QTPOC performance does not have to get stuck in purely representational or human rights-based narratives, but that it can be part of building a more open-ended paradigm for collective liberation:

We are part of a growing and ever present movement of queer and trans people of color and Two Spirit cultural activism. From performing at the 2010 U.S. Social Forum to headlining at Brown's annual Black Lavender Experience; from curating shows on

QTPOCTS love sex and desire, rites of passage and ancestry, death and memory. Supporting other QTPOCTS artist collectives like Queer Rebels, R3 and Peacock Rebellion.

We root in our belief that we can make stages into sites of freedom, healing and transformation through shared story and art. We know we are both ancient and breathtakingly new. That poetry and dance are far from a luxury. That our ancestors survived through song, poetry and story, mapping freedom trails and envisioning new ways of being beyond survival. And as we remember them by dancing in their memory, we do the same. [...] And we will keep finding the way. (Mangos with Chili)

MWC takes up performance as a process and practice of exploring political potential. In its multi-genre performances, MWC offers a variety of media forms that together create a practice of worldmaking on stage. MWC is intentionally rooted in stories and art that are “both ancient and breathtakingly new,” in such a way that each artistic work is meant to be part of a ritual and ceremony that travels across and disrupts normative temporalities of linear progress and survival. In particular, the stage, as “[a site] of freedom, healing and transformation,” is pivotal to how MWC traces ancestral strategies of survival of the past through “song, poetry and story,” or maps of “freedom trails” in order to access clues into generating “new ways of being beyond [mere] survival.” In our conversation, Leah emphasizes the importance of the stage as a conduit for creating political potential:

[There are] a lot of spaces [2-QTPOC] don’t have control over, but when you have control over the stage or the performance space, you can make anything happen there. And art speaks to people on a lot of levels including the sub-rational and the dream state; it speaks to you in so many different ways. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz, who has written extensively on queer of color performance, takes up “the stage” in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, in which he “issues an urgent call for the revivification of the queer political

imagination” in the face of an “LGBT agenda [that] has far too long been dominated by pragmatic issues like same-sex marriage and gays in the military” (back cover). In his chapter, “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative,” Muñoz argues that “the stage” (97) can be a site for the performance of a desire for utopia, as something better that is missing from the present:

Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be. (97, original emphasis)

By bringing together 2-QTPOC experience with “love, sex and desire, rites of passage and ancestry, death and memory,” that reach into both the past and future, MWC uses the stage to open a portal of political potential that both expresses a dissatisfaction with current systems of oppression, while also keeping the process of generating a new politics open to exploration.

Whereas Dean’s proposal to rein in the affects of “communicative capitalism” involves a kind of explicit characterization of capitalism as a precise target to be eliminated, MWC attempts to develop a new politics through the process of “staging utopia,” (97) as Muñoz would say, through performance that embraces the indeterminate and affective pull of desiring better ways of living. It is the very unknowability of “new ways of being beyond survival” (Mangos with Chili) in MWC performances that poses a challenge to capitalism. As Muñoz explains:

Capitalism [...] would have us think that it is a natural order, an inevitability, the way things should be. The “should be” of utopia, its indeterminacy and its deployment of hope, stand against capitalism’s ever expanding and exhausting force field of how things “are and will be.” (99)

Furthermore, according to Muñoz, the performing utopia on stage “suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished” (99) and continues to generate potential even after the performer has left the stage. Because “[performance] never completely disappears, but, instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people,” (113) what MWC’s audience bears witness to is the creation of what Muñoz calls “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality,” “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1) rather than a final product or fixed representation of 2-QTPOC experience. In addition, the affects that are generated on stage necessarily fold the audience into a collective movement building endeavor of “mapping” and “envisioning” (Mangos with Chili) a new politics through the intimacy of the live performance. The stage becomes a site for political potential to emerge from relationality, from the connections forged between the artists and audience members:

That’s the thing... Movements, however they’re defined, they could be more traditional political movements or they could be kin networks, relationship networks... [Movement building can be] anything that breaks isolation and makes people connect so that you have that not-automatic learned connection where you can build power. That [connection] can happen when you see somebody on stage telling a part of your story. Or it can happen when you see somebody on stage acting, or saying or dancing a story that you’ve never thought of before. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Through these intimate and immediate connections of live performance, MWC demonstrates the immense role of vulnerability as a means through which new tactics and new worlds can be processed. According to Leah, the vulnerability and emotionality felt through what MWC enacts on stage affirms the importance of cultural work as it cultivates intuitive and embodied knowledge in addition to other more explicit forms of political resistance:

Audre Lorde said “The white father said ‘I think therefore I am.’ And the Black mother, the poet, whispers in my dreams, “I feel therefore I can be free.” And she didn’t say that it was going to be one over the other, but she made an incredibly deep link that Black, queer, feminism is about the intelligence of feelings. [...] It’s not a march, but it’s giving us visions, and it’s transforming our consciousness. And helping us see and remember different ways to be, and we absolutely fucking need that. You know, it’s not an opiate—it’s another tool. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

## **Chapter 2: Healing and Mediating the Incommensurable**

MWC is a project that treats stories and movement as sacred. Throughout the performance, one by one, each artist presents a portal into their lived experience as a 2-QTPOC. These stories are intensely self-reflexive as much as they are critical of systems of oppression. Because one of the deepest dimensions at which colonial violence continues to be perpetuated is within the realm of personal and collective trauma, MWC's storytelling performances of personal struggle enact and shape processes of healing. In the performances described below, MWC grapples with the complexity of lived experience across memories, sensations, and narratives that honor the daily struggles and everyday details of living *through* movements, as 2-QTPOC artists who are also committed to building movements for social justice. MWC presents complicated, yet rich, scenarios of what constitutes healing for 2-QTPOC, whether it be about connecting to traditional medicine and knowledge, the embodiment of intergenerational trauma and survival, or the role of mourning as a way to renegotiate loss and cultural survival throughout ongoing processes of colonization.

### **“In Defense of Magic”: Manish Vaidya on humor as opening and collective support**

One aspect of healing MWC takes up is in regards to spirituality, as it exceeds the confines of institutionalized religion, linear temporalities and opens up possibilities for movement building. The spirituality in the performances themselves or the politics that inform their work come from personal versions of ancestral practices in faith, hope and intention that challenge the



dichotomy of queerness as white and secularist and racial identity as associated with heterosexuality and organized religion.

Manish Vaidya's performances are poetry/spoken word performances that combine comedy, tender confessions, and social critique. In the Summer of 2013, at MWC's show the National Queer Arts Festival in San Francisco, "Free: Two-Spirit, Trans and People of Color Visions of Freedom," Manish Vaidya, performed a piece called "In Defense of Magic," which speaks to Manish's views and experiences with traditional knowledge, and healing through a letter to a former lover who was a proponent of Western science. The piece takes the audience on a journey through the historical context of how capitalism developed in relation to the demonization of traditional medicines:

There is no science to this, is there? No Pfizer-funded research paper to support this. It just is. Except, there is science now. Thousands of studies in the journal of the American medical association, and the annals of the gastroenterology, and...[takes a huge breath in] [audience laughter]... written as thousands...shit, millions? Lie in piles of blood wounds from medical bills. Thousands of studies now confirm that maybe acupuncture and acupressure, and cupping, and yoga, and herbal medicines work. As adjuncts. Adjuncts to synthetically-produced "real medicine"--"real." Many earth-based medicine systems have had what, six thousand years or more to bloom? And now, Western scientists write papers saying "maaaaaaayyyy.." [checks watch] [audience laughter/cheering] "maaaayyyybe."

Ok, I got chewed out for turning in my astronomy report—about the planet Pluto—six hours late. Western science turns in their papers six thousand years late [audience laughter] and no one says shit to that! You know what, fuck you Western science. Western science you can sit on my face [laughter]. (Vaidya)

Manish describes what he calls “earth-based medicine systems” as “magic” that are directly linked to knowledge of health and spirituality passed down intergenerationally by indigenous and people of color. Most importantly, in our conversation, Manish emphasized the need to rescue or reclaim this knowledge as survival strategies that are sacred in their own right, rather than dependent on the legitimization offered only recently by Western scientific authorities.

When I’m talking about magic, I’m talking about intuition. I’m talking about things like yoga, meditation, acupuncture, acupressure. I’m talking about all these things as ancestral wisdom. [I’m] looking at Western science as the alternative, actually, *that’s* the complimentary thing. That the tools, the skills, the resources that people have learned, how people have built resilience, that that is actually, all of that together, is magic. (Vaidya)

In “In Defense of Magic,” Manish describes the rise of capitalism in relation to the gendering of medical knowledge:

Who are the ones who forsake the names of spells? Who caged witches, healers, anything whole, anything not correct? Who turn heirstory into history into myth? Who are the ones who scorch the earth and its keepers, and who is at stake? In the book *Caliban and the Witch*, Sylvia Federici traces how the baby “primitive accumulation” grew up to become the schoolyard bully called “capitalism.” In the book she describes the strategy of criminalizing community-based healers who were mostly women. And turning healing into a male-dominated science. That’s a brilliant strategy, turning earth-based healing and religion and healers away from the land and the people and turning them into whole industries of products to be bought and sold. Federici’s book does go into how many of the healers were queer, ‘cause you know, what’s more queer than healing... [audience laughter] (Vaidya)

While Manish is taking up a long and complicated history of early capitalism and its implications across a multitude of social issues intersecting class, gender, race, based in an academic text, he articulates his critique with an intimacy that grounds the theoretical content of his letter with humor that references queer sexuality and people of color activism. Manish’s humor gestures

towards the complications of healing (and trauma) that queers must reckon with, but does so in a way that carefully mocks these struggles while also promoting and affirming the importance of healing as a process for 2-QTPOCs. Manish explained to me that the intention behind his comedy to open up a space for tenderness and the sharing of personal truths to audiences that may be 2-QTPOC, but skeptical of the notions of “magic” and “healing”:

I have this line in that piece “In Defense of Magic”: “Beloved queers of color, we know we’re healers, sacred, right? Don’t we know we’re irreplaceable, powerful, intuitive, resilient magic makers, shapeshifters? Don’t we know we shape our futures with clues our ancestors drop into our dreams?” And this is a part of tension in the audience, right, that some people are like “Uhhh...what the fuck are you talking about?” you know. So then the next line is: “Sometimes I remember I was taught to forget” [...] so, I turn it on myself, to make it ok for audience members to have that little bit of distance. (Vaidya)

Manish begins and ends his poem from a sensual and emotionally raw place that has a way of bringing in the historical context of healing and his critique of capitalism to the audience through glimpses of the most intimate moments of a past relationship where 2-QTPOC desire, bodily sensation, anger and healing meet:

How dare you. You who would tear my bones from flesh. You who deny spells casting whispers, who bury wisdom with the bones of the ghosts who chose your name. You who slash at skin. With claims that my talents are evil. You who denied parts of parts that made me whole. You dared defy magic?

Oh yes. I believe in magic. Our people can conjure healing, I’ve witnessed this myself. It’s you, inside me. Pausing, “baby, is this still ok?” You [...] with thirty lifetimes of rage and love...I believe in magic. How else can bodies heal with cups? Or needles into flesh? Or pressure. Just...the right...pressure.

[...]

And to that sweet brown boy who clings to Western conventions, like security blankets, I still say “how dare you?” How dare you deny the existence of magic? When your existence is proof that magic is real. (Vaidya)

Manish explained to me that the humor created an opening, somewhere between the self-consciousness of audience members who are invested in appearing like they know everything, and their longing for something like magic. Manish's humor was intentionally deployed to nurture an environment for tenderness, which in turn grounded his social criticism and activism in the most intimate details like the desire shared between lovers. In our conversation he told me:

And you know, I would not have been able to deliver that line, ["To that sweet brown boy who clings to Western conventions, how dare you deny the existence of magic, when your existence is proof that magic is real"], had I not done all this work to create the opening with the humor. But I'm not fucking around. That's a moment that pulls at a heartstring, you know, and I know that. I want to end in a really soft, tender place. And I'm also not fucking around. Like what I'm trying to say is that I believe that each person alive today is the answer to their ancestors' prayers. (Vaidya)

Later in "In Defense of Magic," Manish revisits the ancestral connection through the realm of dreams, but ties up that connection to the audience in the present moment of his performance:

Beloved queers of color, we know we are healers. Sacred, right? Don't we know we're irreplaceable, powerful, intuitive, resilient magic makers, shapeshifters? Don't we know we shape our futures with clues our ancestors drop into our dreams? Because sometimes I remember I was taught to forget.

Just a short while, after I enter my dream portal, I see my ancestors [...] queer desi uncles throwing brightly colored powders and their bangles [...] welcome me home. They draw pictures of their kin. At first I am surprised, but I see them, [...] bursas, two-spirit beloveds, medicine people...and all of them look just...like...you.

Yeah. They mirror your divine spirit. And they encourage me to sleep with that super hot queer in the audience at the Mangos with Chili show [audience laughter]. I'll be all like, "what, I'm just passing on messages to the ancestors." (Vaidya)

When I ask Manish, who writes about living with depression, intergenerational trauma, or what he calls “ancestral trauma, blood memory,” how he had come to claim the conviction that magic is real, he describes magic as an expansive idea that includes intuition and listening to our bodies as a way to develop practices that help 2-QTPOC to cope with traumatic moments, but also to build toward community cultures of mutual support:

I want people to reconnect with their bodies. I’m working with folks... You know almost all my close friends have disclosed that they’re survivors of sexual violence, for example. And I know that I check out, I dissociate, or I appease or I have a flight response, or a fight response, any of those things. So my rational mind is not going to get me healed. My rational mind is great; you know I have learned survival strategies. But what I’m really doing is I’m reacting to trauma or to a trigger, like just in the ways that I move through the world. And I’m trying to shift from reacting to responding, and from responding to actually anticipating. And I want to build that with other people. (Vaidya)

Fostering survival strategies that “actually anticipate,” then becomes part of developing what sociologist Avery Gordon describes as an “anticipatory consciousness [which] is intensely in the present tense, moving back and forth between memories of what has come before and what is to come next, folding itself into sensual stories of movement, social movement, individual movement” (Gordon 198). Manish’s piece fosters an “anticipatory consciousness” that takes the notion of consciousness-raising further than a simple linear progression of movement building, towards a conception of social transformation as an oscillating process. The focus, instead, becomes more about the fluidity and relationality between moments, the resonance across temporalities that bring out the knowledge of desire and intergenerational ancestral wisdom that in turn fashion practices that can attune with this motion instead of attempting to constrain or close it up.

Manish takes this expansive approach to 2-QTPOC magic in his writing to “support people returning to their inner wisdom,” to develop emergent strategies of processing the impacts of intergenerational trauma, sexual abuse, and depression. However, while engaging with this level of vulnerability is crucial to creating cultures of collective liberation, talking about 2-QTPOC magic and healing requires navigating the stigmas attached to these concepts because of colonialism and cultural imperialism that outlawed Indigenous and people of color spiritual practices (and which were later co-opted by white cultures). In addition, this cultural dispossession has generated survival strategies that rely on closing oneself off from vulnerability and emotionality, making it difficult to feel safe enough to tune in to the affective and spiritual violence that a body can hold. Thus, even within 2-QTPOC social justice movements, the notion of spirituality as a method of organizing remains tethered to what feminist scholar and spiritual practitioner M. Jacqui Alexander calls “the ‘geographies of suspicion’ that pervade feminist and transnational theory that thinks of the spiritual as patriarchal or depoliticized” (Cvetkovich, *Depression* 134). In particular, Alexander, who writes about transnational feminism, queer sexual politics and African cosmologies, warns of

the perils associated with the journey [from displacement into assimilation]: there is a cost associated with taking refuge in the borrowed gifts of alienation that cultivate the practice of forgetting, the refusal to pull on the ancestral cord, denying ourselves life force. (qtd. in Cvetkovich, *Depression* 136)

One way Manish seeks to work through this “amnesia” is by creating cultures of collective liberation during performance. In his spoken word piece “In Defense of Magic,” Manish includes a participatory component during which he invites the audience, in a shared effort to “pull on the ancestral cord,” as Alexander says, to lean into healing practices of freedom:

Do you remember? Do you remember how to get free? How do you build your freedom muscles? How do you protect yourself, move through your own cycles? What does your instinct tell you? Ancestors left clues for us. Teachings. And just like in social studies class, not all the teachings are super helpful, or accurate. Ancestors were just trying to figure it out too.

Actually, welcome to the workshop portion of the MWC show. Let's try to figure this out together. Let's take a minute to think to yourself about this question. There's paper and a pen with your program for you to jot down notes if you want. What are some things I've done to support my healing and community healing? Physical, emotional, cultural, sexual, spiritual, etc. We'll shout out our responses in a minute, we'll start a collective list of ways we can get free now. (Vaidya)

After a few minutes, Manish invites the audience to share some of their responses, and place their notes if they wanted to on the altar set up at the show, to be later posted online to continue the list.<sup>8</sup> Some of the responses shared aloud at the show included: "I sobered up," "masturbation," "write it out," "short skirts," "breathing," "armed struggle," "meditation," "talk to my mom," "don't talk to my mom," "make art with other QPOC," "have a lot of sex with somebody who loves me," "two-page Facebook statuses," and "Michael Jackson." (Mangos with Chili Live!)

When Manish resumes his poetry, he affirms the moment by saying "Oh yes beloveds. This, this is magic right here. We can conjure together" (Vaidya). While the notion of "magic" is often framed as exotic and inconceivable, the "magic" Manish facilitated through his piece was brought out from the daily strategies 2-QTPOC in the audience already practice, whether mundane, militant, creative, or even contrary to other strategies, the exercise had a way of bringing the complexity of healing into the intricacies of everyday life for 2-QTPOC. Manish's exercise and performance upholds what feminist and affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich highlights

about Alexander's insistence on "a notion of the sacred that transforms our understandings of political practice" (Cvetkovich, *Depression* 137):

The sacred is connected to everyday practices that are not glamorous or other-worldly and that suggest a rethinking of political practices that can address the self and its feelings, moods, energies and will. Taking the risk of invoking the sacred [can allow for a connection to] everyday feelings of disconnection with transnational histories, as well as to forge practices, often everyday practices of the body, that aim to address them. (Cvetkovich, *Depression* 137)

### **"This Body is My Altar": Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha on chronic illness and embodied healing**

In Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's performance, her spoken word poetry played on the speakers as she performed her reflections on disability, pain, ancestry, love and community. As the audio of her prose plays over the speakers, Leah slowly travels, circling around the stage, stopping at different points, and practicing rituals at each stop: lighting a candle, scattering the ground with soil, pouring a glass of wine, and washing at a bowl of water. She traces her relationship to chronic illness across a timeline of life events that detail embodiment as a ritual of reflection, survival and healing. As Leah begins the performance lying "in bed," she describes it as an "altar," a place that is simultaneously a space of vulnerability, sacredness and growth:

If chronic illness and disability are ritual, this bed is my altar. The place I circle and return to. The place where I rest. The place where I am dismembered and am reborn over and over again. The place where I live when I am too sick to go out and the place where I make my own dance party. If prayer is repetition and intention and change. If chronic illness is the bed, here is where I pray.

[getting out of bed]



East. The ones who came before. Ancestors who survived so much. Whose trauma and life live in my bones. Who are the reasons why my bones ache. Let me honor you in my body by listening to, living in this ache. Let me always remember that my pain is you reaching for me. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Leah's performance takes up disability by drawing upon disability justice activism and theory that is distinct from a "disability rights movement [that] largely understands disability as a form of nonnormativity that deserves to be depathologized" (Puar 153). Rather,

disability justice activists seek to move beyond access issues foregrounded by the Americans with Disabilities Act as well as global human rights frames that standardize definitions of disability and the terms of their legal redress across national locations. They instead avow that in working-poor and working-class communities of color, disabilities and debilities are actually "the norm." (Puar 153)

Thus, from a disability justice perspective, navigating debility and capacity in marginalized communities is not exceptional, but built in to neoliberal capitalist systems based on the exploitation of bodies and labor. According to queer of color cultural scholar Jasbir Puar, finance capital seeks to sustain its demand for "bodily capacity," with the "profitability of debility," where some bodies are "made to pay for 'progress,'" while others can be "reinvigorated for neoliberalism" (Puar 153). As Leah recounts sharing her experience living with chronic illness with other queer brown folks before moving to the Bay Area, she describes a kind of commiseration that comes with the work of daily struggle, and the difficulty it can pose to feeling connected to a broader history of survival:

I know some other queer brown folks with chronic illnesses, but all we know how to say to each other is "Yeah, it sucks, right?" We don't know that our bodies can be anything other than shame. We don't know that our sick bodies have smarts that non-disabled bodies don't have. That our sickness lives in a history of disabled people who fought back and survived. Just like our queer and brown bodies do. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Puar's attempt to intervene into "the binaried production of disabled versus nondisabled bodies" (153) draws upon the ongoing context of neoliberal capitalism that Lauren Berlant describes as "slow death" (Puar 152):

Slow death occurs not within the timescale of the suicide or the epidemic but within [what Berlant describes as] "a zone of temporality...of ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent, often in phenomena not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact." (Puar 152)

Yet Leah's description of her pain as her ancestors reaching out to her works through everyday processes and bodily sensations as immanently connected to and in the process of creating new temporalities of survival. As her performance continues, Leah's recounting of her ancestral connection to intergenerational history/memory then flows into her reflection on the way community-based healing practices, at their most micropolitical, in their daily gestures, can constitute the evolution of new social worlds:

2007. I move. Everything changes. I was so afraid to leave my free Ontario health care, but here there's California sunshine, community acupuncture for twelve bucks. There's people who will carry my groceries up the stairs while my legs give out. There's a cane. There's me finally able to use it in public. Finally able to ask for help, because it's given without pity. I'm able to do these things because there are cripes who look like me and different from me, who did this work. Together we began to remake the world. And our life is remade. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Leah's conceptualization of disability and embodiment as ritual articulates a politic and daily practice of honoring the body as sacred rather than a vessel to sacrifice. Therefore, Leah's piece centered healing as a practice in embracing complexity, instead of positioning pain, debility and vulnerability as obstacles to freedom that necessarily require elimination or repair. In a

discussion among disability justice activists about “creating care culture,” (Hande and Mire), Eddie Ndopu, “an emerging disability scholar and self-described queercrip Afropolitan,” (Hande and Mire 11) explains that:

incorporating an ethic of care into making movements accessible is about redefining how people are valued within the context of radical potential organizing [...] So much of organizing is predicated on pushing the body to extremes. It’s about putting your body on the line, almost quite literally to effect positive change. It’s not about sleeping in or taking time out to make sure you feel healthy. All of that is implicated in these larger ableist relational formations. (Hande and Mire 11)<sup>9</sup>

In closing her piece, Leah reframes her poetic reflections as glimpses into her sacred process of “making love” beyond merely “getting by” and “living on,” as Berlant describes. This process merits an attunement or a kind of “listening” to how holding “bodies as disabled divinity” shapes a healing practice that does not have to turn away from disability to enact new worlds:

North. The body. If disability has rituals, this body is my altar. This body is the daily practice, what I return to over and over again. What I return to, the only place I will ever own. I begin by listening. If our bodies are disabled divinity, this crip making love is part of the healing of the world. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

### **Feeling Freedom: Micha Cárdenas’ “Noci en violencia”**

At the 2013 Spring MWC performance in Toronto, Micha performed a movement and poetry piece called “Noci en violencia” or “Born in violence.” Through spoken word and dance/movement, it traced the processes of violence of free market capitalism, state structures and carceral institutions, and sexual abuse in Micha’s lived experience.<sup>10</sup> In considering the

theme of the show, “visions of freedom,” Micha notes the distinctions and complications within any notion of “freedom”:

I’m really thinking about [...] feeling not free, because of being a survivor and because of being a trans woman and violence every day. But then it led me to thinking about dance, and how that’s some of the only time that I get any kind of sense of freedom, is sometimes [being] lost in dance. Not just lost in it, but just in that sensation of feeling my muscles, and my body. (Cárdenas)

Reflecting over twenty years after co-editing and publishing *This Bridge Called My Back*:

*Writings by Radical Women of Color*, queer Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga continues to uphold the importance of the feminist mantra “the personal is political,” because “our bodies and our experiences are that complex site of conflict through which our political work is mediated” (Moraga, *Xicana Codex* 60). The ever-evolving process of personal and collective healing thus calls for a certain self-reflexivity and self-initiated accountability, as “one of the greatest damages white feminism did to women was to convince us of our own victimization without at the same time requiring us to acknowledge our complicity in oppression and the ways in which we, ourselves, oppress” (Moraga, *Xicana Codex* 60). Furthermore, this turn inward is not a turning away from structural inequity and systemic violence, but rather it digs deeper to better develop strategies for survival as well as flourishing among a political landscape that thrives on destruction and precarity. As Moraga continues to explore “the political questions regarding state-sanctioned death and its dealers—urban poverty and its consequent child abuse; the prison of drugs and apartheid-style education; and illegal land occupation and war for profit,” she says that she is “most concerned about [her] own inability

to control the warring inside [of herself],” because “in this colony, our anger remains intimate, as it remains a disguise for our fear of loss, death, oblivion” (Moraga, *Xicana Codex* 59-60).

Micha’s performance takes up the intimacy of internalized oppression by intentionally embodying her story in movement to generate an affective politics in addition to a critical analysis of systemic oppression. While freedom from oppression requires structural change, Micha’s description of dance as a way to embody freedom highlights the importance of creating moments that explore not only what freedom is, but also how freedom feels. Further, this exploration necessitates considering both the feeling of non-freedom and potential freedom to distinguish the affective thresholds of freedom. What can we gain by exploring the messiness of something like freedom or liberation? In *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander explores how to “find balance in turbulence” (304):

It's being in the eye of the storm, which is the stillness. ... I am there (in the vortex) though I am not spinning. [While] Oya [the Goddess of Wind and Fire] brings much peace, [it] will also move me when I am too still. You have to get up and do, hence the balance. Oya moves people; moves the Ocean...moves me beyond fear, since movement is sometimes scary...moves us to grow as mother of transformation... She allows me to sit in the eye of the storm to grow. (304)

For Micha, dancing or sitting in the “eye of the storm to grow,” is a moment when a map to freedom cannot necessarily be coherently captured, but its presence and possibility can be embodied through feeling. Towards the end of her performance, she moves through her own words that say:

Maybe freedom is what we can't even imagine. But it feels near. In those fleeting moments of dance. Those feathers in the dark, moving without location. Without a name, or a species, or a gender, or any words, or anyone even looking. Unfolding in an expanse of shadow in a slow and powerful curve. Blue, black, full of life. I feel it deep in my fascia, in my tissue, in the elastic tension in my limbs, pulling on my bones, shining so full of feeling that everything falls away. (Cárdenas)

The relationship between reflection and introspection propels a movement beyond fear and vice versa. It is this propulsion that generates a paradigm for social transformation where collective liberation from oppression is tied to creating freedom with and beyond fear. Instead of taking up fear as a weakness, Moraga embraces it as an invitation to respect the transformative action that visioning new ways of living demands:

I'm scared all the time and when I am not scared, there is no chance for change. In me. [...] Go toward the fear... Feel its pulse. Let it speak to you. [...] Sometimes you read or write works you got to live up to. Never know what it's going to dig up. Dig up the dirt of memory, the dirt of land. Make you want some for us. Make you fight to have it. (*Loving*, 185)

Micha's work demonstrates how visioning for freedom through embodiment and movement art is a practice in departing from rational notions of structural and systemic oppression to get "lost" in a moment that can surely be visually representative of liberation, but can also be in of itself a kind of affective blueprint for liberated ways of living. Thus, despite the feeling of freedom being so elusive in everyday experience, there is still room to grow potentialities of freedom in performance as it offers sensations of freedom to work towards, a feeling to "live up to," one that will "make you want" it, and "make you fight to have it" (Moraga, *Loving* 185).

Getting lost in movement can be useful to find a sense of freedom and ultimately belonging, but what does belonging mean in the context of settler colonialism? In our conversation, Micha told me about her struggle to navigate processes of healing that involve grappling with a longing for being loved and “the way that comes out of histories of trauma and family histories” (Cárdenas). Micha reflected on building a sense of “home,” as a settler on stolen Indigenous territory, as a “tension between feeling like I need to build a home and family in this place where I’m a settler, and wanting to undo and end colonization. Especially because I don’t feel like I have some original home to go back to” (Cárdenas).

The tension Micha described reminds us that in processes of individual and collective healing that involve finding a sense of belonging and safety, non-Indigenous QTPOCs simultaneously need to be cognizant of their own complicity in colonization. Often the historical dispossession of 2-QTPOC and their ancestors from land or culture has resulted in collective traumas that haunt us with uncertainty, leaving us to attempt to consolidate a sense of safety in a destination or place that offers a remedy or restoration of belonging. According to MWC’s politics of performance that does not seek to “fix” trauma, it allows for a different kind of paradigm of healing for QTPOC settlers in which the colonial structure of the neoliberal nation-state is not necessary for healing. In her research on the relationships between feelings, migration and queerness in the US, feminist scholar Ann Cvetkovich upholds the potential of queer diasporas to reach towards a sense of QTPOC community that does not assume an inevitable or perpetual settler futurity:

Queer diasporas contain the promise of public cultures that reject national belonging and virulent nationalisms as the condition of possibility for community. [...] Migration can traumatize national identity, producing dislocation from or loss of an original home or nation. But if one adopts a queer and depathologizing approach to trauma and refuses the normal as an ideal or real state, the trauma of immigration need not be “healed” by a return to the “natural” nation of origin or assimilation into a new one. (Cvetkovich, *Archive* 121)

According to Cvetkovich, the nation-state is valid as a structure for healing only as long as trauma remains pathologized. MWC works with trauma, upholds healing not as turning away from trauma by stigmatizing or pathologizing it, but embracing it as both an opportunity through which 2-QTPOC have developed survival strategies and how these can be extended towards healing through complexity rather than towards a specific destination of belonging that must be fixed, stable, and quantifiable. Healing as negotiated in MWC performance then becomes a practice of mediating among states of healing, for example “sick” vs. “well” or “traumatized” vs. “healed,” that are usually dichotomized, and occupying a multiplicity of these states at once. Thus, MWC does not trace a linear path towards some predetermined nor perfect point of wellness. If healing is part of collective liberation, then the work of getting free is an ongoing process that requires a renegotiation of the normative linear temporalities of Western institutionalized history, by attending to the blurriness between past, present and future.

### **“We Have Always Existed”: Landa Lakes on cultural survival and Two-Spirit complexity**

Landa Lakes, two-spirit<sup>11</sup> performer and painter, focuses on the history, narrative and implications of residential schools in North America/Turtle Island in her performance at the



MWC 2013 show in Toronto. In Landa's piece, she brings together several temporalities to blur the lines of history to tell the story of cultural survival despite the residential school system.

Landa's audiovisual and dance performance began with a projected video backdrop, which displayed historical footage of the residential schooling system and quotes recounting the violence of its legacy. While the video footage played, Lakes' dance shifted from her standing alone on stage to a point where she revealed her wearing traditional dance regalia and invited audience members to join in a circle dance to "show how although stripped away by the boarding schools, our culture has somehow survived and continues to prosper" (Lakes). In our conversation, Landa elaborated on how the delegitimization of traditional language throughout colonization, in particular, in the residential school system, has fostered a tension between "traditional" and Eurocentric Christian philosophies:

They had this thought of course that dates back to the 1800's which was you know, 'kill the Indian, save the man'. [...] And even today like, you still see so many people suffering from this time there, and there is always this clash that exists now between what is Native and traditional, and what was taught at the boarding schools that sort of embarrassed people. (Lakes)

In his reflections on queerness and indigeneity, scholar Mark Rifkin applies the notion of hauntology (as theorized by Jacques Derrida), to open up possibilities for the future that disrupt linear temporalities and authenticity, because

the return of the ghostly past makes possible the unpredictability of the future, the potential for change, rather than the staging of a continuity between now and then. [...] Acknowledging the often unrecognized work of manifesting the past as the present—the task or labor of inheritance—can allow for a thinking of the current moment as

occupied by numerous histories, only some of which are given form as (what counts as) the real. (Rifkin 54)

According to Rifkin, the memories, sensations, and scattered pieces of evidence from the past that make a linear static account of history impossible<sup>12</sup>, especially those that were not or could not be documented in colonial texts, invite an indeterminate quality to our notion of the future. This uncertainty, rather than be considered as a crisis in logic, can be taken up as an opportunity or potential for imagining completely new ways of building decoloniality beyond the rationalist, colonial logics of what is “real” or plausible. For Landa, performing pieces that revisit the past is a way to conjure a multitude of histories and experiences that haunt or remain in what we understand to be the present moment. In reflecting on the legacy of two-spirit people, Landa emphasizes that revisiting the past brings strength to contemporary struggles of two-spirit people:

There were some people who were doing some really brave things and that was back like almost a century ago, 40 years ago even, 30 years ago. [...] Especially [for] those who cross over the gender spectrum, it’s good for us to relate to that, because today sometimes people who sort of are in between a gender spectrum sometimes, may feel not yet strong enough. [...] It’s important for us to know that we’ve always existed.  
(Lakes)

Therefore, the ancestral knowledge that two-spirit people “always existed” exceeds the normative bounds of a colonial logic that was designed so that Native people were never meant to survive, and reconfigures what is possible for the future. Furthermore, as linear temporalities of historical progress are disturbed, so do conceptions of social transformation. Often, the work of daily survival and healing often goes undocumented and becomes invisible in the neoliberal

process of consolidating social justice victories into exceptional individuals and seemingly spontaneous public actions. However, Landa's piece highlights the paradigm-shifting political work that unfolds in simply existing. In this way, "two-spirit" is more than a matter of semantics or a discursive identity category, but it is about embodying a spiritual connection to one's relations and community that necessarily exceed the confines of what comes to count as so-called "real," or "present." The power of Landa's performance not only lies in its reclaiming the history of residential schooling as a story of resistance, but also that the struggles to heal from that history continue to be embodied across generations. In our conversation, Landa explained to me how social justice work is a way to continue the work of healing and paying homage to those before her:

It's not just that you're Native and gay, but it's your spirituality that sort of brings it all together. [...] You're a part of this greater concept of a tribal base or a nation that you're also a part of and consequently you're also a part of like these traditions, these old ancient traditions that are just a part of you [...] especially with social justice, especially within the Native community is that in order for me to really respect those who have gone on before me I have to understand what they've gone through, and they've gone through a lot so, social justice now is about me getting justice or settling things. (Lakes)

Healing through the spiritual connection Landa describes becomes a practice of not casting away pain and loss, but acknowledging them for what they are. Allowing trauma to proliferate without necessarily trying to "make sense" of it, to pin down, rationalize it. To acknowledge what haunts across or beyond linear temporalities requires a non-linear approach. Healing processes that have this kind of non-linear relationship to the past/present/future in turn shape how 2-QTPOC can practice and envision social movements that can find resilience and growth in grieving death and loss. When so much of political activism is about "resistance," what would

it mean, feel, or look like to practice mourning as healing, as movement building? In Landa's experience, performance art has allowed for moments when "there are parts of you that can sort of start to let things go" (Lakes). In our conversation she explained:

In performance sometimes when we relate it to life unfortunately, especially within the Two-Spirit community, or even the Native community, as a whole, there is a lot of anger, and it's really hard to let go of some of that anger. [...] So I think that media within the art form is a great way of helping people release.

I left Oklahoma many years ago to enter into the Navy and one of the reasons that I left was because it was back in the 80's and a lot of my friends were starting to die because the AIDS epidemic had come through, and I really sort of just wanted to avoid all that. So I completely left and the thing about it is...when people would not be at the clubs, wouldn't be around, I [would] never ask about them. I would never ask about them. I would just sort of go along my business, and say for instance, if somebody named Jay wasn't around for a while I wouldn't ask anybody where they were. I was just very, very silent on it. So, [in] doing so I don't think I ever had that mourning opportunity, that time to mourn those people who I had lost along the way. So I finally did a performance where I sort of addressed that. And I would have to say that after that performance there was such a huge release from it. Emotionally I finally was able to sort of come to terms with the deaths of all of my friends. (Lakes)

For Landa, this release does not remain isolated in her own individual experience, but her performances bring the audience into this enactment of both mourning a friend and affirming the connection that will always remain. The empathetic connection made between artist and audience by witnessing this release in turn creates openings for what Landa describes as "touch" (Lakes):

If you can feel the pain of someone else, it makes you understand more what they go through. And, especially with vulnerability where you're dealing with different aspects of empathy—not sympathy, but empathy where you have this great overflowing feeling for this person. [T]here are things [...] that you never really think about because they don't relate to you. But then when it's put into a nutshell and said "ok now it's in this nutshell, we're going to open it up" and you look inside and you see all the nice meat inside there, all of a sudden you can see how this can relate to you somewhere in your

life. Whether it's a feeling, whether it's a part of history, some part of history that you crossed over, or crossed through, or your parents crossed through something. You have that sort of...that touch.<sup>13</sup> (Lakes)

### **Chapter 3: Interdependence and Vulnerability: Transforming conditions of political potential**

The personal stories that are told through MWC performances are not presented to be admired from a distance nor to be consumed as a product. Rather, MWC shares its work with a sincerity and vulnerability that fosters the conditions for building relationships within a larger movement for social justice. While the rhetoric of “connection” and “relationship-building” can get lost in neoliberal individualistic narratives of so-called “freedom,” MWC focuses on the collectively complex, interpersonal interactions of political transformation that complicate what constitutes the “work” of political organizing.

As much as the performances aim to articulate reflections on various social issues, beyond their content they also demonstrate a politics in its process of becoming and that this involves struggling to follow the intimate desires and longings that propel the urgency to create and perform. Through poetry, visual art, video and dance, MWC fosters a space/time for the vulnerability that fuels both the pain and the power to enact and imagine new ways of living towards collective liberation. The intimacy of MWC performances have the potential to create the conditions for the trust and relationships that enable the more visibly mass-based movements to seemingly emerge spontaneously in moments of crisis.

## Intention and Intimacy in Manish Vaidya's "Love Letters"

When *MWC* came to Toronto in the Spring of 2013, Manish Vaidya<sup>14</sup> performed spoken word piece called *Love Letters*, during which he read three letters, one to his "first love," and another to "the worst sex partner [he has] ever had" (Vaidya). It was his last letter, addressed to the audience, that best touched upon the relational processes involved in 2-QTPOC media making that are absorbed into everyday ritual and intimate histories, but are not always visible or valued as deeply politically transformative:

So this last letter is to you, audience. Yes, you. I love you too. I love you in the most queer and trans and indigenous, people of color rainbow-miracle-of-dreams-big-sticky-cream-our-hearts-made-together way. I love you in the "fill the community, smash the state" kind of way. Though, I don't really like the word "smash," so much as "lovingly make irrelevant." [cheers] Because I think love is the strongest tool in the war for liberation. Love can disarm thought-bombs dropped on our colonized consciousness. (Vaidya)

Manish's loving proclamations are unapologetically overflowing with political camaraderie and yet as he references activist slogans likely familiar to the audience, he also redefines them. The process of "lovingly" making the state "irrelevant" gestures toward a politic that strives towards a paradigm of transformation that is not invested in perpetuating a radical politics that relies on the negation of "the state." Instead of framing "love" as a purely retaliatory tactic in "the war for liberation," Manish posits that "love" has the power to "disarm thought-bombs," to redefine how we relate to one another at a psychic level. The irrelevancy that Manish describes requires engaging the realm of the relational, the quality (vs. quantity) of our relationships. As activist and writer Adrienne Maree Brown frames it, "love" can be taken up as a form of adaptation to changing conditions:

Many of us have been socialized that constant growth, and critical mass, are the ways to create change. But [...] adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical connections. Dare I say love. The quality of connection between the nodes in the patterns.<sup>15</sup> (Brown)

While *Love Letters* is about love, it is the audience's reactions to the performance that give Manish's words the kind of vitality that compliments and demonstrates the relational dynamic of a "loving" politic. By delivering vulnerable and frankly-written letters with humor, Manish creates "an opening" (Vaidya) where moments of relating to 2-QTPOC and activist experiences. Manish's comedic performance creates rises in anticipation that tumble into moments relief, eruptions of cheering, laughter, or tears that enact a relational and flow that come about by listening to the intonation of the spoken word, becoming part of a harmonization of responsive loops, the valleys and peaks of jokes travelling winding and unraveling together. Manish also makes a point to articulate a politic of "love" through the affirmation of traditional knowledge and healing practices that have persisted despite the co-optation and exotification of indigenous and people of color spiritual practices:

Yes, love. I love you. And to the haters, saying "here he goes again, all 'Bay Area' with that woo woo hippie ass new age bullshit," I say "YES." [laughter] I do yoga. And I meditate. These are tools I learned at the feet of my grandparents, not some 24-hour Goodlife Fitness from some white girl named Shanti. [laughter] I'm pretty sure her name is Amanda. [laughter] You're welcome. Yoga and meditation are survival tools passed down for more than six thousand years. That shit ain't new age. [cheers] Love and survival are nothing new. (Vaidya)

Speaking to the traumatic legacies of colonialism at the same time as to the heartbreaking banality of cultural appropriation, Manish's love letter disrupts cultures of isolation and the environment he creates with this relational experience becomes for the most part unspoken



among the audience, and yet infectious. Finally, Vaidya finishes his letter with an invitation to follow queer desire into political transformation and a reminder to listen for each other and recognize the life-sustaining potential that can be activated in loving relationships:

So I love you. And I hope you love me too. And I hope that tonight you come so hard the walls shake. I hope the walls, and the borders and the binaries from all sovereign nations from here to Arizona to Mexico to Palestine. I hope, if you are calling for solidarity, I hope you call loud, because I will hear you. Because I believe our people, our people, all of us together can give each other what we need for love, and lust, and liberation. (Vaidya)

When I ask Manish about why he chose the format of love letters, it is clear that the intimacy and intentionality of a shared letter is his way of redefining 2-QTPOC social justice movement cultures. According to Manish, love is a practice in community and worldmaking that “isn’t so much new age, but ancestral,” (Vaidya) that works beyond dismantling forms of oppression by simultaneously building new forms of communicating and relating to one another to replace it:

Even though the creation or the invention of the archetype of an activist and who an activist is supposed to be is [...] like you know these martyrs who burn out all the time and are riddled with [stress-induced] tumors [...] and fucking mean to each other, you know? So I want to be able to open opportunities for practice. So this thing about love is like... Who is more of a hardcore activist? The person who puts up this wall [...]? I think that love is the most badass thing that people can be. If people can still work to dismantle forms of oppression, well then what are we trying to replace the oppression with?

So, I hug my cat all the time [laughs] you know, I like, sing to her. [These] are little things that are actually huge and important, and the people in my life, my friends, my family, which is my chosen family, and then my very complicated relationships with my birth family. They’re part of my work, how I show up as a cis-gender male, my masculinities, how I perform them, [and] are central to how I build movement. (Vaidya)

MWC works through vulnerability to build the trust that remains understated in social movement theory. In our conversation Manish emphasized the importance of relationships in his movement building work:

I think when some folks think about movement building, they're really thinking about mass-based work. You know, having like [a day where] a million people walk out of schools [...] In a sense, yes it's great that a million people came together. That's awesome. So what are the relationships that are actually getting people to go to a demo, that are getting people to be doing ongoing political consciousness raising work?

So for me, my movement building work, I think of it as relationship building. Where the relationships I'm building are also with myself. How am I healing and trying to decolonize my mind. Like seriously. I don't want to [...] just throw [that term] around. So [...] why is it when a lot of activists in the Bay area talk about gentrification, a lot of us just talk about white folks? [I think] "well what about like middle class people of color who rolled in onto Ohlone land, folks who are not Ohlone"? It's so rare [to hear these questions]. So in terms of movement building I think of it as relationship building: practices and processes that get people to actually show up for each other over the long term. (Vaidya)

## **2-QTPOC Love: A Lifetime of Struggle**

In affirming the complexity of vulnerability that circulates throughout experiences of queerness, racialization and colonialism, the concept of "love" can also function as an organizing principle to guide interactions and creative movement building that does not necessarily entail forging intimacies and friendships despite one's capacity or compatibility, but does involve valuing the existence of others within a paradigm of interdependence. Long-time social activist Grace Lee Boggs, now 99 years old, has been organizing and theorizing social transformation since the 1950's. Reflecting on her seven decades of witnessing movement building across issues of civil rights, Black power, feminism, environmentalism, in her most

recent book, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, Boggs writes that “these are the times to grow our souls” (28):

We are in the midst of a process that is nothing short of reinventing revolution. For much of the twentieth century the theory and practice of revolution have been dominated by overarching ideologies, purist paradigms, and absolutist views of a static Paradise; arguments over which class, race or gender was the main revolutionary force; and binary oppositions between Left and Right. Big victories have been prioritized over small collaborative actions that build community and neighborhoods: the end has been valued over the means. We rarely stopped to wonder how much this view of revolution reflected the capitalist culture that was dehumanizing us. (47-48)

Boggs’ call to examine “the means” of movement building signals an urgency to seriously consider the way our political paradigms inform our relationships at their most intimate. What new kinds of political potential can emerge if we celebrate the processes of movement building as much as the “big victories”? What possibilities would unfold in a paradigm that generated solutions from conditions of vulnerability and interdependence? According to Manish, 2-QTPOC arts initiatives need to build cultures of support together to avoid the competitive, product-driven, capitalist forms of movement building which Boggs describes. When we talked about relationship building, Manish highlighted the risks and challenges of performing and organizing with vulnerability that he has experienced 2-QTPOC artist:

I think we have to really stick together. [...] Peacock Rebellion got a lot of support from groups like Sins Invalid, Mangos with Chili, Queer Rebels, and this other group called Reveries of Rage that’s even newer than Peacock Rebellion. A bunch of us came together [...] and the biggest feedback I got, from current and former producers, was that I’d have to get used to a lot of shit talking. A lot of critique, but [also] a lot of call-out culture.

I think a lot of people move to the Bay Area—like I did—very traumatized and coming to the Bay to like heal [...] but also in the process of healing we’re also playing out our traumas on each other. Peacock Rebellion has only been around for a year and most of my time has gone toward kind of responding to critique and to trying to deal with the effects with really horrific personal attacks. [...] There’s like a lot of jealousy, and that sort of thing, which you know, I get jealous too. But it’s just like, what do we do with that? How do we create spaces where everybody gets the spotlight, rather than putting anyone on a pedestal? Because that’s just not going to help anything. (Vaidya)

As much as community and relationship building sound like ideal strategies to build better movements, they remain an ongoing struggle among 2-QTPOC because of the trauma of being oppressive in the first place. The “call-out culture” Manish describes results in insecurities that make collaboration and interdependence very difficult. As Leah reflected on MWC’s evolution in the past eight years, she explains:

It’s really intense Anabel, because everyone’s like “oh my god you’re famous!” and then sometimes I think we’re afraid of people going “ah Mangos with Chili, whatever, I’ve seen them. They’re still going? They’re still doing shows?” And it just kind of mirrors the way, as QPOC, we’re so loving, we make miracles, and we’re also so hard on each other, and so critical.

[Before MWC was formed, there was] this urgency around “oh my god, Kitchen Table stopped being supported, this press stopped happening and this and that...” and that these are our cherished super fragile community institutions and we need to support them. And then seven years into forming my own community institution, I’m like “oh I get it” you know, this is so much work and it’s fucking hard, and you fuck up and show your ass in front of the community and they feel so betrayed, because everyone fucks up... And after a while the money doesn’t keep going up necessarily, unless you know you do some kind of Mangos With Chili in a Coca-Cola ad kind of thing, which is not going to happen, and you have to deal with the total unexpected. Our community love continues to be what keeps us going and what makes it matter for us, and it’s also complicated. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Therefore, building movements and communities through a politics of love involves navigation these complications. However, love may be the only process through which freedom can be

found. What MWC performances make clear is that the hardest part of movement building is about taking that risk of desiring liberation in all its difficulty and mystery. MWC articulates a politics that necessitates tuning in to where care, desire and vulnerability reside and proliferate in order to generate the power to create new worlds. M. Jacqui Alexander specifically links freedom making to the work of the artist:

[Freedom is a choice that] will entail the desire to forge structures of engagement, which embrace that fragile, delicate undertaking of revealing the beloved to herself and to one another, which [queer of color writer] James Baldwin sees as the work of the artist. “The artist does at [her] best what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to [herself] and with that revelation to make freedom real.” (Alexander 18)

MWC’s work thus can be thought of as a kind of love and freedom making that seeks to orient itself by getting lost. In her book *Methodology of the Oppressed*, feminist scholar Chela Sandoval takes up love as a way of accessing revolutionary change that is particularly suited to cultural production. For Sandoval, love can be understood as “a passage into a differential consciousness that is linked to whatever is not expressible through words, [but] accessed through poetic modes of expression: gestures, music, images, sounds, words that plummet or rise through signification to find some void—some no-place—to claim their due” (140). The differential consciousness Sandoval describes is less a static state of knowing, but more like an oscillation of being open to transformation. Drawing upon French philosopher Roland Barthes’ use of love as an example of this mode of consciousness, Sandoval explains:

Indeed, the consciousness that travels through the abyss becomes transformed insofar as it has now moved into and through what Barthes calls the “zero degree” of all meaning, the place from which the obtuse, third meaning emerges to haunt all we think we think we know. It is initially a painful crossing to this no-place, this chiasmus, this crossroads, for here new kinds of powers imprecate the body as it is dissolved [...] It is a

coming to a utopian nonsite, a no-place where everything is possible—but only in exchange for the pain of the crossing. (141)

According to Sandoval, love is the work of sitting with and holding the complexity of lived experience, especially and necessarily when it hurts. MWC's performances guide audiences to witness and enact that attention to pain as a political practice. Nevertheless, the practice of loving toward freedom is also difficult because it is a cyclical and continuous attempt to find and feel free, together. As Leah concludes:

Working through loving relationships [and] love is not automatic. There are so many learned skills that go with figuring out how to love ourselves well, and love others well and not sacrificing ourselves in loving each other...and not smoothing over or minimizing trauma or oppression when we love each other. So like it may sound simple, and it is, but it's also not. [...] As the [Black feminist] Combahee River Collective said in their statement, "we are ready for the lifetime of struggle that lies before us" and that's real—it is a lifetime of struggle. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

## Conclusion

By exploring MWC's work as audience member and in conversation with these artists, I hope to present MWC the way it describes itself, as an "incubator" and "ritual space" (Mangos with Chili) that generates and grows political potentiality. Throughout these chapters, I considered MWC within the context of economic precarity of cultural work, the importance of healing in political struggle, and finally, the politics of interdependence and vulnerability, to argue that movement building is necessarily holistic or needs to be approached as such. MWC brings up the complexities of movement building while working through uncertainty, trauma and vulnerability to expand the horizons of what becomes politically imaginable.

By navigating these intimate and intricate dynamics to enact what Micha describes as "a visionary politics that is trying to move away from a grievance-based politics. So, instead of [saying] "we're POC and we're oppressed and we're pissed off about it," [a visionary politics would have us say] "we're POC, and we're from the future, and here's what our future looks like" (Cárdenas). Part of the work of this visionary politics towards futurity lies in the distinction between possibility and potentiality that Agamben sought to highlight. As Muñoz explains,

Possibilities exist, or more nearly, they exist within a logical real, the possible, which is within the present and is linked to presence. Potentialities are different in that although they are present, they do not exist in present things. [...] Potentiality is and is not presence, and its ontology cannot be reduced to presentness. [...] It is something like a trace or potential that exists or lingers after a performance. At performance's end, if it is situated historically and materially, it is never just the duration of the event. (99)

Mangos can work toward futurity by illuminating the potentiality of 2-QTPOC lived experience as it is currently felt as well as how experience can change. In doing so, audiences can develop a mode of attunement to collective futurity, wherein “performance [can be] the kernel of a potentiality that is transmitted to audience and witnesses and that the real force of performance is its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging” (Muñoz 98-99). Thus these modes of recognition can help forge new understandings of relationality as ways of being and how we want to be with each other. According to Leah,

If we can imagine different possibilities for how we want to be with our families, with ourselves, with our bodies, as 2-QTPOC, as people who are actively trying to build alliances with each other, the world can change. [...] That’s disability, that’s how we deal with abuse, that’s aging, that’s how we inhabit cities and country spaces, that’s decoloniality, that’s indigenous activism and indigenous sovereignty, it is everything. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)

Nevertheless, while imagining towards new futures can be done in the spirit of collective liberation from structural and internalized oppression, the speculative and visionary practices of 2-QTPOC performance carried out through MWC are haunted by the interplay of present power relations and affects across race, class, and gender that determine the priorities and privileges in futurist endeavors. As Micha emphasizes, “it’s a question of who gets to define the future, and who gets to imagine the future. [W]ho has the privilege to imagine it, and who is asked to imagine it” (Cárdenas).



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> I have a lot of gratitude for the Allied Media Conference/Allied Media Projects in Detroit and related organizers such as Adrienne Maree Brown, Grace Lee Boggs, Invincible Ill Weaver, Jenny Lee, and Diana Nucera. The time and space that the AMC offered over the last six years allowed me to feel, think and explore these inclinations toward complexity. This summer's tracks on "Media Strategies for Transforming Justice" and "Liberation Technologies for World Building and Survival" were especially inspiring. The AMC informed my approach to media and cultural theory as a way to both exist in its own right as open-ended thoughts as well as to allow itself to be shaped towards strategies and prototypes for libratory futures. This annual gathering that has evolved over the last sixteen years, specifically takes up mediated practices as strategies for collective liberation that invite the crossing, complicating, and creating of paradigms that are necessarily novel while at the same time experimental. For more information and AMC, see: [amc.alliedmedia.org](http://amc.alliedmedia.org)

<sup>2</sup> The youth leadership and community-focused work of groups in Detroit like Detroit Summer (started in 1992 by activist and philosopher Grace Lee Boggs now almost 100 years old) sought to "subvert the policies and practices of institutions like the World Trade Organization, but be grounded in people's commitment to different kinds of relationships with each other, with the earth, and their cities. [...] Detroit Summer was [...] part of the paradigm shift in how people view our ability to create power, rather than just taking or directly confronting power" (Lee qtd. in Nieves 24).

<sup>3</sup> I refer to "tech hacking" as the practice of reconfiguring or repurposing technologies or digital programming for uses not necessarily linked to its original purpose.

<sup>4</sup> North America is also referred to by some Indigenous nations and allied activists as Turtle Island. I use both terms to acknowledge the multiple histories and names attached to this continent throughout the process of colonialism.

<sup>5</sup> For Leah's personal website, see: [brownstargirl.org](http://brownstargirl.org)

<sup>6</sup> For more on Local Autonomy Networks (Autonets), see: [autonets.org](http://autonets.org)

<sup>7</sup> Scholars concerned with the right to communication and the relationship between media and democracy have offered reflections on the history and challenges within media rights advocacy or media activism as they pertain to institutionalized structures of funding as well as to the dynamics of movement building at the grassroots level. In Robert Hackett and William Carroll's report-back from the 2003 National Media Reform Conference (NMRC), organized by the non-profit *Free Press*, there was a recognized need for "collective-action frames" through which "deeply held values and identities in American political culture" could connect. Carroll and

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Hackett identified three frames: a *mainstream frame* that linked media reform to the value of “American freedom” and the value of media as watchdogs on the abuse of government power; a *progressive frame* concerned with the Right’s domination of the national political agenda and media coverage; and finally an *alternative frame* “articulated at the fringes of the conference’s official program, especially by young media and community activists of color”. As Carroll and Hackett describe:

For them, media reform is not some progressive issue which can be picked up by middle-class liberals motivated by abstract commitments to democracy or diversity. Rather, it's about power, and about cultural and physical survival. Indeed, this group challenged the very term “media reform” in favor of “media justice,” re-positioning the problem as one of social justice in a world organized around globalized capitalism, racism and patriarchy. Even “democracy” was questioned as irretrievable, insofar as, for non-white minorities in the US, ‘democracy’ has meant conquest, genocide, slavery. (Carroll and Hackett) According to Carroll and Hackett, this unquestioned use of “democracy” parallels a flaw dominant in media and communication studies with regards to the “movements-and-media” tradition, wherein even a progressive discourse of the relationship between social movements and media “takes for granted the existing structures and practices of established media” such that “in the dialogical relation between media and movements there is space for *negotiation* but there is no prospect of *radical redesign*” (Carroll and Hackett, *Remaking* 45).

<sup>8</sup> List can be found online at: [peacockrebellion.org/resources](http://peacockrebellion.org/resources)

<sup>9</sup> Further, Eli Clare calls for a shift from the necessity of “cure” that “[mandates the retuning of] damaged bodies to some former, and non-disabled, state of being,” and that “clearly locates the problem, or damage, of disability within individual disabled/chronically ill bodies,” towards “a politics of cure” that is “not a simple or reactive belief system, not an anti-cure stance in the face of the endless assumptions about bodily difference, but rather a broad-based politics mirroring the complexity of all our bodies/minds” (Clare 5).

<sup>10</sup> Micha uses art to speak to violence and preventing sexual assault when she learned she was a survivor of childhood sexual assault but did not know how to talk about it. One of Micha’s projects, Local Autonomy Networks (Autonets), harnesses the radical potential of mobile media and wearable electronics in developing safety devices and procedures among marginalized communities most likely to face violence. Autonets combines online and offline networks, “including handmade wearable electronic fashion and face to face agreements between people. The Autonets garments, when activated, will alert everyone in range of the local mesh network who is wearing another Autonets garment that someone needs help and will indicate that person’s direction and distance.” Designed to create “networks of communication to increase community autonomy and reduce violence against women, LGBTQI people, people of color and other groups who continue to survive violence on a daily basis,” Autonets also works toward building new ways of dealing with violence beyond punitive disciplinary measures that exacerbate violence by fostering “autonomous local networks that [do not] rely on corporate

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infrastructure to function, inspired by community based, anti-racist, prison abolitionist responses to gendered violence.” (Cárdenas, *Background*).

<sup>11</sup> Quo-Li Driskill, a Cherokee Two-Spirit/Queer writer, scholar, educator, activist, and performer, describes ‘two-spirit’ as “a word that resists colonial definitions of who [two-spirit people] are. It is an expression of [two-spirit] sexual and gender identities as sovereign from those of white GLBT movements.” Because “[t]he coinage of the word was never meant to create a monolithic understanding of the array of Native traditions regarding what dominant European and Euroamerican traditions call ‘alternative’ genders and sexualities,” (52) “many [two-spirit] stories address difference, the embodiment of dichotomies, and journeys between worlds” (55, original emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> Erin Manning writes that “touch provokes disarticulation by marking the impossibility of a final reaching toward. Touch makes possible the image of a body falling apart, leaving parts of itself behind, incorporeally becoming. Touch reminds us of the ghost we see when a camera catches our movements multiplied. Touch evokes a spectral politics, a politics of capture that never quite reaches its goal. Touch is an adventurous sensation” (140).

<sup>14</sup> For Manish, the political potential of humor in his performances can provide an opening “for people to laugh at ourselves, for making mistakes.” In describing Sock World, a video series he is part of creating that chronicles the lives of “awkward activist sock puppets,” who live in a co-op in Berkeley called Beyoncé’s Glitter Forest, Manish highlights the way depicting vulnerable day-to-day interactions that reference 2-QTPOC activist culture can foster new dialogues and practices in community and interpersonal conflict resolution:

So, these were actually inspired by real life, really difficult situations, and it’s a comedy show. And it’s fucking sock puppets, you know, people are going to laugh at it, and be able to be like a little bit removed, but they can hopefully see themselves in these sock puppets, and identify with the love on these..sock puppets. And hopefully by the end of the show, will be treating people better or each other better. So I think media has an amazing amazing radical potential, and every piece of media *is* transformative. It’s just what do we do with it. (Vaidya)

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