

Making With Place: Youth Community Arts Experiments and Theories of Change

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Abstract

This dissertation asks: how do diverse emerging artists engage community arts in public space to express and enact place and change? It is a case study of the *Making With Place* project which mobilised youth identifying as QT/BIPOC (queer, trans, Black, Indigenous and/or of colour) to create public art activations. This work began amidst transformations of personal and public space mandated by orders to contain Covid-19, and growing awareness and organising to address anti-Black racism. Grounded in methodologies of participatory action research, I collaborated with the *Making With Place* youth artist-researchers to engage in cycles of creative sharing, public art experimentation, and reflection and theorizing. The resulting dialogues, artworks and analyses surface underrepresented histories, systems of inequity, internal landscapes of isolation and trauma, and regenerative relationships of resilience and mutual aid. I draw on participant observation, individual interviews, group dialogues, and co-writing to develop a series of academic journal articles and community ‘zine style publications that synthesise and unpack these findings. In these pieces, we discuss emergent creative articulations of place, processes of (re)search, and embodied and affective theories of change. This dissertation deepens understandings of critical pedagogies of place from the margins as a place of radical possibility, with a view towards new, more equitable social relations.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents Joanne Valliere Lombardo and Bill Lombardo, for their unwavering love and support, and for nurturing in me a sense of place centered in care and justice.

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It has been a true honour to collaborate with the powerful, insightful and generous young artist-researchers who truly realized a *Making With Place*. Jess DeVitt, Jahmal Nugent, Pree Rehal, Ammarah Syed, Ayrah Taerb, Olympia Trypis, Bert Whitecrow, T.J. Banate, your creativity, vision and friendship have been deep inspirations which continue to resonate and inspire. I am equally grateful and humbled to have worked with such amazing artist and researcher mentors. Phyllis Novak you have been pivotal in my personal and professional evolution, guiding me to embrace and explore new ways of seeing. Sarah Flicker your wise, generative and caring research supervision is a heartbeat of this work. Lisa Myers your stewardship and lens deepened the research. Leesa Fawcett and Catriona Sandilands your astute feedback greatly informed and strengthened my work. To the community artists and creative leads, notably Sue Cohen and Naty Tremblay, thank you for breathing your life and force into these creations. I acknowledge with great appreciation all of the artists, facilitators, partners and supporters who made this work possible. I would also like to thank the many academic mentors who have helped and encouraged me on my learning evolutions, in particular Harvey Skinner, Cameron Norman, Carol Strike, June Larkin, Brenda Gladstone and Alia Weston.

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List of Abbreviations

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Definition</u>
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency virus
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and other diverse sexual identities
PAR	Participatory Action Research
QT/BIPOC	Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous and/or of Colour
ToC	Theory of Change model
YPAR	Youth Participatory Action Research

1. Introduction

My doctoral research explores experiences and impacts of youth engagement in community arts, with a specific focus on underrepresented voices. I partnered with the organisation SKETCH Working Arts to co-lead the *Making With Place* research project that engaged a group of talented young people in cycles of reflection, public art-making and dialogue. Using the project as a case study, my dissertation investigates our collaborative work to examine: a) processes of co-production, b) expressions of place, and c) theorizations of change.

In this introduction, I ground my research through sharing my own journey to this work and offer a critical reading of academic literature on participatory research and community arts. I then provide a detailed overview of the *Making With Place* research and describe our iterative stages and cycles of meaning making, activation/production and theorizing. Finally, I outline the outputs of our collective work that comprise this dissertation and how they address my research questions and contribute to related academic discourses.

Placing Myself and My Research

I come to this work through several decades of learning, practice and leadership in youth engagement and participatory research. As a young woman and burgeoning feminist, I served as a peer sexual health counsellor, beginning a journey into community health which eventually led me to complete a Masters of Health Science degree. From there, I undertook a series of community-based learning experiences with youth organisations. Youth engagement, and the growing "for youth by youth" ethos, became the cornerstone of my practice. As a young person motivated by social justice and hungry for agency, I connected to these

emancipatory aims both personally and politically. Before embarking on a PhD, I took on a leadership role with a youth engagement research group and spent many years facilitating dialogues based on models of participatory action research (PAR) (McTaggart, 1991). I worked with colleagues to develop a “youth voices” process for expression and action that was informed by Paolo Freire's (1970) teachings of “conscientization”. This “critical pedagogy” involves problem-posing with and by oppressed groups, to develop and reveal heightened awareness of the forces affecting their lives as a catalyst for informed action against inequity (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). We implemented projects with diverse youth navigating poverty, discrimination and precarity to raise consciousness, surface community concerns and spark collective action. I have collaborated on multiple projects locally (e.g., urban and rural Ontario) and globally (e.g., Israel, Palestine, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Romania) to address topics such as youth social action, food security, youth-friendly services, environmental justice and HIV vulnerability (Flicker et al, 2008; Larkin et al, 2008; Lombardo et al, 2002; Norman et al, 2010). Drawing on these experiences, and in dialogue with debates in the literature, I discuss below the research interests and questions that brought me to my doctoral work.

Critical Participatory Action Research (PAR)

My diverse experiences with PAR have taught me to deeply value these traditions and practices as counter hegemonic approaches to knowledge production. I have experienced and documented many transformative moments and expressions of empowerment. However, I have also come to identify with critiques that locate participatory approaches themselves as a form of leveraging power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Kapoor, 2005; Kemmis, 2006; Olesen & Nordentoft, 2018). These critiques have called for more critical PAR perspectives that explicitly problematize participatory practices and their power dynamics (Kemmis et al, 2019;

McTaggart et al, 2017).

The term action research arose from a post world war II British school of thought forefronted by Kurt Lewin (1946). Lewin was a social psychologist who was interested in exploring “greater gains in productivity and in law and order through democratic participation rather than autocratic coercion” (Adelman, 1993, p7). He recommended an iterative process of analysis and intervention grounded in guidelines and desired ends as informed by a “host community” (Fox, 2003). For Lewin, participation and stakeholder buy-in were essential components for promoting efficiency and organisational change, and boosting morale. His research was largely focused in the business realm, where he made the argument that engaging the workers (or employees) in problem-solving would lead to improvements at the factory or workplace setting. PAR builds on this idea of putting those most impacted by a problem at the centre of solution-building, but embraces more emancipatory goals. Rather than working towards efficiency, PAR is more interested in empowerment. Drawing from 1970s Latin American social movement theories, PAR is concerned with supporting community members to challenge the status quo - including challenging (rather than tweaking) oppressive organisations and structures. Literacy scholar Paulo Freire’s (1970) work and theory of “conscientization” has become a cornerstone of PAR practice. This dialogic process of listening and demythologizing as a first step toward concerted social action is grounded in cycles of listening, dialogue and action.

Recently, more critical PAR perspectives have emerged which emphasise the need to return a more alive questioning and reinterpreting of action research goals, particularly as they get increasingly taken up within the academy (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al, 2019). Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) trace the foundations of critical PAR to growing critiques of

neoliberalism, rampant individualism and instrumental reason. Critical PAR opens space to name and reflect on the ways in which PAR projects can be guilty of mythologizing participatory practices. A key generative element is a questioning of potentially exaggerated assumptions about concepts of participation and empowerment. A critical lens calls for the reflexive recognition “that authentic change and the empowerment that drives it and derives from it requires political sustenance by some kind of collective” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005 p. 569). These understandings highlight the role of the collective in providing vital support for the development of political agency and critical mass for social processes of transformational change. As Michelle Fine (2018) describes, critical PAR seeks a re-centering of the need to “carve out delicate spaces for fragile solidarities and collective inquiries...where we might join with others to collectively ignite the slow fuse of possible” (p. 123). Also problematized within critical PAR is the role of facilitation and illusions of neutrality. Conceptualising facilitation as a neutral or technical activity denies the social responsibility of the facilitator, overplays the importance of academic researchers, and implicitly differentiates the work of theoreticians and practitioners (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Critical PAR explicitly questions inherent tensions within “naturalised” power hierarchies, particularly as they pertain to academic settings in which research most often arises.

As a white, middle-class woman based in a university institution, I have experienced these tensions. Though I have centred PAR as a form of research that seeks for more equitable benefits from these systems, I recognize the privilege that has contributed to me gaining success within these same systems. Through these entrenched power structures, researchers often retain control while being presented more benignly as arbitrators of neutral or benevolent processes, and even "experts" in participatory methods (Juraez & Brown, 2008). And despite

stated power sharing goals, participants have in some projects nonetheless been constructed, at times, as "subjects" expected to perform in particular ways (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Based in a faculty of public health, my earlier work was focused on more "traditional" health priorities such as smoking cessation and gambling prevention. It was often quite clear to me that, despite funder enthusiasm, these were not areas of significant priority for the young people involved in these projects. I frequently suspected that they were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear by repeating dominant anti-smoking and risk reduction narratives. These contradictory expressions of "participatory" power can lead to outcomes that are decidedly more extractive than empowering (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Juraez & Brown, 2008). Insidiously, they risk contributing to the legitimisation of neoliberal programmes and institutions, further entrenching inequitable power structures (Hall, 1981; St. Denis, 1992). Even very "power-aware" PAR approaches may privilege a form of "empowerment" that is not ultimately socially transformative (Kesby et al, 2007). I worried that while enabling a kind of liberating dialogue, our projects may have been producing an understanding of lived experiences that while sometimes feeling agentic, also risked resulting in inertia or acceptance (instead of political action).

A key commitment in critical PAR is to contest and counter dominant narratives and stereotypes by making space for underrepresented and repressed ways of knowing and being (Fine & Torre, 2021). This lens is of particular relevance to models of youth engagement which are typically based in settings tasked with priorities of education and development. Freire (2011) critiqued "banking" models of education that privilege teachers as narrating subjects, and students as listening objects positioned as containers or receptacles to be filled by "expert" knowledge. A growing participatory research emphasis, youth PAR or (YPAR), builds

on these foundations to surface and confront hierarchical constructions of knowledge production with young people (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra et al, 2016). YPAR emphasises breaking down these knowledge barriers, by engaging people with lived expertise, not just as research participants but as co-researchers, with the goal of raising the relevance, quality and impact of the knowledge generated. Much YPAR contests inherent hegemonic educational narratives, such as standardised testing and related ideals for “developing” young people based in neoliberal notions of competitiveness (Akom et al, 2008; Apple, 2011). Increasingly YPAR practitioners make linkages to critical theories to inform and deepen transgressive and systemic perspectives (Akom, 2009; Aldana & Richards-Schuster, 2021; Torre, 2009). Critical PAR perspectives on power and participation are also very alive in YPAR practice, surfacing reflections and tensions inherent in co-research with youth (Bertrand & Lozenski, 2023; Dentith et al, 2009; Felner, 2020; Fox, 2013; Hillier & Kroehle, 2021). In this work I have found a fruitful lens for reading my own participatory research challenges, and a motivating space for further engagement.

Community Arts Approaches

As PAR traditions widen, this work has also coincided with the growing popularity of arts-based research methods and a parallel turn to community in the arts (Badham, 2013; Bardnt, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Purcell, 2007; Sepala et al, 2016; Wyatt et al., 2013). YPAR in particular has employed arts-based strategies as hopeful opportunities for youth voice, agency and re-storying (Cahill et al., 2010; Domínguez & Cammarota, 2022; Felner et al, 2020; Shabtay, 2021; Wright, 2019). Unlike alienating deficit-oriented constructions of youth, arts-based approaches engage young people as assets and advocates (Carson et al, 2007; Mutere et al 2014; Prescott et al, 2008; Spiegel & Parent, 2017). This emphasis counters a

dominant deficiency model in youth work which places a focus on negative images of youth as “at risk” or “in need” (Foster & Spencer, 2010; Kelly, 2001; te Riele, 2006). Risk/needs-based perspectives have been critiqued for reinforcing external and internal processes of stigmatisation, fragmenting efforts to find solutions, underlining the perception that only outside experts can help, and ultimately deepening cycles of dependence (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). As Kelly (2001) contends “youth at risk” discourses perpetuate stigmas of youth as delinquent, deviant and disadvantaged. Foster & Spencer (2010) identify such discourses as a form of “symbolic violence.” Rooted in individualised notions of risk, they maintain power differentials by placing burden and responsibility on young people and those who care for them, downplaying or neglecting attention to structural forces and inequities.

Arts-based approaches contest discourses of youth risk and deficit by focusing on skills and capacities of imagination, creativity and vision (Hickey-Moody, 2010; Rhodes & Schecter 2014; Wright, 2019). As Fine & Torres (2021) discuss, creative YPAR projects can spark “aesthetic openings” into new understandings of how things might be otherwise. Moreover, art-making can be a powerful site of inquiry. In their special issue on creative and critical practices in youth research, Goessling et al (2020) describe how art can be a rigorous medium for analysing, producing and sharing knowledge. They highlight arts engagement as an intrinsic form of research, with value far beyond the way artistic activities are often used as an add-on or “fun” element to community or classroom-based youth work. Arts-based methods are increasingly being leveraged as ways of eliciting information, perspectives and understandings, valued as accessible, embodied and affective modes of information and communication (Boydell et al, 2015). Sepala et al (2016) discuss the possibilities of arts-based PAR as a decolonizing research practice based on potentials for inviting and centering

non-Western epistemologies and resisting colonial and Eurocentric research processes.

From the outset of PAR foundations in the 1970s, applied theorist Augusto Boal used theatre with historically marginalised groups to both dramatise and work against oppression (Boal, 2023). Boal believed that theatre should begin from their own experiences, and that the performance itself could become a dialogue with the audience. This work, known as forum theatre, represents an early form of socially-engaged arts (Helgura, 2011). With a shared grounding in participatory foundations, socially-engaged arts, like PAR, are often expressly harnessed for communicating diversities of experience, and resisting dominant and generalising social definitions that perpetuate stigma and displacement (Larsen & Johnson, 2013).

Community arts are a form of socially-engaged arts characterised by dialogue and co-creation with a partner community (Cleveland, 2002). Community arts approaches emerged in response to critiques of mainstream arts practices (Berrigan, 1977). These critiques focused on the ways that mainstream arts often reproduce ruling-class ideologies and exclude particular groups from a means of public self-expression (Bourgeault, 2022). Community arts can thus be understood as a radical tactic that strives to perform a critical kind of "anti-essentializing" (Rose, 1997).

Community art in public space, in particular, can be a rich site of contest and inquiry for resisting what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) calls “the danger of the single story”. But this requires the re-centring of perspectives currently dis-placed in public art (Liodaki & Velegrakis, 2020). bell hooks affirms this “choosing (of) the margin” as a repositioning of people and communities with diversities of experience as knowledge keepers and wisdom leaders, with the power to reinvent or re-conceptualize "the margins" as spaces of “radical openness” (hooks, 1989 p.15).

Principles of re-centering arts engagement are central to the community arts

partnership which forms the core of my dissertation work. Many years ago, I convened a community-based learning initiative to develop a community of practice approach to youth engagement in Ontario (Lombardo, 2007). It was through this initiative that I first connected with SKETCH Working Arts, and their practices of youth-driven community arts and anti-oppression. Over the following decade, I collaborated on several projects with SKETCH, in partnership with their founding artistic director Phyllis Novak. Our work together has been rooted in exploring and advancing creative approaches as participatory innovations for amplifying underrepresented youth wisdom and leadership (Lombardo & Novak, 2012). These many years of relationship-building and participatory inquiry led us both on a trajectory towards graduate studies. We ultimately both found ourselves working towards graduate degrees at York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies (later to become the Faculty of Urban and Environmental Change). Through our shared interest in participatory research on creative arts approaches with equity-seeking young people, the *Making With Place* research project was born.

Place-Based Perspectives

Making With Place draws on my arts-based youth engagement interests and practices, with my burgeoning focus on place as an environmental studies student. Concepts of "place" investigate and theorize spaces, places and landscapes as culturally constructed and contested (Larsen & Johnson, 2013; Lefebvre, 1992). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall refers to place as "one of the key discourses in the systems of meaning we call culture" (Hall, 2008 p. 268). This can comprise forms of cultural identity that are imagined through a sense of belonging to a bounded and stable geographic space, or to socially constructed "geographies of identity", such as "race" or "gender" (Rose, 1997). Place-based explorations both acknowledge and challenge such identities, seeking

to question and explode barriers that are based on essentialist understandings of difference (Hall, 1990). Within such discourses, notions of "community" have been challenged as potentially regressive understandings of place that may structure desired identity as uniform within, and hostile to what is positioned as without (Carter et al, 1993). Such a projection of community will commonly create a context of "insiders" and "outsiders"; those who feel excluded may feel that exclusion all the more because others feel included (Mulligan, 2013). In this way, community can be understood as both aspirational and contested.

These critical perspectives on *place* and *community* provide a fruitful dialogue with the community arts goal of anti-essentializing. While community arts are generally grounded in pluralistic and collaborative practices, "community" has also been problematized by artists who question whose community is being defined/engaged and whose art is ultimately being expressed (Bourgeault, 2022; Ford-Smith, 2011; Rose, 1997). Place in community arts thus expresses itself as a spatiality of power, particularly when enacting goals of art in public space with the expressed purpose of re-centering the margins (Liodaki & Velegrakis, 2020; Loveless, 2019). Community arts projects in public space can serve to animate a commons through which processes of inclusion, exclusion and essentialization can be collectively problematized. They can also provide space for resistances and counter narratives about particular places and how they have/are/can be occupied. Hickey-Moody (2010) writes that "as sites of public pedagogy, youth arts projects promote diverse conceptions of creativity and place..(and) show the instability of our everyday uses of these concepts" (p.213). Crath (2017) reflects on how youth mural arts projects can serve to both reinforce and disrupt hegemonic narratives. By functioning as a graffiti abatement strategy, city-approved mural projects can reinforce dominant ideas of urban beautification and normative aesthetics. However, often commissioned through community arts

processes, they also provide a large canvas for re-storying and representation. Ranciere (2007) writes of the “politics of aesthetics” exploring the conditions in which art choices are made. Community arts in public space can be understood as expressing an aesthetic politics of place by seeking to engage underrepresented “geographies of identity” and provide access to communal physical spaces for creative expression and dialogue.

Place-based perspectives also meaningfully take up and inform my foundational interests in critical pedagogy. Grunewald (2003) theorizes a critical pedagogy of place in dialogue with Freire’s (1970) notions of “situationality”. Human beings are rooted in situations that are defined by conditions which mark them and which they also mark. Such situationality has temporal, spatial, geographical and contextual dimensions. Reflecting on one’s situation requires reflecting on the space(s) one inhabits, and acting on one’s situation requires changing one’s relationship to a place. Grunewald identifies how spatial dimensions of situationality connect critical pedagogy with a pedagogy of place. Both discourses are concerned with the conditions that shape people and the actions people take to shape these conditions. Social constructions, ideologies and experiences of places can shape socio-cultural identities (Peng et al, 2020). A critical pedagogy of place cultivates spaces where these constructions can be explored so that disruption and transformation becomes possible (Haymes, 1995). These expressions of critical pedagogy focus on the importance of people telling their own stories in places of community and struggle, to explore how individual narratives are connected to larger patterns of domination and resistance (Grunewald, 2003).

This dissertation explores *Making With Place* learning about community arts in public space to ask: Who and what is invited to be expressed through our collective practice? What is the nature of this “community” we seek to engage in/for/with? How can we

explore/realize/reinforce radical ideals and re-imagined geographies? These perspectives became particularly salient as this research began just as the first Covid-19 restrictions were mandated here in Toronto/Tkaronto. Suddenly ideas of place became even more complicated and contested, particularly for people already navigating precarity. Ultimately this focus revealed a deeply embodied, plural and imaginative space for creative exploration. This time also highlighted how places can suddenly change, and how this disruption can reveal an opportunity to reimagine the world that comes after (Roy, 2020). The pandemic was a challenge to navigate as a doctoral student doing participatory research, but it also provided unique insights into critical praxis as a path towards mutuality and solidarity (Fine & Torre, 2021).

Discourses of Impact and Change

My interests in critical participatory action research, community arts, and place-based perspectives are also all united through a broad focus on change. Throughout my career in youth engagement, change has been a highly present yet under-theorized concept often conflated with preoccupations on evidence and evaluation (Zeller-Berkman, 2010). I knew I wanted to delve into these tensions, and used my first comprehensive to explore questions of change and impact in community arts (Lombardo, 2021). I uncovered pressures to substantiate community arts work (Clift, 2012; Hamilton et al, 2003), a proliferation of evaluations seeking to demonstrate different types of impact (e.g. APPGAHW, 2017; Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013; Daykin et al, 2008; Johnson & Stanley, 2007; Kelaher et al, 2014; White, 2006; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017), and contention regarding what constitutes the best or most valid forms of evidence (Clift, 2012; Goulding, 2014; Putland, 2008; Raw et al, 2012). I also found a discourse of frustration expressing that it can “seem like positivism gone mad to expect the arts to justify their existence on scientific grounds” (Hamilton et al. 2003, p. 402). This sentiment is well captured by

Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) who challenges the construction of the arts as a definable naturalistic phenomenon that is available to be observed and measured, arguing that diverse art forms and practices are “processes of cultural production...evolving within both symbolic and material conditions that constrain but do not predefine how individuals engage each other. In other words, rather than thinking about the arts as doing something to people, we should think about artistic forms as something people do” (p. 225–226).

As a response to these epistemological challenges, some efforts have focused on theorizing community arts practice (Cohen, 2009; Raw et al, 2012; Sonn & Baker, 2016). Theory-based evaluations of the social impacts of the arts offer a counterpoint to the evidence-base as dominated by a “rationalist-modernist paradigm” that emphasises methodology rather than theory as the basis of “good evaluation” (Galloway 2009). Within this space, there is growing use of an application called “theory of change” (often abbreviated as ToC). ToC offers a model of causality rooted in an embrace of complexity rather than experimental design (Galloway 2009; Mayne, 2015). These are often funder driven tools utilised in a similar way to logic models. They typically consist of causal diagrams showing targeted impact pathways that outline short and long-term outcomes of initiatives from individual to broader social levels. Like many community organisations, *SKETCH Working Arts* has spent considerable time elaborating and iterating such a theory of change (see Appendix A). Given my inherent interests in this work as a form of social change, I initially thought my dissertation research would explore and build on this ToC model. However, when I brought this challenge to the collective process of our *Making With Place* participatory action cycles, it failed to resonate. The ToC model felt far too rigid and deterministic. It had the effect of distancing and even disturbing our young artist collaborators. One artist called it “funder speak.” This perspective is echoed by Tuck and Yang

(2013) in their book *Youth Resistance and Theories of Change*.

“It is clear that what we mean by theories of change is not the same as what those (non-profit) foundations mean, because we do not mean anything certain or linear. We’re not ready to cede the term to those other evocations—instead, we want to deepen the notion of theory and deepen the notion of change in our use of the term. Reflecting or imagining a theory of change is an ontological and epistemological activity, related to core questions of being and knowing.” (Tuck & Yang, 2013, 3rd paragraph)

Responding to these ideas and frustrations, my dissertation’s participatory research became, as Tuck and Yang (2013) advocate, a much more pedagogical, reflective and creative engagement with change. This revealed new insights for understanding and enacting change, deeply rooted in the ideas of young people who are at the forefront of imagining a different future.

This dissertation takes up ideas and pluralities of community, arts, place and change. These concepts are explored from the perspective of young people from underrepresented and oppressed identities through their art activations in public space. The dissertation combines and builds on my scholarly and practice-based interests in youth engagement, creative participatory approaches, critical pedagogies of place, and theories of change. The work draws on: a long-term community partnership and in-depth engagement with young artists.

My Dissertation Research

My dissertation examines the community arts project *Making With Place*. Working with and through the participatory action research design, I investigate the project’s processes and outcomes in relation to the goals of impacting knowledge, place, community and socio-cultural change. I am guided by the overarching research question: *how do diverse emerging artists engage community arts in public space to express and enact place and change?* I unpack and explore this question via three areas of focus: a) processes of co-production, b) expressions of place and c) theorizations of change.

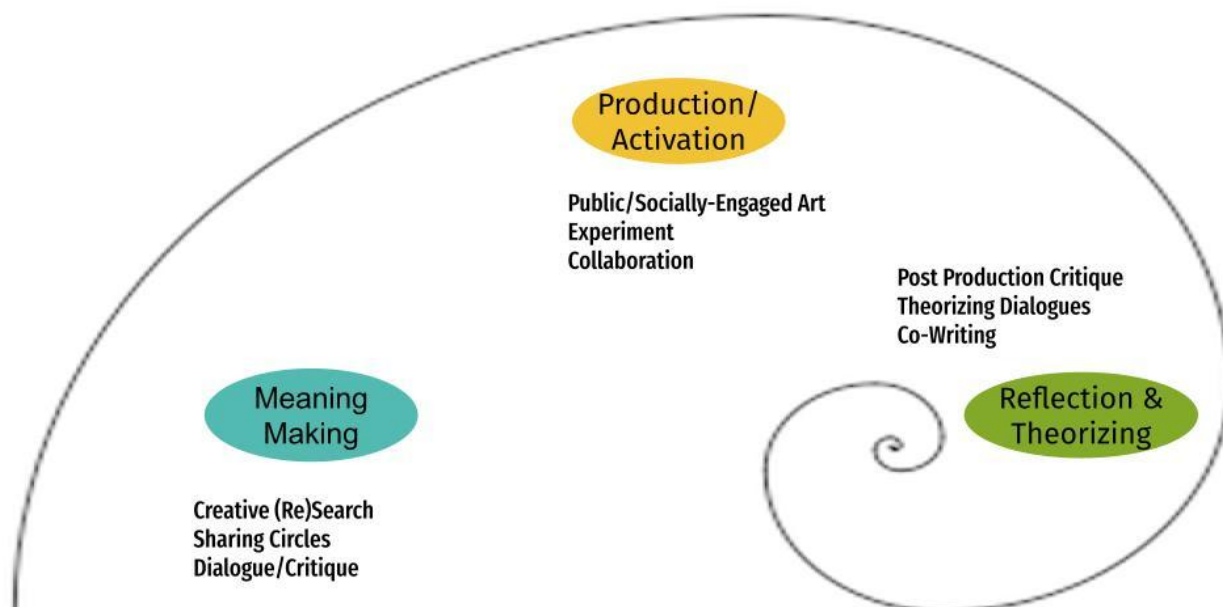
Table 1.1. My Dissertation Research Questions

1. How do youth artist-researchers engage collectively in co-production and meaning making? a) How is knowledge surfaced, communicated? b) How does the process affect understandings, relationships with place? c) How does the processt affect understandings, relationships with community?
2. How do youth artist-researchers explore and express space and place? a) What is created/produced? b) How are places and spaces conceptualized and activated? c) What are the intended messages and impacts?
3. What are the theories of change emergent from this work? a) In what ways do participants take up and explore concepts of change? b) How do the artworks express concepts of change? c) How might these articulations inform and/or problematize current theories of change?

Research Methodology

Participatory Action Cycles. My research is based in processes of participatory action research (Kemmis et al, 2019; Kindon et al, 2007) through cycles of listening and dialogue, action through arts production, and reflection and theorizing. Participatory action research is an approach to research and knowledge mobilisation that counters researcher control over the process of constructing, sharing and using knowledge, in favour of participant empowerment and voice and some form of transformational action (Selenger, 1997). Youth-PAR (or YPAR) is a particular application of this practice that specifically focuses on partnership and power sharing with young people. YPAR acknowledges that youth, especially those from historically vulnerable or disenfranchised communities, face significant barriers to political and social engagement (Schensul, 2014).

Figure 1.1 Making With Place (re)search cycle



Making With Place was undertaken through iterative and generative PAR cycles of:

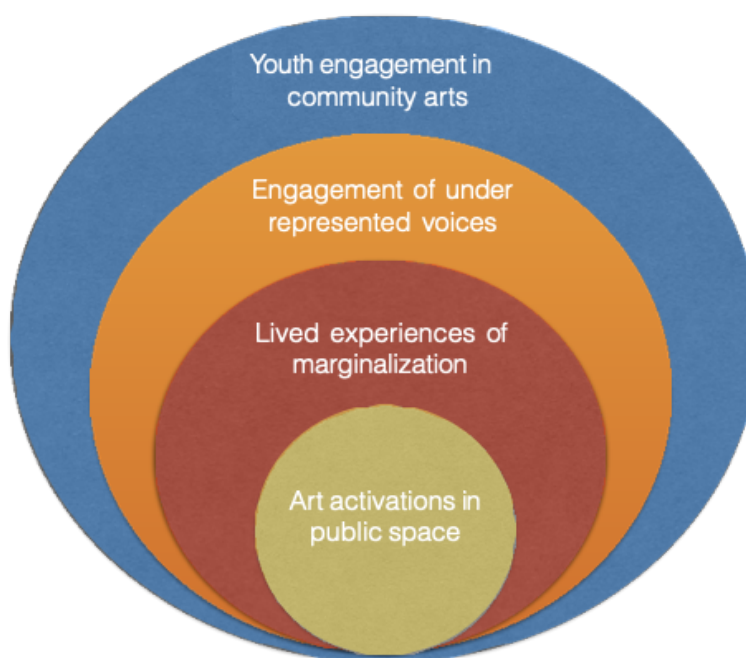
1. Creative sharing and meaning making. Place-based artistic and narrative explorations of project themes were undertaken through sharing circles where participants brought forth artwork for feedback and discussion. These circles became spaces of storytelling where personal concepts of place were expressed by each artist through their work. They also sparked creative critique and dialogue on place, deepening our collective learning as (re)search, and furthering the development of solo and collaborative arts practices.

2. Place-based production and activation. Drawing from the creative outputs and discussions, the artists engaged in the design and development of multidisciplinary art outreach productions. These sought to build on and express surfaced ideas of place, and respond to and activate notions of reclaiming space through public art.

3. Reflection and theorizing. At key and/or culminating points in the group process, we engaged in reflection and participatory data analysis to capture and deepen meaning making and explore theory building and knowledge mobilisation. Themes and findings emerging from this analysis formed a knowledge framework that served to continually inform and be informed by new project cycles.

Case Study Methodology. I also draw on case study methodology to develop an in-depth, settings-based understanding of the project (Yin, 2018). Case study methodology calls for an articulation of the real-life bounded system to be studied (Stake, 2005). Figure 3 articulates/bounds the case under investigation; the engagement of young people with lived experiences of oppression in the creation of art activations in public space. The *Making With Place* project represents a specific illustration of this, known as an instrumental case (Stake, 1995). The case is also bounded by time and place, as *Making With Place* takes place within a demarcated project and timeline (2020-2023).

Figure 1.2 Bounding the Case



Data Collection and Analysis Methods

To realise the extensive and in-depth data needed for a case study approach (Cresswell & Poth, 2016), I employed several data collection methods involving multiple sources of information which I utilised to build patterns or explanations investigating the research questions (Yin, 2018). Full informed consent processes were sought throughout (York University research ethics protocols #2020-048 and #2021-201).

1. Participant Observation

I engaged in prolonged, in-depth participation and observation (Wasterfors, 2018) during all cycles and phases of the *Making With Place* project. As research facilitator I led the youth artist-researchers group in the PAR sessions and cycles and engaged deeply with the public art projects and collaborations. I also engaged as a creative participant, bringing my own arts-based explorations regularly to the group sharing sessions, and developing my own place-based activation during the Bentway experiments in phase one. Throughout I kept a reflective journal, with detailed notes documenting impressions, experiences, challenges, questions, tensions and insights.

2. Group Discussions

The participatory action research sessions with the youth artist-researchers were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed, through qualitative coding to identify major themes and narratives (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). This was a process of inductive coding which began with myself and Phyllis Novak engaging with key portions of the discussion transcripts via memoing, and then collaboratively and iteratively assembling these notes into a codebook ensuring inter-coder reliability through subjective agreement (Felner & Henderson, 2022). The codes were then organised into code trees and presented to the youth artist-researchers for

participatory coding and meaning making. Codes were reviewed, explored and further iterated on with the young artists in two participatory analysis sessions through which major themes and narratives capturing and communicating the data and findings were generated. We collectively sought to ensure a diverse sample of narratives capturing perspectives from each young artist and their artworks, and to centre stories of resilience, hope and resistance, to move beyond narratives of deficit, need and challenge (Fine & Torre, 2021).

3. *Individual Interviews*

I also conducted one-on-one interviews with artist-researchers and other key informants at pivotal stages of the project process. These interviews were semi-structured (Gubrium et al, 2012), involving open-ended questions exploring *Making With Places* artworks, processes and outcomes. These were also audio-recorded, transcribed and qualitatively coded and analysed to identify major issues/themes/messages/stories addressed (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Felner & Henderson, 2022). Resulting themes and narratives were then discussed with each interviewee, and co-produced into written narrative outputs through processes of review, synthesis and co-writing.

4. *Journal-zine*

The themes and narratives developed via these processes of collaborative analysis and meaning making were then assembled into short articles designed around a ‘zine style format. The term ‘zine refers to a community-based do-it-yourself (DIY) form of independent publication usually devoted to specialised or unconventional subject matter (O’Brien, 2012). This was a format of communication familiar to many of our young artists collaborators and identified by them as more desirable and accessible than academic journal articles. However while we collectively took inspiration from community ‘zine style publications, the co-writing

and synthesis of these articles was also a highly facilitated process drawing on the qualitative research methods described above (Burkeholder et al, 2022; Lebel, 2022). We thus came to call what we were developing a "journal-zine". It became a space to showcase the artworks being produced, and document, disseminate and archive the project's experiences of public art production and experimentation. The 'zine also came to represent another level of theorizing and meaning making. It became a place of synthesis from themes to theorizing via co-writing dialogues to produce written narratives (Phillips et al., 2022).

Establishing Rigour

I sought to ensure credibility through prolonged, in-depth engagement throughout the *Making With Place* project conception, planning, implementation and reporting, which represents the continuation of long-term relationship building with SKETCH over many years. (Our first collaboration was over ten years ago and we have since worked on several projects and initiatives together). I also ensured rigour through triangulation, using research methods and data collection from various sources including youth participants, SKETCH staff and external stakeholders. The multiple points of data collection at progressive stages of the project, and the participatory processes of data analysis, provided for debriefing and member checking of results as findings were elucidated, defined and reported. In service to the in-depth case study methodology, below I engage in thick description, reporting full, nuanced details of the case, the project processes and findings, and my own personal engagement.

Making With Place

Making With Place is a community arts initiative exploring the relationship between community, culture, place and public space from the perspective of young people living/organising/resisting "on the margins." Our research aim is to engage youth from underrepresented and oppressed identities in knowledge surfacing, synthesis and dissemination, with the goal of invigorating new relationships with place, community and culture. With the mentorship of adult artists, QT/BIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) youth participate as "artist-researchers" to explore and create place-based activations, and collectively make meaning from these experiences. *Making With Place* is a collaboration with *SKETCH Working Arts*, a Toronto-based community arts enterprise for diverse young people, ages 16-29. SKETCH harnesses the transformative power of the arts to build leadership, support self-sufficiency, and cultivate social and environmental change. For twenty years SKETCH has valued working through the arts as a life affirming approach to surmounting the constraints and stigma of poverty, homelessness and marginalisation.

Artist-Researchers

Making With Place began in spring 2020, as a SSHRC funded research study co-designed by myself and SKETCH Artistic Director Phyllis Novak (aka Nowakowski). Phyllis and I undertook this work as student researchers, with support from our respective supervisors Lisa Myers and Sarah Flicker. We co-led: recruitment of youth artist-researcher participants, design and facilitation of project sessions, and training and support to the youth in the process of planning and implementing art projects. Phyllis and I also managed

the project's participatory research, from our perspectives as student researchers, each with a particular focus and process. My research, in service of my doctoral dissertation, focuses on investigating *Making With Place* outcomes and impacts using a case study approach drawing on qualitative and participatory research methods. Phyllis' research, in service of her MES major research project, focused on the research creation process co-curated with the youth participants.

Young artists were recruited from amongst currently active SKETCH participants, to a) work with the project team as artist-researchers, b) engage in solo and collaborative art-making, and c) take part in participatory research to investigate project processes and experiences. Recruitment took place by first advertising the opportunity to all current SKETCH youth participants, and then explaining the project via an info session. Youth interested in applying were then asked to sign up for a short interview discussion focused on their interests and experiences related to the project. Selection criteria included identified lived experience of oppression or marginalisation, and interest and/or experience with community-oriented art practice. Diverse representation was a key criterion, with particular attention to recruitment of youth identifying as Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and/or racialized. Seven young artists signed on to form the core youth-artist researcher team: Jess DeVitt, Jahmal Nugent, Pree Rehal, Ammarah Syed, Ayrah Taerb, Olympia Trypis, and Bert Whitecrow. Emerging youth artist T.J. Banate, and community artist facilitators Sue Cohen and Naty Tremblay joined later in phase two of the work. See table 1.2 for a breakdown of participants and phases, and appendix B for bios of the youth artist-researchers.

Project Phases

The Making With Place project unfolded in two distinct phases, beginning with creative research at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and slowly developing, with the progressive lifting of restrictions, into fulsome public art projects with increasing community arts collaborations.

Phase One

Virtual Dialogues. The *Making With Place* research launched in spring 2020, just as the first Covid-19 mandated lockdowns were taking effect in Toronto. Though we had planned an in-person collaborative art-making process, Covid forced us into virtual space. We began by meeting online via the Zoom platform, during that uncertain, liminal time. Our project timelines elongated. We focused this first cycle of meaning making on sharing how we were feeling, and what we were creating, or not creating, and why. We reorganised the project budget to provide honoraria to the young artists throughout the height of the first lockdowns. The project provided both material and affective support at an acute moment of risk. After several virtual sharing and storytelling sessions, we engaged in a process of qualitative analysis to identify and co-develop emergent codes and themes. Codebooks and code trees were generated which helped to capture and deepen our collective meaning making. Then finally, with some loosening of restrictions in summer 2020, we were able to meet in-person, while socially distanced, to experiment with place-based public art productions.

Bentway Experiments. A cycle of public art experiment began, drawing on creative sharing and meaning making generated during the virtual dialogues. This centred around one particular public space: The Bentway, an urban park-like space recently created under a highway

in downtown Toronto. Leveraging SKETCH's existing partnership with the Bentway Conservancy, which operates the site, we were able to gain access for one evening, to experiment and test artworks under development by the artist-researchers. *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit*, a poetry and video installation acknowledging Treaty 3 territory by Bert Whitecrow (2020) was projected onto the concrete "bents" holding up the highway. *Grounding and Activating*, a photography and poetry installation on wellness and activism by Ammarah Syed (2020) was mounted beneath the bent architecture. And *Medicine Mobiles*, an installation of Indigenous medicines and objects captured in tiny glass bottles by Olympia Trypis (2020) was strung below the bent archways. Though limited to a one-night run, with only our fellow artist-researcher team as audience, the Bentway experiments helped to ground us in place after the separations of lockdown and isolation. Some artist-researchers also experimented at other sites, notably online or hybrid space given ongoing vulnerabilities and risks. *CRIP Collab*, an online zine celebrating the artwork of young artists identifying as disabled was curated by Pree Rehal (2020). And a video of a spoken word performance by Susie Mensah was recorded against the backdrop of *An Invitation*, her mural collaborative with Jess DeVitt depicting resistances to gender-based violence (DeVitt & Mensah, 2020).

Production Reflections. After the production experimentation experiences, we engaged in a group process of post-production reflection and critique. Taking each piece in turn, the team shared our responses, impressions, sensing and sense-makings from the works. We also reflected on what we had learned around successes and challenges of production, and discussed how we might like to document and disseminate the lessons arising. The group decided to create our own "journal-zine" to report on the cultural and knowledge production elements of our research.

Figure 1.3 Making With Place timeline

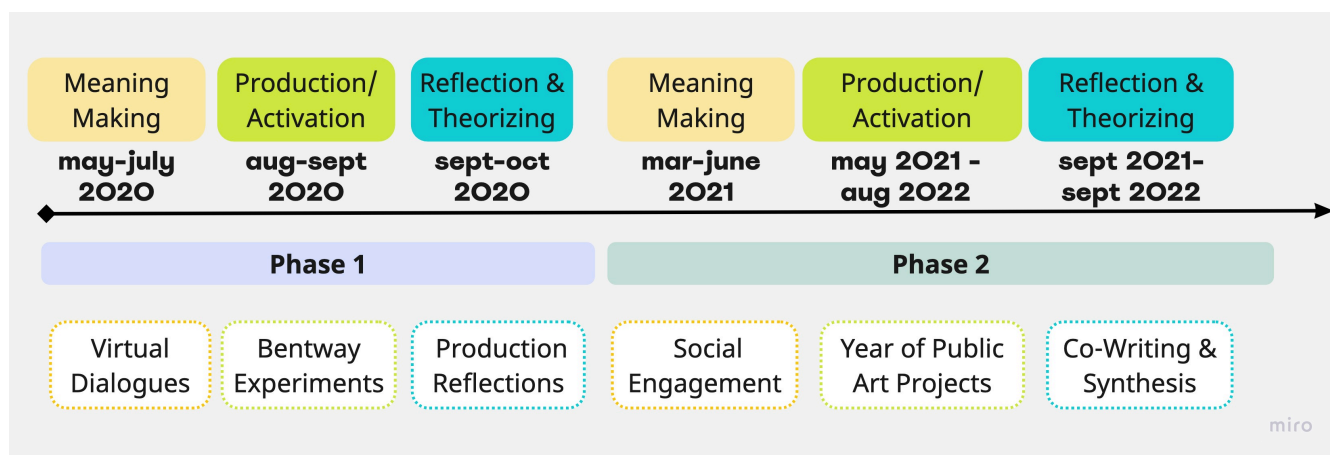


Table 1.2 Making With Place Research Phases and Projects

<i>Phases</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Key Public Art Activations</i>
<i>Phase 1</i> spring 2020 to fall 2020	<u>youth artist-researchers</u> Jess DeVitt, Jahmal Nugent, Pree Rehal, Ammarah Syed, Ayrach Taerb, Olympia Trypis, Bert Whitecrow <u>artist-researcher facilitators</u> Charlotte Lombardo Phyllis Novak <u>research-mentors</u> Sarah Flicker Lisa Myers	<i>Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit</i> video and poetry projection <i>An Invitation</i> poetic mural installation <i>CRIP Collab</i> digital zine vol. 1 <i>Grounding & Activating</i> image and poetry installation <i>Medicine Mobiles</i> offerings installation
<i>Phase 2</i> spring 2021 to spring 2022	<u>returning artist-researchers</u> Jess DeVitt, Sarah Flicker, Jahmal Nugent, Charlotte Lombardo, Lisa Myers, Phyllis Novak, Pree Rehal, Ammarah Syed, Ayrach Taerb, Olympia Trypis, Bert Whitecrow <u>new artist-researcher collaborators</u> T. J. Banate, Sue Cohen, Naty Tremblay	<i>CRIP Collab</i> vols. 2 & 3 <i>Cooking for Community</i> recipe-zine <i>Indica; Omega</i> album and performance <i>Queering Place</i> earth art installation <i>Reconstructions of Home</i> artist residency and installations

Phase Two

Social-Engagement. With more opening up of the public world, as we slowly emerged from the Covid lockdowns, came a reaching out and building from the *Making With Place* incubations and experimentations. Given the successes of phase one amidst the challenges of Covid, all partners were eager to expand *Making With Place* into a larger program, to follow the art and ideas more fully into social engagement and public art projects. Thanks to funding secured from the City of Toronto, *Making With Place* was expanded into a full-fledged SKETCH program, and featured as part of the city's broader plan for the Year of Public Art 2021-2022. The seven young artist-researchers from phase one continued on as leaders in this work. SKETCH artist director Phyllis Novak provided curatorial leadership and I continued as a participatory researcher. The Bentway also remained a partner and core placemaking site. The program unfolded through four separate streams, with widened engagement of new young artists and experienced community artists as creative leads. For the purposes of clarity, in this dissertation I focus on the participants who engaged directly with my research.

Year of Public Art Projects. The resulting *Making With Place* Year of Public Art projects developed into exciting, fulsome public art interventions. Three key projects emerged which built on the articulations and capacities nurtured during the initial phase one study. *Queering Place* (2021) an "earth-art" garden and storytelling project stewarded by Indi/queer artists, including Bert Whitecrow. *Reconstructions of Home* (2022) a multi-sited installation uncovering experiences of homelessness, with leadership by Jess DeVitt and Olympia Trypis. And *Indica Omega* a hip hop album and performance installation by Ayrah Taerb (2021) exploring Black creativity, harm reduction, and mental health. Digital and hybrid approaches remained important given the continued rising and falling of Covid risks. Online activations included new volumes

of Pree Rehal's *CRIP Collab* (2022) focusing on disabled artists of colour. And *Cooking for Community* (2021), a collaborative food security recipe-zine by Jess DeVitt with contributions by Pree Rehal, Ammarah Syed and Jahmal Nugent.

Co-Writing. The team of youth artist-researchers also worked with me and Phyllis to develop and realise the vision for the *Making With Place* "journal-zine". Through processes of dialogue and interview we engaged in co-writing to produce a website showcasing the phase one activations. Each of the phase one pieces was documented in zine-style blog entry to capture and communicate the work in both visual and written form. In my role as participatory researcher, I took a lead on this dissemination strategy. As phase two progressed, I worked with the artist-researchers to help capture the new projects through participant observation and interview dialogues, which were co-written into new journal-zine entries and articles.

Time and Place

Making With Place unfolded during the radical transformation of personal and public space mandated by public health orders to contain Covid-19. These changes were felt acutely by all, but differentially impacted vulnerable peoples navigating marginality and precarity. This time also collided with a period of growing attention, awareness, activism and organising to address anti-Black racism. These global shifts were highlighted by the artist-researchers as they collectively and creatively responded to their personal experiences during a time of significant public and social upheaval. The project provided an important and compelling opportunity to share knowledge and perspectives from marginalised voices, in this space and place of pandemic and extraordinary personal and social experience. Confinement changes our relationship with place, urgently so for people for whom place was already problematic, insecure and contested. What happens to relationships with the outside world and each other in this situation? What

happens within personal, inner spaces, inner worlds? How might experiences of marginality, trauma and resilience teach and heal our communities in this time of upheaval and change?

The work also, largely, took place at The Bentway, a unique public arts and cultural infrastructure project that seeks to “use the city as site, subject and canvas”¹. The Bentway is a 1.75km area underneath Toronto's Gardiner Expressway that has been transformed into a public park and gathering space, which offers year-round activities and events, including gardens, recreational amenities, public art, special exhibitions, festivals, theatre and musical performances. This place under the "bridge" of the highway presented a relevant and interesting animation site for *Making With Place* given current and historical realities of this and similar locations being utilised by disenfranchised people for alternative housing. It is an area where underhoused peoples have consistently made shelters, dwellings and communities. These temporary homes are often contested and forcibly removed by city officials. We were interested in exploring and activating the Bentway site within an awareness of the tensions it may represent, and questions about who is currently being engaged there. Indeed, a related high-profile controversy occurred shortly after the Bentway opened. An expensive event called Dinner With a View was hosted there, featuring large transparent domed dining areas that could be booked at upwards of \$100 per person to enjoy a “completely luxurious dining experience – in a unique outdoor space”. The crass irony of this juxtaposition, a privileged experience staged “with a view” to a space oft used for shelter by people living in poverty, generated a public outcry which included media advocacy campaigns by anti-poverty organising groups². It is

¹ <https://thebentway.ca/about/>

² Toronto Star headline and byline, April 2, 2019 - Poverty activists plan free protest meal opposite luxury pop-up restaurant under the Gardiner. The irony of a glitzy pop-up restaurant near where makeshift homeless camps were cleared earlier this year has sparked a free protest meal this Friday, called “Dinner With A View — Of The Rich.”

important to note that the event was a private rental, it was not organised by the Bentway Conservancy group that operates and programs the site. It nevertheless served to highlight the tensions of this space. And likely played a factor in the Bentway Conservancy expressing both a need for programming featuring/engaging voices of underrepresented youth, and a strong interest in partnering with SKETCH and the *Making With Place* project.

What this Dissertation Offers

My dissertation contributes to the growing body of literature that theorizes community arts as an intrinsic form of knowledge production. Based on critical YPAR methods and perspectives, I investigate *Making With Place* in order to locate, surface and synthesise the experiences and theorizations arising from this work.

I have prepared a three-manuscript dissertation. Each paper addresses a particular area of focus of my dissertation research, and has been formatted and submitted to an academic peer reviewed publication. The manuscripts are all co-authored. They are all first authored by me and draw on my experiences as one of the lead research-facilitators of the project's collaborative processes of participatory research. For each piece, I provide an authorship statement on the role of the co-authors. Representation of the co-production of this knowledge base is core to recognizing the fundamental contributions of the co-researchers. Sharing authorship credit reflects my commitments to critical processes of power sharing that seek to disrupt subjectification in academic research.

Alongside each manuscript is an excerpt from a corresponding *Making With Place* journal-zine article, written via dialogue and synthesis between myself and the artists. These journal-zine pieces provide greater space to sit with the artworks and ideas, from the perspectives

of the artist-researchers. The pieces featured in this dissertation are part of a new magazine format we are experimenting with, in order to disseminate the journal-zine content via a print-friendly format that can also be easily sent and saved digitally. We are intentionally working and experimenting with different formats, from academic publication to web ‘zine to magazine, to explore different forms of expression and reach diverse audiences.

Manuscript #1 - Co-Production with Young Artists: Making With Place as (Re)Search

The first manuscript details the processes of participatory research we undertook as part of our YPAR methodology. It has been submitted for consideration to the journal Action Research. The paper takes up my first area of research into co-production and meaning making: *How do participants engage in co-production and meaning making? a) In what ways is knowledge surfaced, communicated? b) How does the project affect understandings, relationships with place? c) How does the project affect understandings, relationships with community?* This paper centres and reflects on the work and leadership of two of the *Making With Place* youth artists-researchers, Jess DeVitt and Ammarah Syed. It tells the story of their creative engagements and journeys to illustrate the project’s broader processes and learnings. We discuss experiences of creative participatory research and artistic production, reflection and theorizing, and elaborate a model and process based on this work centred in relational becoming and collective care.

Authorship Statement

I am the lead author of this manuscript. I wrote the manuscript text and developed the articulations of the model and processes, with feedback and comments by second author Phyllis Novak. Jess DeVitt and Ammarah Syed are also co-authors: they contributed both artworks and

short pieces of text featured in the form of poetry-like snippets and provided feedback on drafts of the manuscript.

Journal-zine article: On Fragmentation and Coming Into Coherence

This article showcases Ammarah Syed's photography-based gif artworks and theorizations into principles of somatics, trauma and healing. The piece illustrates our *Making With Place* processes of co-production and meaning making as (re)search. Ammarah and I developed the text together via PAR dialogue and synthesis.

Manuscript #2 - Making With Place: Youth Public Art Experiments

The second manuscript explores expressions and desires for place, community and culture by taking up *Making With Place* public art installations and experiments (Lombardo et al, 2023). In August 2023, it was published in the journal *Art/Research International*. The paper addresses my second set of research questions on place and community arts production: *How do participants use art to explore space and place? a) How are places and spaces conceptualised and activated? b) What is created/produced? c) What are the intended messages and impacts?* The paper draws on six *Making With Place* artworks to capture and illustrate findings across three interrelated themes; place holds histories, place is relational, and place as verb. We discuss how these works and themes express living processes of placemaking for re-mapping spatialities of power and community.

Authorship Statement

I am the lead author of this manuscript. I developed the overarching themes and model. I drafted all sections of the piece by drawing on *Making With Place* artistic and qualitative research outputs, as well as field notes, research writings and conversations with second author (research collaborator, Phyllis Novak). Third author, Sarah Flicker, provided in-depth, generative feedback

to help tighten and hone the ideas and overall piece. *Making With Place* artists are also listed as a group in the authorship credits. Though the youth artists did not contribute directly to the writing of the manuscript, their artworks are featured throughout and many of the findings are drawn from our collective dialogues including our co-authored journal-zine pieces. They were therefore recognized as authors for the work.

Journal-zine article: On Queering Place, Fluidity and Reclaiming Failure

This article illustrates “place as relational” through TJ Banate’s reflections and experiences of the garden as an Indiqueer place. The piece showcases conceptualizations and activations of place enacted by the *Making With Place* earth art residency Queering Place. TJ and I developed the text together via PAR dialogue and synthesis.

Manuscript #3 - Making With Place: Theorizing Change with Community Artists

The third manuscript explores three metaphors of place arising from the *Making With Place* project - the garden, the bridge, the margins - as situated and affective theories of change. It will be submitted to the journal Learning Landscapes for a [special call](#) on critical and sustainable approaches to youth well-being and development. The paper takes up my final set of questions on theorizing community arts and mechanisms of change: *What are the theories of change emergent from this work? a) In what ways do participants take up and explore concepts of change? b) How do the artworks express concepts of change? c) How might these articulations inform and/or problematize current theories of change?* The piece responds to calls for more plural and emergent theorizations of social change that are rooted in understandings of community arts as alternative modes of knowledge production. We discuss how *Making With Place* disrupts existing hierarchies and addresses dynamics of power and agency within discourses of

community arts evaluation, and processes of participatory action.

Authorship Statement

I am the lead author of this manuscript. I wrote the text and developed the articulations of the metaphors and change processes, drawing on the artworks, discussions with the artists, and my field notes and experiences. Phyllis Novak (second author) provided in-depth feedback, comments and edits.

Journal-zine article: On Issues of Equity and Scarcity in Community Arts

This article theorizes the margins as a place of embodied culture making through Ayrah Taerb's critical placings of hip hop and community arts practice. These ideas are presented alongside images and music from his *Making With Place* activation Indica; Omega. The piece illustrates how *Making With Place* can express and disrupt concepts and theories of change. Ayrah and I developed the text together via PAR dialogue and synthesis.

The dissertation concludes with a final chapter that reflects on and discusses the contributions this scholarship makes to discourses and practices of critical pedagogy, participatory research and constructions of impact and studying change. We hope you find meaning in these community arts readings of place, co-production and change, that work to re-centre underrepresented voices and realise mutual benefits of knowledge production.

submitted to [Action Research](#)

2. First Manuscript

Co-Production with Young Artists: Making With Place as (Re)Search

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Abstract: The community arts initiative *Making With Place* engages diverse young artmakers as artists-researchers to create community arts explorations and activations, and collectively make meaning from these experiences. This paper centers and reflects on the work and leadership of two of these artists. It tells the story of their creative engagements and journeys, to illustrate the project's broader processes and learnings. We discuss experiences of creative (re)search and artistic production, reflection and theorizing for relational becoming and collective care. *Making With Place* values and contributes to the deepening discourse on the praxis, tensions and epistemologies of co-production, by centering art as a process of exploration and expression through arts practice that is defined by the artists. We share our model and process in an effort to highlight emergent aspects of artistic research and inherent reflexivities for continuing conversations about equity, justice and new social relations.

Keywords: participatory action research, youth artists-researchers, community arts, co-production, co-theorizing



*I've been thinking
what happens when place is
something inside of us
during isolation there's been this time to
really be acquainted with ourselves
I was thinking about how hard that can be
for me it's like intrusive thoughts
coming in waves
spiraling thoughts*

*I decided that I wanted to do
an homage to intrusive thoughts
how can I make it so that I don't fear them?
thinking about these thoughts as coming
deep from inside of my brain
and settling there*

Image 2.1 Intrusive thoughts by Jess DeVitt (2020)

Places of (Re)Search

Making With Place engages diverse young people as artists-researchers to create community art activations and collectively make meaning from these experiences. Though we initially planned to explore notions of place through in person collaborative art practice in 2020, the project launched just as the first Covid-19 lockdowns were taking effect in Toronto, Canada. The pandemic forced us into virtual space. We began our explorations through creative sharing circles held via weekly Zoom sessions. We each brought the art that we were individually making to the group. Together, we discussed our work, creative processes, ideas and anxieties. At the time, place in the world felt suddenly and strangely strained and uncertain. In one impactful instance, artist-researcher Jess De Vitt shared an image she had been working on: it depicted a dandelion growing up and pushing through a brain (image 1). This visual metaphor

for intrusive thoughts that can come up unbidden, particularly during periods of social isolation, captures tensions of place that she experienced both internally and externally. In dialogue about the piece, Jess reflected on her personal history of migration from Mexico to Canada. Her creative explorations led her to investigate the story and origin of dandelions. She learned that dandelions were brought to North America by European settlers. She juxtaposed this knowledge with modern efforts to control dandelion growth, and lesser known or more Indigenous uses of dandelions as food and medicine. Jess' visceral work and reflective research prompted critical discussion amongst the wider group of co-researchers. It generated a collective exploration of concepts like invasiveness and the impacts of colonialism on identity.

A research and action initiative, *Making With Place* centers the perspectives of young artists who are Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Colour (QT/BIPOC). Our work is based on models of critical Participatory Action Research (PAR) that examine how social practices are produced and reproduced, relationally and historically, in order to understand, articulate and ultimately transform unjust narratives and structures (McTaggart et al, 2017). The growing interest in arts-based methods and practices as forms of research is frequently located within broader principles of participation and the democratization of knowledge production (Barrett & Bolt, 2019; Grierson & Bearley, 2009). Community-engaged arts approaches have been employed to address equity goals, cultivate dialogue and co-create with underrepresented groups (Cleveland, 2011; Novak, 2012). Such practices use cycles of production, reflection and action, informed by traditions of participatory research, to develop and draw meaning from arts-based activities and inquiries (Flicker et al, 2008; Freire, 1972). Embodied within this work is a deepening discourse on the praxis, tensions and epistemologies of co-production (Olesen & Nordentoft, 2018; Paylor & McKevitt, 2019). This article values and enters into this discussion,

offering *Making With Place* as a model and case study for exploring youth participatory arts as (re)search.

Who We Are, How We Come To This Work

Making With Place began with a group of eight diverse young artist-researchers affiliated with the community arts organization *SKETCH Working Arts*. From spring 2020 to fall 2021, this collective undertook participatory cycles of art and meaning making. This paper centers and reflects on the work and leadership of two of these artists, Jess and Ammarah. It tells the story of their creative engagement and illustrates the project's broader processes and learnings, while deeply acknowledging and celebrating the broader "we" of this collaborative work. Jess De Vitt (she/they) is a queer mixed (Mexican-Italian) visual artist working with her community through the arts. She offers instructional workshops for a range of mediums and techniques, both digitally and in person. Jess creates and facilitates socially engaged art to foster inclusive practices, accessibility and transformative justice. Ammarah Syed (she/they) is an interdisciplinary artist whose practice in arts-based wellness explores how modern-day discourses such as capitalism, colonialism, and various power dynamics have developed to inform the way we perceive mental health, identity, and sexuality. Ammarah explores how words, among other factors, influence emotion, culture, and politics. She strives to decolonize and deconstruct experiences of marginalization through wellness arts. As community artists and activists, Jess and Ammarah express their lives and the world around them through their creative practice.

Making With Place was convened and facilitated by two older White Canadian-born graduate students, Phyllis and Charlotte, who share a desire to engage in participatory, collaborative and action-oriented research. Charlotte Lombardo (she/her) began her journey in arts-based research with visual methods like Photovoice (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang &

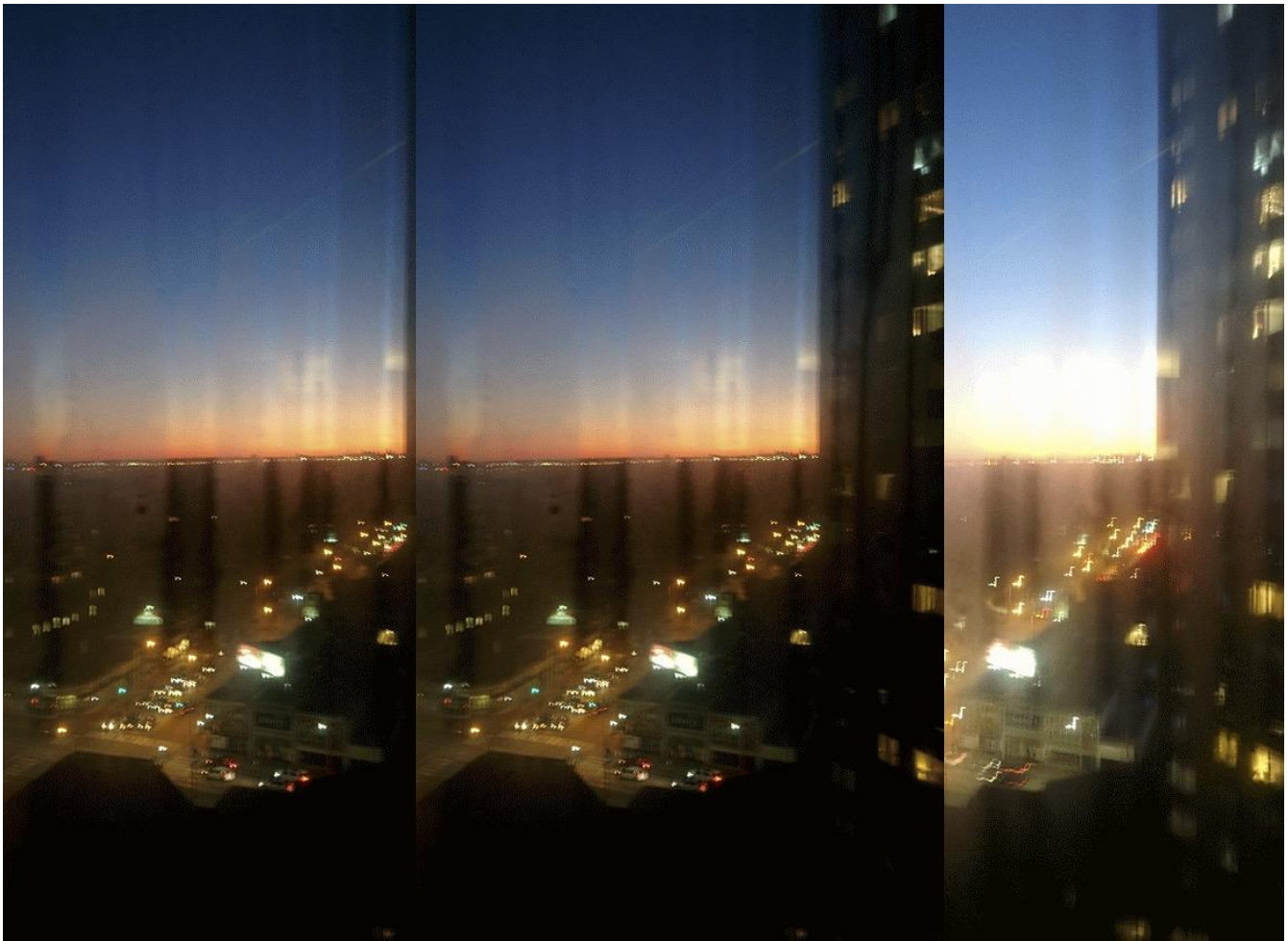
Burris, 1994). Through projects targeting specific topics such as health equity, environmental justice and peace-building, she engaged youth communities in participatory photography to represent and analyze their experiences for over a decade. Charlotte found that while these projects often produced insights and actionable results, they regularly fell short of their emancipatory aims. Too often, goals and outcomes remained informed, influenced, and sometimes constrained, by researcher and institutional priorities. Collaboration with Phyllis opened a fresh perspective, grounded in arts practice and artistic production. This approach provided space for creative exploration and new possibilities to emerge through praxis. Phyllis Novak (she/they) translated a successful theater arts practice into decades of community arts leadership as the founding artistic director of *SKETCH Working Arts*. This community organization provides arts opportunities for young people navigating inequity and precarity to actualize their radical culture-making leadership toward social change. Developed over many years of experimentation with community artists, the *SKETCH* model centers art and art-making as vibrant and person-affirming approaches for overcoming the constraints of poverty and oppression. *SKETCH* provides a unique space for investigating and illuminating creative community arts practice as a form of knowledge production. As participatory researchers and learners, Phyllis and Charlotte engage both as research facilitators and creative participants, bringing and building their own creative work and undertaking a co-practice of sharing and dialogue alongside youth artist-researchers. The “we” of this paper is consequently complex and tensional. It is a “we” of collective creative sharing and meaning making, with all four authors providing content and input to this manuscript. Nevertheless, the writing was largely spearheaded by Charlotte who led this paper as part of her doctoral dissertation and solicited feedback from the group on multiple drafts and iterations.

Our Research Questions and Frustrations

Making With Place seeks to co-research and co-produce in ways that center the experiences of young people living and leading community arts work. We emphasize this repositioning through the playful rewording (re)search, informed by teachings of Indigenous scholar Kathleen Absolon (2011) on responsibilities to issues of representation as a critical encounter in meaning making. We acknowledge and problematize a core tension of arts-based participatory research: the desire for process-oriented co-production within an academic context that prizes individual outputs and authorship. Too often, the voices of communities on the margins remain sidelined. Despite the increasing traction of ideals democratizing knowledge production, traditional knowledge hierarchies still dominate in academia and social policy (Flinders et al, 2016; Locock and Boaz, 2019). These pressures can lead to an instrumentalisation of arts-based methods. Projects often operate within preset ideas of issue and product, and risk becoming narrow, co-opted and depoliticized explorations of what Phillips et al. (2022) call “predefined problems.” This can lead to largely tokenistic outputs that reproduce existing knowledge hierarchies (Lenette, 2022). While approaches like participatory visual methods can sometimes be powerful and fruitful catalysts for social change, their “empowerment” goals are often formed, and limited, by researcher/institutional perspectives (Coemans et al., 2019; Evans-Agnew & Rosenberg, 2016; Hergenrather et al., 2009). This can result in situations where youth put forward “other” voices as opposed to their “own” (Komulainen, 2007; Valentine, 1999). For example, this might lead to young people articulating what they think adult researchers want to hear, or reproducing the narratives of others (Liebenberg et al, 2020; Spyrou, 2011). In Charlotte’s experience with Photovoice projects, topics and processes were largely mandated by funders and institutional structures. For example, projects often targeted “adult” priorities such as smoking cessation or

youth-friendly health services. Resultant work by young people embraced or reinforced dominant messaging such as anti-smoking or anti-drug narratives. With nuanced facilitation, more plural narratives can and do emerge that complicate stereotypes and oversimplifications. In general, however, while these “predefined” projects produce results that speak to important aspects of youth experience, they are not necessarily reflective of youth priorities and hence may not be as participatory or emancipatory as they purport or wish to be (Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Switzer, 2019).

By contrast, *Making With Place* centers community arts practice as knowledge production, and explicitly grapples with tensions associated with cultivating collaborative, creative processes and producing specific and tangible research results. We seek to authentically work with implicit power dynamics of academic research, organizational hierarchies and community leadership. We explore community arts practices as accessible, embodied and affective modes of knowing that can counteract the hegemony and linearity of traditional written texts, bring attention to processes of uncovering meaning, and offer new ways of perceiving and interpreting the world (Boydell et al, 2012b; Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). If arts-based research is to be more than a tool for the expression of largely preset problems, how do we make space for the necessary un-knowing? How do we move past what Ozner et al (2013) identify as “bounded empowerment”, towards a more critical arts-based participatory action research? We offer here a discussion of the opportunities and challenges involved in taking the time to deeply engage young artists as creative researchers and social actors, to create, reflect, analyze and co-theorize. We share how our process enriched both theoretical possibilities and artistic outputs, even while dancing a continuum steeped in power and privilege (Chavez et al, 2008; Turuba et al, 2022).



*the past couple of weeks have just generally been pretty rough for me
 so I've been taking a lot of pictures
 for grounding purposes
 and making a lot of animations
 this was the sunrise that I woke up for on a particular day
 when all the police brutality stuff started in the States
 I'm really scared for my activist community.
 the police put us in the enemy situation.
 the prison industrial complex is
 literally making money off of what is
 essentially modern slavery*

Image 2.2 Golden Hour by Ammarah Syed (2020)
 [stills captured from moving photography (GIF) image]

Creative Sharing and Meaning Making

Making With Place artist-researcher Ammarah Syed offered powerful insights for locating current place and space, taking us into her daily work context at an emergency isolation shelter for under-housed Covid-positive people. She presented us with photography and animated “gif” images of moving lights capturing Toronto on (her) journeys to and from work, sunrise to sunset (image 2 above). Drawing on her identification as a wellness artist, Ammarah used her art practice to help ground herself during the uncertainty of Covid and her confrontations with vulnerability and risk at the isolation shelter. Through her experience, we were reminded of the localized impacts of Covid-19 in further displacing already displaced peoples. She also reflected another core element of the time and place, the growing uprisings against anti-Black racism and police violence. Identifying herself as a person of color born in America, Ammarah viscerally experienced these events. This emotionality was strongly echoed by the wider artist-researcher group. It sharpened collective and individual resolve and prompted focus, urgency and purpose to our creative practices and potential collaborations.

Our dialogues generated rich sources of information and meaning, through sharing, response, critique and social learning (Skains, 2018). Creative prompts were deliberately open-ended and not explicitly defined. Instead Charlotte and Phyllis broadly opened the idea of place and then delved into notions and concepts this brought up for participants. We did not want this space to feel like a classroom or a didactic educational environment, where ideas may be preset or where certain definitions are positioned as particularly correct or desirable. Instead, we invited imagination. Each artist-researcher shared their creative explorations and responses to place, and the group reacted with impressions and feedback exploring impacts and meanings. The resulting artworks and dialogues, as exemplified by Jess’ dandelion visual art metaphor and

Ammarah's golden hour moving images, served as sources of aesthetic knowledge and embodied learning. They speak to materialist understandings of knowledge as being derived from doing and from the senses at the intersection of making and thinking (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015). As Manning describes (2009, p.3), "A body *is* not, it *does*. To sense is not simply to receive input - it is to invent." Through a co-practice of vulnerability and constructive critique, the artist-researchers drew on and collaboratively iterated their artworks to share evolving perspectives and constructions of themselves and the world around them, during an acute time of disruption and change.

The sharing circle dialogue sessions were audio recorded and transcribed, using talk to text software. These transcripts were then analyzed by the research facilitators Phyllis and Charlotte. This was accomplished through memoing and coding to identify core and repeated ideas speaking into the project's goals of exploring place, community and culture, and then classifying and synthesizing these codes into themes (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). Full transcripts were made available to all of the artist-researchers, however raw coding did not prove to be engaging or accessible to most. Interestingly, one of the artist researchers responded to the invitation to engage in coding with the remark, "didn't we already do that with our artwork?" What proved to be more successful, was when Phyllis and Charlotte prepared codebooks and code trees, which were presented to the artist-researchers as a group. Codebooks were presented as key quotes/excerpts of text assembled to identify and categorize common themes. Code trees were presented as more dynamic and artistic representations of these themes and their linkages/relationships to each other rendered in mindmaps (see figure 1).

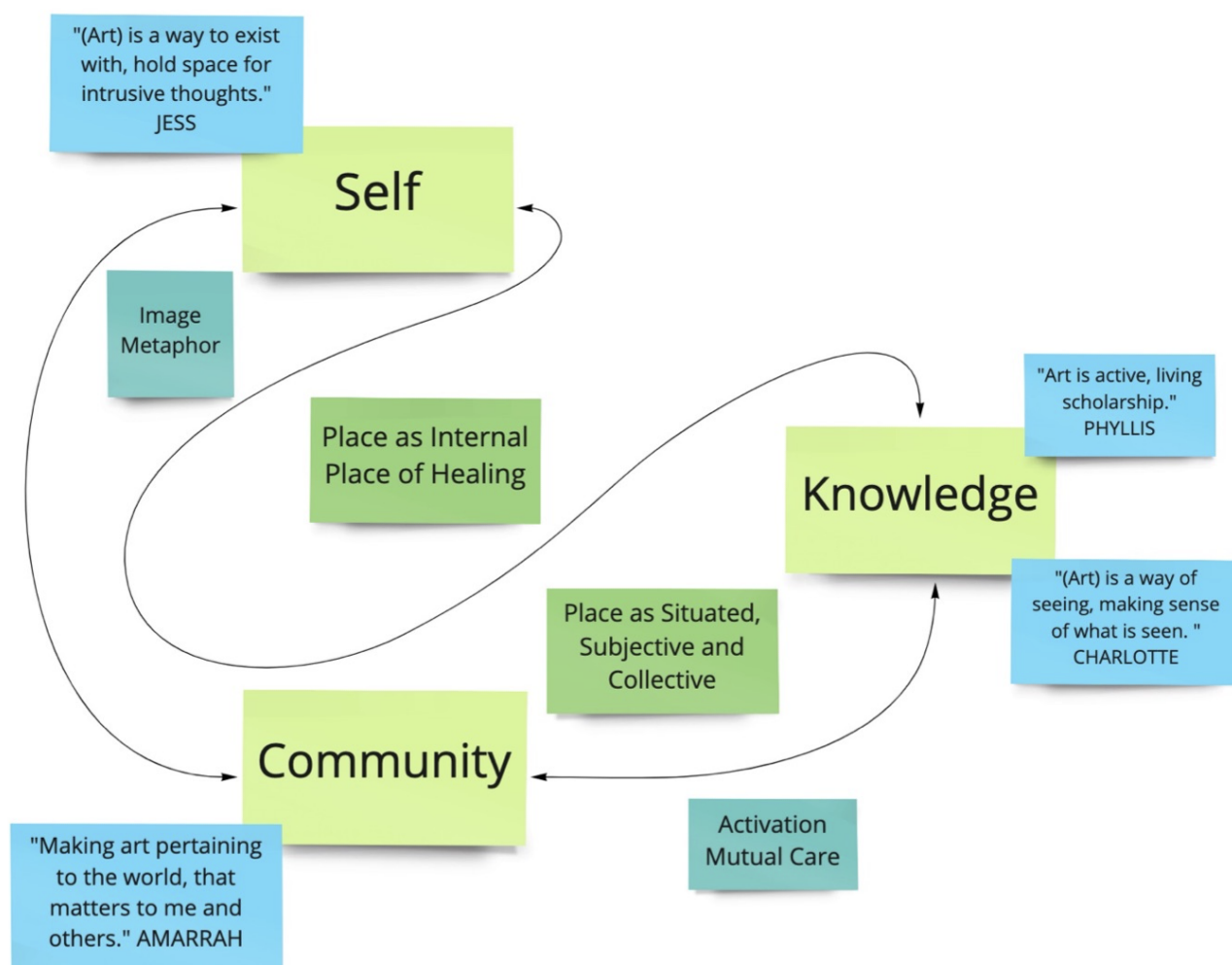


Figure 2.1 Except from Arts as (Re)search mind map on place

Through engagement with the code trees in particular, the group generated themes, interpretations and connections into how ideas of place showed up in their artworks, reflections and responses/critique. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the project's genesis during a time of isolation and solo practice, a core theme highlighted internal landscape as an identified place. Many of the sharing circle conversations illuminated artist-researchers' struggles with the pandemic's disproportionate adverse effects on those marginalized and racialized. This led to

discussions that bridged from self to community healing, with desires for collective action. Ammarah expressed how engagement with the sharing circles helped to link their personal experience and wellness practice. Jess found that the sharing dialogues offered her introspection and healing, in particular a space to grieve while building self awareness and connection to others. Arts as research may seemingly be outward-facing, seeking to offer knowledge to prompt social change. However the *Making With Place* experience highlights how this work first incorporates, perhaps springs from, each artist-researcher's relationship with self, affirming subjectivity as critical in arts-research and particularly so with research from the margins (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

Art Production and Activation

From these creative sharing and meaning making dialogues, *Making With Place* moved into a new and more production focused cycle of creative practice. As public spaces began to re-open with the relaxing of Covid-19 restrictions, artists-researchers were encouraged and supported to build from these discussions to create new emergent pieces that moved outward from notions of place as internal landscapes. One-on-one recorded conversations were held with each artist-researcher to help them explore and develop their creative process. These picked up on specific ideas that surfaced during the group dialogues. Resulting art activations were created and mounted in public spaces in downtown Toronto. This work represented personal explorations and group identifications of core themes driving the research.



*I don't think I'd make art if it wasn't for words
calligraphy has been my gateway into this work*

*this was a really enormous project for me
these are photos I've taken and words I have written
over the past six, seven years*

*it throws a bunch of causes at you
it throws a bunch of awareness at you
like, how can I be the most active with this platform*

**Image 2.3. Excerpt from [Grounding and Activating](#)
[Collage and poetry installation] (Syed, 2020)**

Building off of her grounding visual work created during the height of the lockdowns, Ammarah combined photography and calligraphy to create iconography that centered and inspired her, and hoped it would similarly speak to and motivate others. The resulting piece *Grounding and Activating* is a large scale photo and text collage in two distinct panels. The *Grounding* collage intends to anchor the viewer with words and images that offer a sense of healing and wellness. Empowering quotes and poetic statements written in beautiful black on

white calligraphy pull the reader in while colorful photos lead the eyes through nurturing images of landscapes, sunsets, water (see image 3 above). The *Activating* collage presents a photo archive of Ammarah's past and current involvement with activism and social movements. It creates a contrasting energy to catalyze learning and motivation. Quotes and images of social action invite the viewer to get involved, and offer direct links to organizations and websites to connect with for making change. Both *Grounding and Activating* panels are energizing in different ways. They are infused with Ammarah's attention to light, shadow and movement. The piece was installed at The Bentway, an area under a large highway in downtown Toronto which has been redesigned as a public park and cultural space. Ammarah worked with the geometric lines of the underbelly of the expressway, installing her work under the large pillars (bents) holding up the highway. Her colorful, detailed piece suspended beneath the giant highway structure drew the viewer in to create a sense of personal, reflective space within this expansive environment. The work invited spectators to come closer and move into its many stories. The artist-researcher team highlighted the effect of engaging with the work in urban space, the calligraphy providing "dancer-type movement" amidst the noise of the highway. In an interesting contrast, the work was also installed underground at a Toronto subway station (in partnership with VIBEarts). Here the artist-researcher team commented on this effective placement for pulling in people commuting through the station, like a "powerful piece of photojournalism".

Similarly motivated from introspection towards expression and social action, Jess began to research mutual aid and collective care. Inspired by Black and Indigenous-led initiatives, she embarked on a community recipe 'zine project. The resulting creative production is *Cooking for Community*, a "do it yourself" (diy) magazine or 'zine that supports and contributes to food security by providing colorful, visually appealing low cost and nutritious recipes with ingredients

and guidelines in accessible language alongside helpful, illustrative visuals, and broader teachings on collective care and food access. Exemplifying commitment to the collective and the power of collaboration, Jess compelled fellow artist-researchers to contribute artful content to help animate the resource. Ammarah offered several image-based works, including a panel from her activating collage with an image of food abundance overlaid with her calligraphy text “collective care and mutual aid”; one of multiple team contributions that resulted in a collaborative visual product (see image 4). Flowing from *Grounding and Activating* and *Cooking for Community* are expressions of collective healing and community solidarity. Jess and Ammarah both quickly moved from an exploration of self to a desire for connection and care of others. (Re)search emerged as a process of making meaning from knowledge of self to care and healing for community. As Jess puts it: “Care extends far beyond the perimeters systems of wealth have dictated and reinforced. I want to choose care that is embedded into the art I make, the food I eat.”



Image 2.4 Excerpt from [*Cooking for Community*](#) [Curated recipe-zine] (DeVitt, 2021)

left image from Fruit Salad by Pree Rehal

right image from Huda Urban Garden Project by Ammarah Syed

Reflection and Theorizing

Drawing on the generative creative dialogues which continued in art productions, *Making With Place* artist-researchers journeyed further into co-theorizing and co-writing. The group expressed strong interest in authorship and recognition for their work and ideas. Nevertheless, most were understandably distanced from, and disinterested in, traditional academic outputs. Instead, several members wanted to create an online platform, based on blogs, online diy journals and zine processes. They expressed that these alternative authorship models felt more accessible to disenfranchised groups. Consequently, the team co-created and curated its own multimedia vehicle for dissemination, reflection and discourse. The MWP online journal-zine, www.makingwithplace.ca, assembles a growing series of feature articles and blog style pieces showcasing the artworks, and theorizing into objectives, representations and impacts of the work. We approached this journal-zine authoring as a new cycle of meaning making, from discussion and action into written theory. We undertook a collaborative writing approach utilizing open-ended qualitative interview discussions, reflecting on and theorizing into the content of the artworks. These discussions were held as a one-on-one dialogue between a research-facilitator and artist-researcher. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed, using talk-to-text software. The transcript was then reviewed by the research-facilitator, who pulled out and synthesized key arguments in the analysis. The resulting draft piece was then explored, edited and finalized with the artist-researcher.

Drawing on this co-writing process, Jess convened a dialogue exploring concepts and strategies of mutual aid with fellow community leaders, Antonia Lawrence from *Uplift Kitchen* and Quinatzin Aguilar from *SKETCH Working Arts* in Toronto. She also collaborated with her friend and co-conspirator Erik Molina, who is part of the trans liberation movement in Mexico

City, and who is connected to *Manos Amigues* a food security arts and ballroom hub for queer, trans and gender-dissident communities. The resulting piece *The Abundance in Each Other*, explores and expresses conceptualizations of mutual aid, support and solidarity emergent from these dialogues.

*we celebrate our daily practices around community care, food and collaboration
connecting ideas, recipes and experiences
from a multiplicity of contexts and territories
we disown colonial language and ideologies that have been imposed onto us
and recognize the autonomy of Black and Indigenous peoples
their territories and common goods
and the agency of all marginalized people and the communities they have built*

The Abundance in Each Other (DeVitt et al, forthcoming) was created as a second and larger volume of the *Cooking for Community* (DeVitt, 2021) zine. It features interviews with Jess' community collaborators on their initiatives, alongside healthy and affordable recipes, and collaboration opportunities. This new iteration continues Jess' journey into theorizing and enacting mutual aid and collective care, picking back up on the initial dandelion metaphor that helped catalyze this creative journey, to explore narratives of scarcity and abundance.

*we aim to subvert the myth of scarcity in the systems around us
challenging capitalist notions that we and the resources around us aren't enough
and by doing so, to transform ourselves and the relationships we have with each other
we take inspiration from urban plants (weeds and herbs), considered pests, but with
immense health properties, making teas and food of what is around us*

A similar dialogic approach with Ammarah built upon her wellness community artworks to tap into her experiences with trauma and healing. The resulting journal zine piece *On Fragmentation and Coming Into Coherence* (Syed & Lombardo, 2022), explores principles of somatics, dropping into the body. Presented alongside Ammarah's moving gif photography, the

texts and images express tenderness and mood without resolution, as fragments searching for coherence.

*there's a phenomenon that happens when trauma happens
called fragmentation
where your perception of yourself and the world around you
just kind of actively shatters
this deeply affects how you make sense of yourself
how you make sense of the world
how you make sense of yourself in the world
coming into coherence is recognizing this
dropping into your body
making room to actually touch
into that thing that was traumatizing*

Ammarah discusses and theorizes into a community level understanding of fragmentation, applying these concepts to systems of power and inequity. Weaving this together, she makes a beautiful case for addressing these understandings at the community level as a coming into coherence for community, for placemaking.

*fragmentation also applies to community, it applies where harm happens
it applies to systems of power, everything is interconnected
fragmentation is happening at an individual level, but also at the community level
that feeds back to the individual level
and that's where systems of inequity come from, and perpetuate themselves
maybe we are trying to come into coherence by trying to understand
to go back to those places where fragmentation has happened
this feels important for making with place
we don't honor that emotional space enough
it's a political space, it's an identity space
but it's also a deeply emotional place, an embodied place*

Co-Production and Relational Becoming

From image to arts production, Jess and Ammarah reveal their personal and communal understandings of place. As Philips et al. (2022) contend, the self is multi-voiced. In relational artworks and creative explorations with fellow artist-researchers and other collaborators, Jess and Ammarah invoke and build on situated, hybrid knowledge, opening space for the voices of others. Jess' dandelion brain provokes critical thought and discussion on how natural, cultural and internal landscapes evolve. Ammarah's photo and text collages and animated images ground and activate: they inspire and connect to diverse experiences of trauma, for healing, strength and movement. Both artists build on these works to inform and infuse concrete aspects of community practice, and engage others in community building. The work invites us into the affective and aesthetic dimensions of knowledge production. The artists use both emotion and cognition to provide a multilayered, embodied analysis (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). Co-production is expressed as an emergent practice of mutual learning that builds on personal relationships of collective care (Groot et al, 2019). In their commitment to these processes, the artists honor principles of relational ethics and provide a strong foundation for dialogic learning across difference (Nicholas et al, 2019; Phillips et al, 2021).

A critical relationality is also both evident and problematized in the co-writing processes with the young artists. In the production of the journal-zine articles with Jess and Ammarah, tensions of voice are inherent and even productive. These journal-zine articles were produced through recorded dialogue between the young artists and Charlotte as research-facilitator. The raw transcripts of this dialogue were then edited and formatted by Charlotte who pulled out and assembled pieces that fit together to form a coherent narrative that reflected the discussion and themes/desires for communication. These edited drafts were then reviewed by each artist to

ensure the process had properly captured their voice and communicative desires. This approach was a deliberate choice to provide the kind of academic editing and writing support that Charlotte herself enjoys from her research advisors. Alternatives were considered, in particular an interview style transcript that would communicate more verbatim questions and answers. It was decided with the artist-researchers that this format would be less readable or appealing to an online 'zine audience, and more complicated to integrate into a creative output format. Both Jess and Ammarah's journal-zine articles, which can be seen as pieces of culminating theory speaking back/into their artworks and productions, are presented alongside their creative outputs. There is of course tension in these edits and translations. All writing and editing is an act of interpretation. In doing so the writer/editor is inevitably distancing the subject (Said, 2003) and bringing their own "iconoclastic baggage" (Kelly, 2003). In our case, Charlotte tended to write in a more formal or "academic" writing style - partly out of habit and partly as a strategy for claiming professional legitimacy for the work. This choice sometimes clashed with the desire to publish in a journal-zine that both adopts and resists traditional notions of academic publication (Burkholder et al, 2021). Finding the right balance in tone and approach took some careful calibrations.

The relationality of co-production also crucially and problematically extends to the tensional power dynamics of participatory research; in particular issues of authorship, representation and impact (Boydell et al, 2012a). While the young artist-researchers are compensated monetarily, they remain in positions of precarity. This is something that was felt acutely and uncomfortably by the older artist-facilitators, and voiced directly by the young artists themselves. This echoed Felner (2020)'s aptly titled reflection "you get a PhD and we get a few hundred bucks". Participatory research is indeed a dance steeped in power, and there have been

many stumbles and missteps throughout our work. Ammarah importantly challenged, bravely and graciously, acute moments of falter: notably the fact that in key project communications the young-artist researchers were explicitly located through naming of their social positionalities, while the research-facilitators were not. We have attempted to better address this in the writing and authorship of this paper. Jess challenged the inherent “charity model” at play within this project, and the larger systems of community arts practice and community-based research. These are typically structured to offer time-limited opportunities for people from “marginalized” groups, as opposed to long-term growth opportunities addressing root causes of inequity. This critical reflection has informed continued directions for *Making With Place*, which include speaking and advocating back to the local bodies and systems that determine community arts and participatory research funding and structures. Felner (2020) calls into such spaces of tension concepts of critical participatory action research, which understand research as one part of larger multifaceted struggles for justice and transformation. In addition to formal research outputs, we continue to work at the multiple avenues and intersections of community and social change. To engage arts as (re)search is to recognize access to modes of cultural expression and production as social and political processes that shape our identities and human relations. And the consequential right and need for displaced communities to participate in meaning making through the languages of art (Ford-Smith, 2001). In order for this to happen, it is necessary to engage in relational dialogue, both with the work being created, and by inviting others in to enact this meaning in continuing, unfolding ways.

Jess and Ammarah’s artist-research journeys are guides for engaging such intersections of change. Their work speaks to Barrett’s (2007 p. 2) reflections that “the innovative potential of practice-led research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge and new ways

of modeling and externalizing such knowledge while at the same time, revealing philosophical, social and cultural contexts for intervention and application of knowledge outcomes.” Jess and Ammarah each bring situated knowledges, from underrepresented and marginal spaces, to the realization of artworks and art practices, as demonstrations of intervention and application of knowledge. They recenter these perspectives as creative resistances towards personal and communal change. Both artists continue to grow their practices and contribute to community change work. Jess engages collective care in community arts spaces, including a new program of action at *SKETCH Working Arts* focused on teaching cooking and food handling skills alongside principles of food security and mutual aid. Ammarah explores wellness in/through community arts as part of her frontline work, artist residencies and workshops exploring movement and healing.

Arts-Centered Process

Making With Place centers art as a process of exploration and expression through practice that is defined by the artists. Here art is not a tool, but rather a process for exploring meanings, or as James Baldwin (1985) asserts, for “laying bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers”. *Making With Place* is enacted through iterative, nonlinear and generative participatory research cycles of: i. creative sharing and meaning making through artistic and narrative activities exploring expressions of place; ii. art production and activation through design and development of art outreach experiments; and iii. reflection and theorizing through discussion, analysis, theory building and knowledge mobilization (see figure 2). Jess and Ammarah’s journeys exemplify this process, from visual and personal practice informed by sharing and dialogic critique, to community art activation with a focus on social engagement and collective care, to reflecting from and through these experiences into theoretical articulations challenging

dichotomies of scarcity/abundance, and linking experiences of individual and community trauma and resilience. It should be acknowledged that each of the other *Making With Place* artist-researchers followed similar cycles, through variations across disciplines of sound and music making, video and digital media arts, and traditional Anishinaabe hand-crafting. As a group, they moved from personal practice to collective production in physical and virtual spaces.

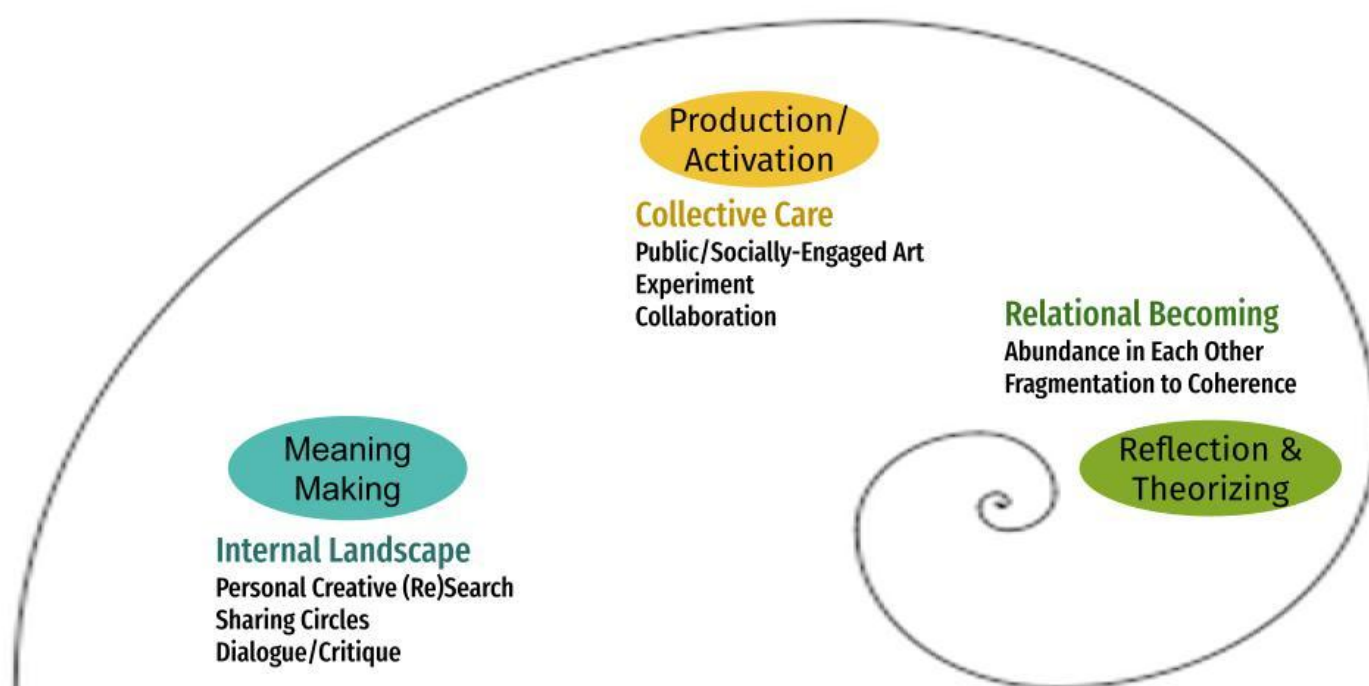


Figure 2.2 *Making With Place Arts (Re)Search Model*

In locating arts-based research, Greenwood (2012) pulls back to name the long history of research within traditions of art making. Artists have always experimented with techniques, forms, representations etc. Working with broadly defined creative prompts of place, each *Making With Place* young artist-researcher identified their own artistic mediums and creative directions, and artist-facilitators sought to locate the shape of the inquiry within these processes and

uncoverings. This process revealed collaboration with place as an emergent paradigm of “following the art” in deep listening and dialogue with arts forms and arts practice.

Artist-researchers moved from a place of internal meaning and solo practice, to sharing work with others for collective interpretation and placing, into ideas of production and activation as spheres of relationality and collective care. The process also displayed a continued folding back into practice and then expanding back outwards, a following of the art that does not cease. This required a significant degree of openness and flexibility. We intentionally planned for the unexpected, and trusted in the aesthetic as a form of knowledge. Jess’ explorations with visual metaphor were an aesthetic opening within which she and the group were able to tap into and locate place as an internal landscape, connecting the personal to the universal. Ammarah used aesthetics of photography, calligraphy and poetry to express and process emotion and resilience, connecting her own stories to shared human experiences of trauma and injustice. Greenwood (2012) theorizes “aesthetic layers of interpretation”, positing that it is not always possible, or desirable, to separate cognitive findings from less defined aesthetic knowings. Allowing for the arts process to reveal its magic, rather than being too deeply committed to an overly prescribed search for meaning, produced a deeper level of analysis that crystallized meaning making. This led to a synthesis that we could unpack, play with, and use (Greenwood, 2012). In Jess’ work, for example, this process of “following the art” opened layers of interpretation which moved from aesthetic metaphor to a creative zine on food security and collective care, representing both arts-based research outputs and iterative cycles of collaborative artistic production.

Centering process also uncovered insight into the ways in which analysis is deeply and cyclically integrated throughout arts-based participatory research. The *Making With Place*

experience echoes, as Cahill (2007) describes, how analysis can propel the participatory cycle forward at each turn in the research process. By moving into meaning making after the initial creative sharing circles, we were able to crystallize ideas that helped to clearly ground and propel the resulting arts-based activations, and these arts productions then, in turn, informed deeper levels of analysis and meaning that emerged from and through stages of co-theorizing and co-writing. At the same time, analysis was revealed to be non-linear and shifting back and forth between stages. Processes of production and analysis, co-writing and meaning making were in practice coincidental, as opposed to sequential. We moved fluidly from reflection into art making and back to reflection throughout creative sharing and arts production cycles. These experiences highlight the power of participatory analysis for allowing a spiraling out to interpret broad social meanings, and then a zooming back up close to explore how these resonate, or not, with personal experience (Cahill, 2007).

The model of practice employed by the lead community organization *SKETCH* also deeply informed how we centered the process. At the time of this project, *SKETCH* had over twenty-three years of experience leading anti-oppressive community arts approaches. Their deep commitment to honoring individual voice and experience manifests in an embrace of flexible timelines and creative drifts within project sessions and cycles. As well, the project's inception during the time of Covid also led to an elongation of timelines and a focus "on the now" within project processes. While Covid presented a significant challenge to community work and public art making, the ways in which the pandemic seemed to stop time for everyone became an opportunity to tap into experimental creative practice and learnings. Longer timelines also meant that we were able to apply for and receive additional funding from Canada's lead social sciences granting agency, a testament to the value of the project's community expertise and research team,

and a significant source of support for the young artists during an acute time of challenge. Extended timelines and a unique ability to “go with” and follow processes allowed for a continued unfolding of outcome stories: Jess’ journey from creatively informing the project’s initial sharing circles, to co-creating deeply impactful community programming, to engaging collaborators in sense making; Ammarah’s growth from artfully documenting lock-down as a frontline worker, to realizing a fully articulated public art production, to authoring trauma-informed theorizing. *Making With Place* opens insight into ways in which tensional creative processes can be both emergent and open-ended, structured and purposive, especially if projects can make space for a core tension, the relinquishment of full control (Phillips et al, 2022).

Jess and Ammarah’s creative work and journeys illustrate how *Making With Place* centers art as research, not just as a tool for gathering information about perspectives, but as a deeply engaged practice and process of art-making for social change. We offer our work as reflective discovery into arts processes as rooted in collaboration with materialities and positionalities of self and place. *Making With Place* uncovers such relationalities from self to community. We invite consideration into the dynamic that shifts when prioritizing creative process and discovery, and what might be lost in overly instrumentalized arts-based approaches that can move too quickly towards wrapping up and conclusivity. We suggest that in any arts-based process the work continues beyond the research outputs. Even in the absence of ongoing creative practice, it continues as witness, it inspires more storytelling. There is an iterative energy about working in artistic practice that does not end at a static piece of art or moment of production. Following this process can unfold deeper layers of participatory and social practice, as a kind of embedded, situated call to action (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Making space for the unpredictable, for

the serendipitous, encourages community artists to gain strength and agency (Skains, 2018). This relinquishment of full control can allow for moving with risk as a generative nourishing force, towards the prompting forward of co-creating together.

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3. Journal-zine feature

On Fragmentation and Coming into Coherence

by Ammarah Syed and Charlotte Lombardo

Ammarah Syed is a wellness artist, photographer and community worker, interested in documenting how modern day discourses inform mental health, identity and sexuality. Below is an excerpt from our *Making With Place* dialogue on principles of somatics, wellness arts, and individual and community healing. It is featured alongside Ammarah's photography and graphic moving images (GIF) artworks. The images express tenderness, mood, movement. They are a heartbeat seeking mindfulness. They are fragments searching for coherence.

To see the full, animated, piece visit our journal-zine at:

<https://www.makingwithplace.ca/2022/01/28/fragmentation-and-coming-into-coherence/>

On Fragmentation and Coming into Coherence

AMARRAH SYED AND 5: 3D>AFF7 >A? 43D6A
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMARRAH SYED



There's a phenomenon that happens when trauma happens, called fragmentation. Where your world concept, your perception of yourself and the perception of the world around you, just kind of actively shatters.

After trauma, you are trying to constantly engage your surroundings, just to make sure you are safe. This deeply affects your understanding of the world around you. How you make sense of yourself, how you make sense of the world, how you make sense of yourself in the world.

Coming into coherence is recognizing this, dropping into your body

And then maybe feeling overwhelmed, and then leaving, but then dropping back in again. Continuing this journey, not always consciously. Listening to your body, actually dropping into your body, and asking what it is saying here. Making room to actually touch into that thing that was traumatizing. So you touch in. And then you touch out.

Some or all of this process may be unconscious. It originates in what we call the primal brain. The parts that developed long before humans did.



And what is happening, as you touch in and you touch out, is grounding.

With people who have experienced much trauma, it really has them believe on a physiological level that it's not safe in their bodies.

And so the whole idea of somatics is, how do we create enough safety, enough grounding, that touching in eventually leads us to a place we can work with? We can actually talk about it. To try to make sense of whatever is happening.

A lot of the world is dissociated. Western society really benefits from us being separate, walking heads, without our body. Disconnected. As our society has revolutionized, bringing us new technologies and innovations, our mental health has gotten worse and worse.



Grow, Grow, Grow. Progress,
Progress, Progress. Eurocentric
capitalist viewpoints. Who is this
society betterment for?

Is there a fragmentation of community? Is there a coming into coherence that's necessary for community, for place making?

Fragmentation applies to community, it applies where harm happens. It applies to systems of power, everything is interconnected.

Fragmentation is happening at an individual level, but also at the community level, that feeds back to the individual level. And that's where systems of inequity come from, and perpetuate themselves.



Coming into coherence may be coming to terms with the things you don't like about your own fragmentation. Identifying and decoding personal experiences of oppression. Honestly confronting privilege. The things we resist, and yet still reenact, or rely on, because we don't know how else to operate in the world. And that all feels incoherent.

Grappling with settler colonial histories. Many people will argue, "well I wasn't there", "I am not responsible for this, but I do want to do something to make it better". But that's not feeling it, that's staying in your head, that's rationalizing, that's "it's not my fault".

So the question, the approach,
would be "How might it feel to
drop into my body?"



Healing doesn't happen in a vacuum, healing happens in community.

Maybe we are trying to come into coherence in community. This feels important for making with place. For providing emotional space for equity work. Because we don't honor that emotional space enough. It's a political space, it's an identity space, but it's also a deeply emotional place, an embodied place.

Art-making is a search for coherence. Your art is really an extension of who you are, if you're not grounded in yourself, if you don't see yourself, you're not going to see your art.



Healing is the solidarity



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4. Second Manuscript

Making With Place: Youth Public Art Experiments

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Charlotte Lombardo is a community-engaged scholar, educator, and facilitator with core interests and experiences in youth engagement, community arts, participatory action, and health promotion. She is currently a PhD candidate. This manuscript was prepared as part of her doctoral dissertation.

Phyllis Novak (aka Nowakowski) is an artist-researcher and educator, and the founding artistic director of SKETCH Working Arts. Her work centres culture-making as a primary way to build equitable and vibrant communities, and social change, which is the focus of her current doctoral studies.

Sarah Flicker is the York Research Chair in Community-Based Participatory Research. She is a widely recognized expert in participatory and community-engaged research, working collaboratively with communities on equity-oriented agendas. Her research has informed policy at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Her teams have won a number of awards for youth engagement in research.

Making With Place is a collective of diverse artists engaged in public art and placemaking experiments with SKETCH Working Arts. This article discusses works by T. J. Banate, Jess DeVitt (aka DeVittoris, Em Dial, Nigel Edwards, Lilah Hillman, Jasbina Justice, Maddie Lycheck, Zephyr McKenna, Susie Mensah, Jahmal Nugent, Billy Parrell, Lisa Petrunia, Destiny Pitters, Pogi (the Artist, Emmet Reed (aka Emmerson Outlaw, Pree Rehal, Amelia R-N, Ty Sloan, Ammarah Syed, Ayrah Taerb, Olympia Trypis, Ry King, and Bert Whitecrow. The projects were realised with creative leads Sue Cohen, Lisa Myers and Naty Tremblay.

Abstract: Making With Place explores expressions and desires of queer, Indigenous, and racialized young artists on place, community, and culture. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (from spring 2020 to fall 2021) community-based researchers engaged in participatory arts processes with young artists, culminating in public art installations theorizing evolving inquiries and ideas into place. In this paper, we showcase six artworks to exemplify three conceptions of place that emerged from this collective work: (a) place holds histories; (b) place is relational; and (c) place as a verb. We consider how learnings from this project can help to more equitably reclaim public space through (remapping and (revisioning as living processes of placemaking. Community arts, in public space, can inform how we create, investigate, and make place through the arts. Who does this inviting, and who is ultimately assembled, is of vital importance. Place is where we encounter each other.

Keywords: community arts; artist-researcher; young people; place; public art

How do diverse young people express and create place and community? How might public arts projects amplify and re-centre their voices? What is the role of real and imagined space? In this article, we take up these questions to theorize place through a case study of six artworks created by youth artist-researchers as part of the Making With Place project. We write here as doctoral students who facilitated this process as part of our graduate training, alongside one of our research mentors and supervisors, and the collective of young people involved. We begin by acknowledging and celebrating the complicated *we* of this collaborative work.

Community Arts and Making With Place

Community arts can be defined as artistic activity characterised by dialogue and co-creation (Novak, 2012). Such socially-engaged arts are increasingly exploring and theorizing spaces, places, and landscapes as culturally constructed and contested (Badham, 2010; Helguera, 2011; Rose, 1997). Community arts, in public space, can inform how we create, investigate, and make place through the arts (Bourgault, 2022; Liodaki & Velegrakis, 2020; Loveless, 2019). Place and space are closely-related, intertwined ideas (Carter et al, 1993). Space is a material experience of the world, and a way of organising that world. To be alive is to move through and occupy spaces; “where there is space there is being” (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 22).

As spaces become imbued with social meaning, they take on connotations of place (Larsen & Johnson, 2013). Foundational theorist Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) posited that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with values” (p. 6). Spaces are generally demarcated in some way, such as physically through geographic boundaries, or conceptually in ideas like “open space.” By contrast, places are often bounded more abstractly through meaning, as in “sense of place” or what Tuan (1977) called “centres of felt value” (p. 4).

Making With Place engaged young artists identifying with lived experiences of systemic inequity (including homelessness, forced precarity, and the navigation of associated oppressions and repressions) to artfully explore these relationships. From spring 2020 to fall 2021, Phyllis Novak and Charlotte Lombardo led a participatory research process with QT/BIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Colour) young people as artist-researchers. Through artistic practice and production experiments, youth explored the complexities of place from both individual and collective perspectives.

This work transpired during the global shifts in personal and public space mandated by public health orders to contain COVID-19. These changes were felt acutely by all, but differentially impacted vulnerable peoples navigating marginality and precarity. Social services were closed, shelters became even more crowded and dangerous, parks were increasingly policed, and surveillance limited access to public space. This time also coincided with a period of growing attention, awareness, and organising to address anti-Black racism. *Making With Place* began with a virtually mediated creative practice space and culminated in a series of public art installations. Youth collectively and creatively responded to their personal experiences during a time of significant public and social upheaval: space and bodies became even more regulated, particularly for people for whom ideas about place were already problematic, insecure, and contested.

Location and context

Making With Place took place in Toronto, Ontario, Canada's largest urban centre. It is considered by many to be among the most multicultural cities in the world (Galanakis, 2013). Toronto is characterised by its diversity, economic engine, and growing inequality (Hulchanski, 2007). The city is also located on the treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the

Credit and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, the Métis, and many other Indigenous nations. Tkaronto, (the place in the water where the trees are standing), remains home to many diverse Indigenous Peoples. Today many are actively and increasingly naming, resisting, and reclaiming histories of colonial violence and erasure.

The majority of the *Making With Place* projects were produced in partnership with The Bentway¹, a formal public space created several years ago under a highway in the downtown core. The Bentway is a two-kilometre park-like space under the Gardiner Expressway, which offers year-round cultural programming, activities, and events. This place is a relevant and interesting animation site for our community arts projects given current and historical realities of similar spaces being utilised by people as places for living rough, tent cities, co-housing, and community building². *Making With Place* sought to explore and activate The Bentway space with an awareness of the tensions the space may represent, and questions about who is currently being engaged there. This work was undertaken in core partnership with The Bentway Conservancy, the group that maintains, operates, and programs the site. The Conservancy both identified a gap and expressed an interest in programming that featured/engaged voices of under-represented youth.

ReSearching Place: Methods and Processes

How we do our research is inextricably linked to how we see the world. Experiences constructing social reality differ between those who benefit from the status quo and those who do not (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). *Making With Place* draws on participatory and arts-based research traditions and approaches. We centre the knowledge and expertise of diverse youth creatives engaged as artist-researchers. Participatory Action Research (PAR)

is an approach to research that favours participant empowerment, and voice with the intention to catalyse transformational action (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). Arts-based approaches can be powerful tools for participatory research. Art and art-making can function as: modes of participatory inquiry, engaging people in eliciting evidence about their lives and experiences, modes of representation and production in the co-creation of knowledge, and modes of dissemination for knowledge communication, education, and translation (Mitchell & Sommer, 2016). Creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal, and subjective concerns which operate not only based on explicit and exact knowledge, but also on tacit knowledge (Barrett & Bolt, 2019). This subjective approach to research can help bring into view particularities that reflect new social realities, and that are not yet recognized in normalised discourses.

Making With Place began virtually in spring 2020 amidst the first COVID-19 lockdowns. Eight young artist-researchers were invited through a community arts organisation to join two graduate students in a participatory arts-based exploration into place. During this time of physical isolation, the group engaged in individual creative practice, which they shared and developed collaboratively through online platforms, in particular through synchronous sessions held using the Zoom platform, and asynchronously via images shared on Instagram. With some loosening of restrictions in Toronto in summer 2020, the project team was able to explore and experiment in-person in-place with a suite of time-limited and socially distanced public art activations. Learning from these experiences informed a second *Making With Place* phase that took place from spring to fall 2021. Featuring leadership by six of the initial eight youth artist-researchers, with engagement of

additional artist collaborators, this second phase culminated, with further loosening of restrictions, in a series of more fulsome and audience-engaged public art activations.

Participatory Action Research Cycles

PAR emphasises the use of Freirean generative dialogue to uncover root causes of problems, explore new ways of re-learning and representing contemporary and traditional knowledge, and identify collective actions that people can take (Freire, 1970; McTaggart et al., 2017. *Making With Place* was undertaken through iterative and generative PAR cycles of:

1. *Creative sharing and meaning making.* Place-based artistic and narrative explorations of project themes were undertaken through sharing circles, where the artists brought forth and discussed their artwork and processes in progress. These circles became spaces of storytelling where personal concepts of place were expressed by each artist through their work. They also sparked creative critique and dialogue on place, deepening our collective learning, and furthering the development of solo and collaborative arts practices.

2. *Place-based production and activation.* Drawing from the creative outputs and discussions, the artists engaged in the design and development of multidisciplinary art outreach productions. The intent of these productions was to build on and express surfaced ideas of place, and respond to and activate notions of reclaiming space through public art.

3. *Reflection and theorizing.* Throughout, the group engaged in reflection and participatory data analysis to capture and deepen meaning-making, and to explore theory building and knowledge mobilisation. Themes and findings emerging from this analysis

formed a knowledge framework that continually informed as it was informed by new project cycles.

The project cycles were facilitated by two white, cis-gendered female graduate students, identifying as queer (Phyllis) and heterosexual (Charlotte). Each engaged not just as facilitators, but also as creative participants, bringing their own artwork regularly to the project sharing circles. The research facilitators engaged in a co-practice of vulnerability, critique, and constructive dialogue with the younger artists, enacting a commitment to learn with and from young people. This participatory engagement sought to counterbalance the positional power held as project directors and graduate students, in an attempt, as Adelstein (2018) asserts, “to redistribute this power and to acknowledge the common humanity that transcends us all” (p. 2).

Making With Place processes and outcomes were documented using qualitative and participatory research methods. Research protocols and informed consent processes were applied and discussed at the outset of the work, and revisited throughout the project stages (research ethics protocols #2020-048 and #2021-201). Youth artist-researchers and research facilitators engaged in open-ended group discussions held approximately weekly throughout the project’s first phase and monthly throughout the second phase. One-on-one interviews also took place with youth artist-researchers at key moments in their creative process. These discussions explored place-oriented perceptions, expressions, and learning emerging from the experiential doing of the creative sharing and production cycles. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed using talk to text software. Auto-generated transcripts were cleaned for accuracy and then reviewed by the research facilitators. They were qualitatively analysed, drawing from Creswell and Poth (2017), through memoing and coding,

classifying codes into themes, and developing and assessing interpretations. The resulting codes and themes were then explored with the youth artist-researchers for review, agreement or challenge, and additions, refinements, or integration of new understandings (Flicker & Nixon, 2015). These sessions also centred dialogue, critique, and content analysis of the project's creative outputs, artworks, and place-based activations (Skains, 2018).

In this article, we present *Making With Place* findings on place as expressed through the artworks and participatory analyses. Elsewhere we discuss and reflect more on the participatory research processes. A methods-focused manuscript on this work is currently in process.

ARTiculating Place: Artworks & Discoveries

Making With Place explores and articulates place, in both distinct and connected ways. Participatory analyses investigating the works reveal shared themes and discoveries that cut across the projects. In this section we discuss key results, drawing on six *Making With Place* artworks as case studies, to capture and illustrate findings across three interrelated themes: Place Holds Histories, Place Is Relational, and Place As Verb. These findings and discussions reflect the artist-researchers' voices, desires, and experiences based in and drawing from our participatory analyses, including the artists' expressions about their works and the responses and interpretations of the broader group.

Place Holds Histories

Many of the *Making With Place* projects explore how place holds and reflects histories. Place holds histories in the stories of what has happened and continues to happen in these geographies. These stories are expressed implicitly and explicitly; some are hidden, others

are silenced. Place holds histories in the narratives about how spaces evolve over time, and in the chronicles of the forces that mould and change them. Place holds histories in memories that remain, and migrations that displace. In urban space, increasing development alters places in ways that often conceal histories and place-makers. Historical dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and resistance affect how a place is made, defined, and developed, and how it in turn defines those within it. Processes of community building, and processes of displacement and disruption co-exist and clash in cycles of development. The artworks *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* and *Reconstructions of Home* experiment with, and illuminate, these ideas.

Bert Whitecrow's (2020) video installation *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* explores and contrasts Indigenous and colonial contexts and histories. Bert is a 2Spirit³ Anishinaabe artist from Seine River First Nation whose work explores themes of healing through preserving and practising ancestral knowledge. Using video and personal poetic narrative, Bert evokes the Anishinaabemowin teaching Mino Bimaadiziwin (the good life). This is a philosophy of living with respect and humility, as well as honouring people, land, and more-than-human relations. As the poetic text by Bert proclaimed: "Spirit is in everything that surrounds us. Honour Nibi who guided our ancestors through riverways steady and strong. Honour y(our) relationships to land, to spirit, a relationship passed down through generations" (2020).



Image 4.1 *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit [Video poetic narrative] (Whitecrow, 2020).*
See the full work at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L05o-FnxGL0>

As a public art activation, *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* was projected onto large structural pillars at The Bentway urban park under an expressway in downtown Toronto. Images of moving waters and skies were cast against concrete bents and steel beamed ceilings, backgrounded with recorded sounds of water rocking a boat while words in poetic form danced across the screen. This created a powerful juxtaposition: industrial infrastructure and fast moving transportation contrasted with peaceful video of life-supporting land and healing waters.

Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit animates how histories and geographies can be placed in contrast to each other to visually break internalised confinements created by industrial architecture and city infrastructure. The space under the Gardiner Expressway, a highway that cuts across the north shore of Lake Ontario, has been mapped many times: by fish and eels in the lake waters before the shorelines receded; by Indigenous peoples creating first footpaths; by settlers at nearby Fort York, a colonial military base; by the

highway infrastructure built to facilitate the movement of cars; by people making temporary shelter and community in tent cities; and most recently by The Bentway as a space for arts and culture. The video installation by Bert briefly altered this place with a storyscape of land and waters, creatures and trees. It created an alternate/simultaneous reality that actively disrupted the present. The piece echoes plural, decolonial histories, and invites visceral teaching about the tensions between the natural world and industrialization, and the strident power of nature within, surrounding, and throughout globalisation.

Similarly, *Reconstructions of Home* is a series of audio and visual installations that engages and expresses lived experiences of houselessness. The stories and recollections seek to “call out, call in, be here, hear, listen, know and share” (RoH, 2022, p.1). The project, also installed at The Bentway, honours experiences of joy, community, challenge, and displacement of those who have survived living under bridges in Toronto. *Reconstructions of Home* is guided by a curatorial committee, dubbed the Tink Tank, that met to develop strategies and principles for community engagement. Core leader of the Tink Tank and artist-researcher, Olympia Trypis, opened this path with an early placemaking work, an installation of *Medicine Mobiles* composed of dreamcatchers⁴, Indigenous medicines, and objects captured in tiny glass bottles. Olympia locates this work as reflecting and building on her identity as a member of the Cree Nation, as well as stories and lessons from diverse Indigenous teachers. The intervention was offered to a downtown encampment of community members with whom the artist shares personal connections and experience. As Olympia described: “I made each dreamcatcher so that they could be taken off and people could take them into their tents. I have friends who live here, so I thought that the

people that live here would appreciate them the most" (personal communication, September 17, 2020).



Image 4.2 Medicine Mobiles [Interactive offerings installation] (Trypis, 2020)

See footage at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMhExVoMOx8&t=49s>

Reconstructions of Home surfaces hidden histories of Toronto's homeless culture and frames the ongoing conflict between the city and these communities. During early COVID-19 lockdowns, restrictions on tent communities were initially relaxed. Once reinstated, however, many community members were forcibly evicted through very public, often brutal showdowns. The project illuminates the tensions of development and the impact of displacement on those living houseless. It contrasts experiences of loss and being

pushed out with community commitment, creativity, and ingenuity. The installations open honest conversations about engagement in community, positionality, and honouring space and experience. The community connections and evolutions at the heart of this work demonstrate cycles of reciprocity and action that impact the tonality of a place to transcend common (mis)conceptions.

Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit and *Reconstructions of Home* both animated The Bentway cultural space, a formerly derelict space under a large expressway in the downtown core. This place, which may at first seem to some to be an empty or neutral space, is revealed by the *Making With Place* art activations to be replete with meaning and history. This illumination of alternative histories and hidden stories reflect processes of colonisation and displacement that the artworks evoke and resist. Both works are rooted in storytelling, using land-based, visual, and narrative approaches. *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* tells of personal history, explorations of self, land, culture, and ancestral geography. By contrast, *Reconstructions of Home* offers a communal storytelling to surface and hold hidden voices and experiences. Both pieces question, challenge, and broaden notions of civic engagement, and who public space is for. They express multiplicities through which place holds histories by exploring alternative histories that challenge dominant ideas of place to reveal more complex and contested realities.

Place Is Relational

Making With Place experiments also reveal place as fluid, deeply relational, and embedded in land, bodies, and communities. Relationality of place is manifest through interactions between people and their environments, and between human and non-human relations. As Olympia Trypis described, “place is the flora and fauna between your feet, and all around

you” (personal communication, May 15, 2020). Land-based *Making With Place* experiments uncovered place as sacred, unknowable, and unownable, disrupting structures and paradigms that enforce relationships over land as opposed to with it. Relationality of place is revealed as an interplay between both external and internal landscapes. Place is embodied through identity, emotion, and internalised constructs, in complex relation with externalised forces of power and resistance. These were particularly salient insights emerging from the time of COVID-19 lockdowns and uprisings for racial justice. The artworks *Queering Place* and *CRIP Collab* capture and reflect these learnings.

Based around a medicine garden with tactile and digital elements, *Queering Place* weaves together natural materials, plants, medicines, text, and imagery with audio stories. Both an installation and artist residency, *Queering Place* was created as an inclusive gathering space to welcome and nurture queer, trans, and 2Spirit young people, while critically and creatively exploring the roots of queer identity and ecology. At the core of the residency are six queer artists. Each created a planter piece for the garden using repurposed tires and native pollinator plants with an accompanying digital sound-story. The planters moved like a river (an ode to water) across the Garrison Commons, a park space in downtown Toronto. This led past wind chimes (an ode to wind) hanging in a burgundy maple grove, to a traditional medicine wheel garden (an ode to earth) and a circle seating arrangement (an ode to fire), as described by project creative lead, Naty Tremblay (personal communication, September 30, 2021). The garden and embedded installations invite audiences to stay a while and sit with their “inqueeries,” as expressed by resident artist T. J. Banate: “Question marks make way more sense than periods. As soon as you place a period

on a place, on an idea, you limit, you define. You don't allow it to be something more, or to develop into something different” (personal communication, October 27, 2021).

Queering Place was created by diverse queer artists navigating impacts of multiple pandemics, from gender discrimination to COVID-19. Based in this time and place of flux and adaptation, the residents and their inqueeries came to centre on relationality. The work embodies the teachings from living organisms that are constantly growing, shedding, and changing. As the garden and residencies grew, the artists witnessed a change in how human and non-human beings engaged with the space. Joggers, dog walkers, and parents with children gravitated towards the installation as a curated place within the park. Baby bunnies were born in the garden sweetgrass, protected from predators by the flora. The artists expressed how making with the natural world provided insight into embracing fluidity and failure as processes of change and rebirth. *Queering Place* activations were hosted in the garden, inviting community members and passers-by to attend performances and readings, to engage in dialogue circles and fire ceremonies, to sit and consult provided reading materials, to talk with one another. These activations altered this liminal space, bordered by the nearby Fort York colonial military base, and condo developments blocking access to the Lake Ontario shoreline. Talking circles explored garden experiences as mirrors to the ways in which queer experiences and lenses vary and flow. Emergent queer theorizing explored *Queering Place* as a re-envisaging of spaces, both internal and external, to express a broader, more inclusive understanding of the surrounding natural and social systems.



Image 4.3 *Queering Place* [Land art installation] (Whitecrow, 2021)

See a video trailer at <https://youtu.be/unfehrMxn8A>

Making With Place explorations uncovered relationality of place from the physical to the virtual. The online *CRIP Collab* zine provides a virtual space for disabled artists to showcase their work and expressions. *CRIP Collab* is curated by Pree Rehal, an artist educator who centres their work through their identity as queer, non-binary, disabled, and racialized. The zine was born from a need to engage more art from similarly diverse folks. At the time of writing, three editions have featured the work of artists who belong to the

queer community, and identify as disabled (including mad, chronically ill, and deaf/hard of hearing), with a majority being Black, Indigenous or People of Colour. The zine showcases digital art, sketches, paintings, photography, graphic stories, and abstract art exploring experiences, expressions, resistances, and celebrations. Beautiful, brave depictions critically exploring, as Pree described, how “place is embodied in our physical bodies, minds and communities” (personal communication, May 15, 2020). The most recent issue of *CRIP Collab* (Rehal, 2022) features creative works alongside personal reflections on place. Métis artist Billy Parrell discussed artful knowledge sharing with instructions for making watercolour paints from salvaged flowers. Artist and sex worker of colour Jasbina Justice unpacked their poetry as expressing “the straddling place, that strange liminal space where life’s banality, abject cruelty, weirdness and impossible beauty meld.” Jamaican artist Destiny Pitters discussed how her collages explore the displacement of slavery and the “trickiness of place as location.” As Pitters’ (2022) *CRIP Collab* statement described: “Many marginalized folk, especially 2SQTIA-BIPOC, don’t have the privilege of clear vision when thinking of place as location; instead, we are afforded a broken window with shards of rejection, houselessness, slavery, genocide and asylum-seeking. But as creative substitutes, place exists for us in other ways: as loved ones (human and non-), identities and dreams.”

The *CRIP Collab* zine, as virtual platform, added a different spatiality that was no less effective than the activations performed in physical space. In fact, given COVID-19 mandates that limited physical audiences, the zine creations have reached broader audiences than many of the in-person *Making With Place* activations. Curator Pree Rehal and their collaborators opened a crucial space of creativity, awareness, and activism for disabled

QT/BIPOC community members. Throughout *Making With Place*, Pree significantly leveraged the potential of social media as a process and production space, at one point sharing visual art to speak out against police violence that generated over 30,000 reactions. They also expertly employed Instagram to conduct advocacy and crowd fundraising projects for trans queer and disabled folks, ensuring that their perspectives would not be forgotten during the fraught time of COVID-19 lockdowns.



Image 4.4 being/(love) [Collage] from CRIP Collab 3 zine (Pitters, 2022)

See the full zine at <https://www.makingwithplace.ca/2022/02/15/5905>

Queering Place and *Crip Collab* express relationalities of place from embodied perspectives of queerness, disability, and racialization. The *Queering Place* garden is an immersive expression with the natural world, centring human and interspecies relations, within a physical space of urban sprawl, condo development and colonial monuments. The experiential learnings from *Queering Place* evoke conceptualizations of queer ecology, offering alternative lenses for reading the world, challenging internal and external landscapes of colonialism and heteronormativity, to chart new pathways for empowerment. The *Crip Collab* zine explores experiences of disability, using digital space to promote the work of disabled artists, resisting constructs of ableism towards disability justice. *Crip Collab* embodies digital space as public space, offering access and voice at a critical time of physical restriction, acutely so for those navigating disability. Both projects express place as relational by resisting limiting landscapes, to create new spaces—physical, virtual and mental—for connection and communion.

Place As Verb

Finally, *Making With Place* discoveries re-affirm place as a verb and placemaking as a process of learning and action, often as a move towards transcendence. Several of the projects explore art in public space as a locus for individual and collective consciousness-raising and action. Public art can inform, provoke, and unite, especially when centring under-represented voices. The very notion of a public art experiment seeks to activate place as verb in order to test, discover, reimagine new ideas, and invite novel ways of being together. The artworks *An Invitation* and *Indica; Omega* explore the activation of place for social expression and impact.

The mural *An Invitation* combines words and images for activism and resistance against violence and displacement. Painted by visual artist and community educator Jess DeVitt (originally titled *No Nos Toquen – Don’t Touch Us*), the mural explores gender-based violence and resistances locally and in Mexico, Jess’ country of origin. Spoken word artist and community worker Susie Mensah was invited to create poetry for/on the piece, drawing attention to intersecting themes of gender, anti-Indigenous violence, land theft, anti-Black racism, and discrimination against drug users and those living without homes. The resulting collaborative piece became *An Invitation* to the broader community to engage with explicit cries for justice. Centring on depictions of strong, curvaceous bodies and colourful flora, “it is a powerful visual that speaks to oppression without images of ugliness” (O. Trypis, personal communication, September 29, 2020). The bright colours of the mural contrast against the monochrome palette in modern architecture, compelling passers-by to be drawn in “only to later hit them with critical thought-provoking text” (J. Nugent, personal communication, September 29, 2020). The mural is the most enduring of the *Making With Place* public art activations. It is still in place, as of this writing. It is like an alternative monument, testifying to place as verb as a holding of space, enduring presence, knowledge, and power. As Susie’s poetry text exclaimed: “Dance with me. Celebrate with me. That we are still here. Step into this wild revisiting of history” (DeVitt & Mensah, 2020).

An Invitation is painted onto an oblong concrete structure in downtown Toronto, known as the Drake Rock because of its rounded boulder-like shape, and location across the street from The Drake, a well-known art hotel. The site is on the cusp of the Parkdale neighbourhood, a once predominantly low-income, now rapidly gentrifying area, where condo development is booming. It is a place where people have sought to make community

only to be displaced, and where many have been lost to drug wars and police violence. The poetic text explores and expresses historic injustices such as “femicide in the DNA of colonial rule,” alongside key calls for justice from recent activist movements including “stop the toxic drug supply,” “no pipelines on stolen land,” and “defund the police.”

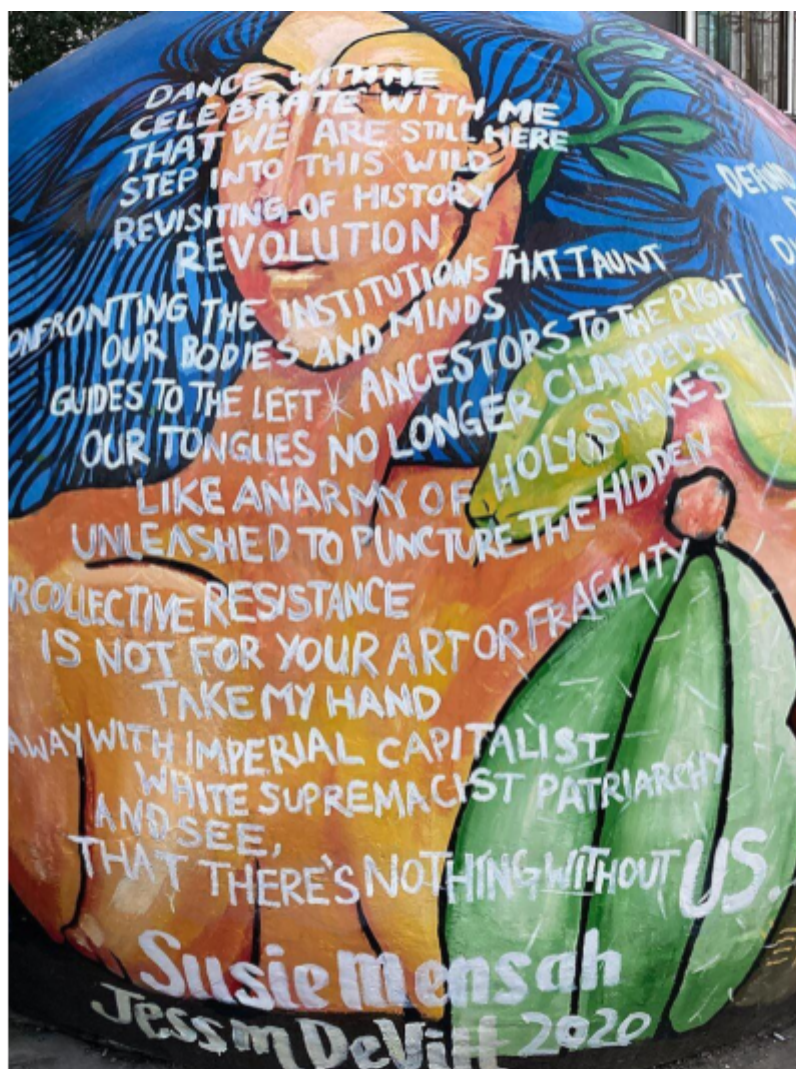


Image 4.5 *An Invitation [Poetic mural installation] (DeVitt & Mensah, 2020)*

See and hear the work at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHFJmGsoA7k>

Over time, and towards realising these activist goals, *An Invitation* has impacted the local community. The work has been featured in several neighbourhood publications, and has

generated discussion and debate, particularly amongst local business owners. Some have been very supportive and have even contributed their voices to the messages; others have been uncomfortable with the overtly political tone. The artists, Jess and Susie, have built meaningfully upon their partnership; their new collaborative postcard print, featuring new illustrations by Jess and poetry by Susie, is selling in a local boutique, with proceeds going towards community efforts for Indigenous Harm Reduction⁵.

Indica; Omega is archly described by creator Ayrah Taerb as a dissertation on the subject of Black expression. Though not a formal academic dissertation, Ayrah locates his performance installation and album of original hip hop music is nonetheless an important and informed treatise. The work is highly collaborative, produced with a creative team of music, recording, and video artists, while remaining largely a solo performance centring on Ayrah's original hip hop and theatrical creations. The work explores "blackness as it presents itself in pop culture," touching on issues and relationships between marginalisation and creativity, harm reduction and mental health. Vulnerable lyricism explores personal relationships with creativity, self-care, romance, and drug use/abuse, featuring a sound bed that samples Claude Debussy's *Reverie*. *Indica; Omega's* embodied animation of space challenged power and social norms, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and identity, evoking a multi-sensory experience of precarity, transience, and solitude. As Ayrah's artistic statement expressed (personal communication, October 7, 2021): "This installation takes a look at the beautiful and painful consequences of the creative commitments Ay have made."

Indica; Omega both celebrates and honestly interrogates experiences with blackness and creativity, in a bid towards personal and collective transcendence. *Indica; Omega*

explores and uncovers intersections between poverty and genius, complexity and culture, surfacing connections between individual experience and broader sociocultural forces.



Image 4.6 Indica; Omega [Performance installation] (Taerb, 2021)

See video trailer at <https://youtu.be/wC-wDkYvcxo>

In a talkback after the performance, the artist and a fellow collaborator discussed how popular culture both constructs and consumes Blackness, while limiting and subjugating Black people. Exploring hip hop as a response and resistance to processes of marginalization, alongside intersectional experiences of classism and racism, the work reflects on the history of black culture as a driver, and even a commodity, of popular, white culture.

An Invitation and *Indica; Omega* engage public space as a site of action and interrogation. Both projects generated attention, discourse, and, for some, discomfort. *An Invitation* drew both interest and anger in response to the mural's expressly activist intent. Though the foundations of street art are rooted in counterculture and social critique, a current emphasis on murals as neighbourhood beautification may serve to undermine street art as political messaging. These tensions speak to processes of gentrification ongoing in the surrounding neighbourhood, once an affordable area widely seen as an artistic enclave. *Indica; Omega* used hip hop performance to portray and confront constructions of Blackness, and exploitations of Black culture. The critically reflective talkback after the performance elicited powerful expressions of connection and solidarity, while also generating concerns in relation to hip hop tropes of gender inequality. By generating difficult but important discourses, these works signal the potential of art in public space for critical placemaking. They enact place as verb through intervention that seeks to compel, challenge, and disrupt.

Enacting Place: Theories and Conclusions

The themes described above are discussed separately, using specific artworks to home in on and unpack expressions and meanings. Centring our analyses on complexities of place, the *Making With Place* artworks and discoveries are really best understood in dialogue with one another. The following figure captures this interrelationship.



Figure 4.1 *Making With Place: Themes and Theorizing*

Place as Verb expresses living processes of placemaking:

- Realised and resisted in multiplicities of time and space, *Place Holds Histories*;
- Manifest and contested in diverse ways of being and inter-being, *Place Is Relational*; and,
- Enacting a form of *(Re)Mapping*, revealing histories and dynamics of place;
- Serving as *(Re)Visions* into the relational possibilities and politics of shared space.

(Re)Mapping: Histories and Dynamics of Place

The *Making With Place* explorations into histories and dynamics of place evoke concepts of (re)mapping, a term first introduced by Indigenous theorist Mishuana Goeman (2008).

Goeman referred to (re)mapping as “the dismantling of boxed geographies” (p. 295) related to colonial structures and paradigms, both external and internal, placed upon subjugated bodies and consciousnesses. She discussed how image, storytelling, song, and movement can produce powerful cognitive maps, narratives, and metaphors, generating alternative conceptions that subvert the project of empire building. In this way, (re)mapping is both a personal process of being and a collective process of becoming, engaging and disrupting space as political and suffused with power struggles, historic and ongoing. These ideas show up repeatedly in the *Making With Place* artworks: *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* (re)mapping the urban landscape with poetic video and text as both personal history and land acknowledgement; the *Queering Place* garden (re)mapping land and relationships across genders, racialisations, and even species; *Reconstructions of Home*’s digital storyscape and commemorative placemaking (re)mapping accepted ideas of place by surfacing untold stories and hidden communities. This re-storying of histories grapples directly with essentialised notions of community and the single story (Adichie, 2009). The projects explore imagery and discourse as a resource to chart new ways of being together that challenge dominant constructs typically sorting our engagement based on hierarchies, roles, and binaries. In this time of global uprisings against colonialism and white supremacy, and amidst the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 restrictions, this work is conspiring to “counter dominant and entrenched visuality that stands in the way of collective liberation” (Goeman, 2008, p. 26).

The *Making With Place* transformations of place confront relationalities in negotiations of difference, interdependence, and justice. *Indica; Omega* is both a highly collaborative, and deeply personal, exploration of themes of Black marginalisation and harm reduction. *An Invitation*'s bold text and imagery clearly articulate specific calls for gender and racial justice, garnering the attention of local actors and systems. Exploring what Karyn Recollet (2015, p. 129) identified as “new geographies of resistance,” the artworks mobilise public space for creative solidarity, reflexivity, and activism. The *CRIP Collab* zine collaborators also intentionally employ the relative access afforded online to share beautiful work on queerness, racialization, and disability, often with expressly political messages and activist intentions. The zine leverages the power of virtual space for organising and its potential to provide otherwise un-propertied youth with a durable, malleable site of identity formation, social organisation, and collective memory (Yang, 2007). Each in their own way, the young artist-researchers express responsibilities and accountabilities in relationship with people, place, and built and natural worlds, to prioritise the disruption of past and current processes of colonisation and oppression.

(Re)Visions: Politics of Location

The diverse, fluctuating relationalities and geographies explored by the *Making With Place* artists affirm bell hooks' (1989) pedagogy of the margins as a space of radical openness, and the need to make place to imagine and surface the powers that exist there. This awareness calls for critical attention to positionalities and politics of identity, to hooks' choosing of the margins as a pedagogy, as opposed to a fixed location. As White (2020) contended, “we inherit our labels, we absorb them, we resist them, we embrace them ... but we do not start with them” (as cited in Bourgault, 2022, p. 107). This was a point

consistently levelled by the artist-researchers and their creative explorations, expressing moral struggles, ethical questions, personal frustrations, and, at times, outright anger at notions of engaging communities on the margins. For example, focusing creative attention on experiences of homelessness and tent housing encampments raised ethical questions about relationship building and the intentions of art production and public art with particular communities. The *Reconstructions of Home* Tink Tank was created as a critical space to explore and address these issues through representation and leadership by artists and community members with lived experience and relationality in this space. Conversations unfolded about the risk of othering individuals with experience outside of normative definitions, while also identifying a passionate need to counteract harmful media and stigmatising stories that only highlight vulnerabilities, rather than focus on the strengths of these communities.

Politics of location, and tensions of place, were also expressed by the artist-researchers in identifications of the acute violence they experienced with oppressive and limiting terminologies. Contestation arose around overused and narrow terms to describe young people with similar experiences to themselves as *street-involved*, *marginalised*, *at risk* or *homeless*. Many emphatically rejected the term *marginalised youth*. Strong discussion unfolded on the ways in which institutions benefit from using oppressive terminology that box people into specific categories. These learnings were brought to the attention of SKETCH, the community-engaged arts partner organisation, to consider the harms caused by repeatedly using these labels. A definitive call to action was articulated to recognise and change oppressive language used in research, education, culture, institutions, and, especially, in charities. Ayrah Taerb explained: “To identify as (marginalised) is

essentially to accept defeat. Like I've allowed myself to be pushed to the margins ... me saying I'm marginalised is like me saying "I'm lost, help me", to the same person who's kicking me to the curb" (personnel communication, May 29, 2020).

The *Making With Place* investigations of place as relational disrupt and problematise such categorisations that, while often seeking to empower, remain based in subjugation. These reflections also surface ways in which community arts funding is predicated on, while simultaneously fuelling, scarcity. Efforts focused on providing creative and alternative opportunities for oppressed peoples target engagement with marginalised communities. Funding, however, flows inconsistently, and initiatives are challenged within the modest resources and systemic constraints of community work. Inherently recognising this, the young artist-researchers expressed frustration with being asked to hold and create space for something that is much larger than the resources leveraged towards addressing it. Moreover, while rooted in anti-oppressive models, community arts initiatives on their own are not able to fully circumvent lived realities of joblessness, housing precarity, and entrenched poverty. Such challenges ask uncomfortable questions about dominant discourses that market arts activities as "adding value to young people" (Hickey-Moody, 2010, p. 203). Soo Ah Kwon (2013) discusses how growth in the youth development industry has occurred alongside neoliberal social disinvestment and an overburdening of nonprofits, situating community organisations increasingly as important sites of care for marginalised groups. This risks producing notions of empowerment that emphasise opportunities for at-risk groups to improve themselves, while doing little to address "the relations of power that made them powerless" in the first place (Kwon, 2013, p. 11). Without plural and critical approaches, community arts risks becoming "a brightly packaged

form of welfare” (Ford-Smith, 2011, p. 85. Ayrah Taerb expresses such critique in *Indica; Omega*, exploring Black experiences that do not fit neatly into binaries of empowerment or objectification, and reflecting critically on the relationship between marginalisation and artistic sustainability. *Indica; Omega*’s guiding question—What goes through the mind of an artist as they commit themselves to making masterpieces on the sidewalk for pocket change?—captures key issues for critical placemaking. Who is resourced to drive culture, and who copes within unequal systems to survive?

Making With Place: Art and Placemaking

The *Making With Place* discoveries work within and across multiple complexities of place to surface embedded geographical, historical, socio-cultural, and land-based elements. Knowledges uncovered by the youth artist-researchers compel understanding and activation of place as verb, towards more inclusive processes of community and equity. They highlight how notions of community can be both aspirational and contested (Mulligan, 2013). These endeavours speak to Tuck and McKenzie’s (2014) conceptualizations of critical place inquiry; the artworks themselves provide an understanding of place as shifting interactively over time and space, and the researchers’ discourses about them aim to further critical politics via a relational ethics of accountability. Placemaking through youth arts can provide conscious recognition of suppressed realities of flux and change as creative resistance to dominant narratives of the determined world around us (Hickey-Moody, 2010). While (re)visioning the dominant, it is important to reckon with an active, relational politics of critical placemaking. Wrestling with systemic inequities calls for honest reflection on the ways in which the structural realities and constraints of the work itself might be complicit within these systems. We are working within determined structures of hierarchy

and scarcity, even while speaking back to and seeking to transform limiting narratives and spaces. In re-centring perspectives from the margins, we must understand this to be a living process of resistance and revision.

Public art can open what bell hooks (1989, p. 15) called “spaces where we begin this process of revision.” Art puts forward ideas to be witnessed and interacted with. Placed in and amongst communities, public artworks can be like energetic cultural texts, which different people can read in their own ways. In public spaces, our encounters have a special potential to be surreptitious, serendipitous. Art in the public realm can forge conversations, connections, and new pathways for positive acts of citizenship (Lombardo, 2021; Wood, 2020). If public art is a way of inviting us together, then who does the inviting, and who is ultimately assembled, is of vital importance. Community arts by under-represented voices can suggest reconsiderations of place, creating space to “think about who we are, how we’re here, and how we got here” (Yakamovich & Wright, 2021, p. 41). Place is where we encounter each other.

Art does not need to be flashy, monumental, or permanent to have an effect. A community that is able to imagine and make art together is already a community in change (Bourgault, 2022). To be making *with* denotes an engagement of mind, body, and social self (Yakamovich & Wright, 2021). This is an enacting of art as (re)search, positioning public art as theory and method. Stuart Hall (1997) noted that “theory is always a detour on the way to something more important” (p. 42). The creative explorations, frustrations, and articulations by young artist-researchers call for new practices of mutual growth and “solidarity, not charity” (Spade, 2020, p. 131), strongly and expressly grounded in a desire-centred lens (Tuck, 2009). This embodied and embedded theorizing, this *Making*

With Place, stands as a bold signpost for helping us all navigate collective spaces so that new, brighter horizons can unfold.

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Endnotes

1. [The Bentway](http://www.thebentway.ca) “works to ignite the urban imagination, using the city as site, subject, and canvas” see www.thebentway.ca
2. The terms living rough and tent cities refer to strategies of shelter and home-making employed by people experiencing housing insecurity, see <https://www.pivotlegal.org/explainer/what-is-a-homeless-tent-city>
3. [Two-spirit](#) is a [third gender](#) found in some Native American cultures, often involving birth-assigned men or women taking on the identities and roles of the opposite sex. A sacred and historical identity, *two-spirit* can include but is by no means limited to LGBTQ+ identities. See <https://www.dictionary.com/e/gender-sexuality/two-spirit/>.
4. A [dreamcatcher](#) is an Indigenous tradition and sacred handmade object, which originated with the Ojibwe people, and has been passed down to other Indigenous nations.
5. Indigenous Harm Reduction refers to efforts to recognize and address harms done by colonialism that put Indigenous people at higher risk of substance use, including re-connecting people to cultural and spiritual traditions. <https://www.fnha.ca/WellnessSite/WellnessDocuments/FNHA-Indigenous-Harm-Reduction-Principles-and-Practices-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

5. Journal-zine feature

On Queering Place, Fluidity and Reclaiming Failure

by T.J. Banate and Charlotte Lombardo

T.J. Banate (aka The Noise Witch) creates immersive and experiential art that explores questions around identity and the natural world, drawing on inspiration from their Filipino culture, precolonial history, spirituality, sexuality, and pop culture. They are an artist in residence with the *Queering Place* earth art installation. *Queering Place* weaves together plants, medicines, and stories with digital media to create an inclusive gathering space that nurtures Queer, Trans and 2Spirit young people. The excerpt below from our *Making With Place* dialogue reflects on emergent learning on place, community-building and change-making.

To see the full piece visit our journal-zine at <https://www.makingwithplace.ca/2022/01/28/5806/>

On Queering Place, Fluidity, And Reclaiming Failure

TJ BANATE AND CHARLOTTE LOMBARDO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAHMAL NUGENT AKA @NINJAHMAL



At the core of the residency are six queer artists, navigating impacts of multiple pandemics, and trying to take care of each other, and also trying to take care of an entire garden.

From the beginning we needed to embrace fluidity, going with the flow, adapting to what shows up, adapting to what becomes available to us.

Gardening As Tending To The Physical, And The Metaphysical

We started the residency without knowing where we were going to build the garden. And then when we settled onto the Garrison Common area, beside Fort York. This sparked much discussion. Historical associations with this colonial, military place, and all that this reflects and symbolizes. And re-framing this as an invitation to heal a place that carries a lot of pain, and carries a lot of complex colonial histories.

On an ecological level, opening up to the teachings around us: noticing which trees are natural to these lands; noticing that the majority of the trees are not native species, and often were intentionally placed there because they don't bear fruit, so they wouldn't repopulate. So we began to explore the idea of the park itself as having been developed.

We built a medicine wheel garden, reintroducing Indigenous medicines, consciously seeking to draw pollinators, to create a pollinator river.

People began to notice 'this place is being taken care of'. People started to navigate the space with a different kind of energy.

We learned to garden with tenderness and care.



image: design by Naty Tremblay, Project Curatorial Lead

Each artist created a planter installation using repurposed tires and native pollinator plants, & an accompanying sound-story piece. These move like a river (ode to water) traveling south-west to north-east across the Garrison Commons. This path leads past wind chimes hanging in the Burgundy Maple grove (ode to wind), to a traditional medicine wheel garden (ode to earth) & a circle seating arrangement (ode to fire) that invites audiences to stay awhile and sit with their inqueries.

It Is Possible That Radically Different People Can Be In Space With One Another, And Come Out Feeling Like Family.



Planter by Maddie Lycheck

As the residency grew, [engaging eight artists] and as Covid restrictions evolved and vaccination started rolling out, it became a form of community care to help each other get our shots. It became our way of caring for each other, and to feel even more safety in space with one another.

All of the residents end-up being each other's social circle. The people we would actually see in person, every week, and be in space with. You have to trust one another, you have to know that we've got each other as priority, because otherwise you can't do this kind of work.

People said the garden is like a beacon, there's a gathering circle, there's a fire. The real beacon was the care, the sense of love that you could feel as you walked in. You felt allowed to be there.

Politics of Place

Visitors talked about this being one of the first times they felt comfortable being in community, after the Covid lockdowns complicated our sense of bodies, and space and risk.

When we started the residency, the city was experiencing rising houselessness. For much of the residency, a housing encampment was actually growing near the site. The folks who were settled there almost became extensions of our residency. They were taking care of the garden when we were not there. They were helping to create place. It was a very unique situation, the space where we were planting and working was also where others made their home. So it was a learning experience.



West quadrant of the medicine wheel garden



Planter by Bert Whitecrow

Eventually the encampments were forced to leave. It really did feel like something was uprooted. There was something missing. These experiences sparked a lot of conversations around transformative justice. How can we be better? Complicated feelings about the fact that we we're given permission to activate that space, where others were not allowed to. What gives a person permission to occupy space, what permits a person to be somewhere?

Twining fluidity and failure

We also talked a lot about embracing failure. Because life comes in. Growing things, in public space, you need to constantly revisit and restructure. Learning to work with a place, and listening to what it is asking of you, instead of trying to impose.

Accepting what comes. Especially in light of the current climate. You can only plan so far ahead. This intersects with queer politics and queer experiences. Many queer folks are blocked from planning very far ahead. Career, life plan, many folks are living paycheck to paycheck. Different marginalized experiences, your day to day already has that struggle



Planter by Zepher McKenna

Reclaiming, even celebrating, failure. You have to turn it around. Understanding how that experience planted the seeds for something better to grow. Embracing fluidity. Nothing changes if we are just sitting comfortably.

We need to challenge the colonial mindset and requirement to always measure change, measure impact. To create some body of data, or proof, that something is worthwhile.



On the surface level, we may not instantly see change. A lot of the work that we have done, what ended up manifesting in the residency, was very philosophical. But there are subtle ways. When we were there occupying space as a group, people would navigate the space a little differently. Even the dogs would start coming up to us, like 'hey friends'. What we created is not necessarily very loud or very long lasting physical change, but it's the social change that shifted. Even on an individual level, the artist residents have now created relationships, connected our communities through direct transfer of knowledge and wisdom. Queer spaces were opened up, resisting against structures that tell us how and what to know

Prior to Queering Place, my ideas about community organizing were a lot more rigid than they are now. It doesn't always have to be formally structured.

Can we just gather? Can we commit to showing up? Can we make space for what is wanting to be built? Can we prioritize just being in space with one another?

to be submitted to [Learning Landscapes Journal special call](#)

6. Third Manuscript

Making With Place: Community Artists Theorizing Change

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Abstract: This article examines inductive theories of change arising from *Making With Place*, a youth-driven community arts research project based in Toronto, Canada. From spring 2020 to fall 2022, we engaged over twenty-five diverse young people as artist-researchers in community arts production experiments exploring concepts of place from individual and collective perspectives. In this article we draw on resulting public artworks, discussions with the artists, and our own field notes to surface the theories of change arising from this work. We identify three emergent metaphors - the garden, the bridge, the margins - and the ways in which they resist dominant discourse in favor of new practices of imagination and repair. We explore how these creative explorations articulate theories of change that refuse forgetting and call forth desire.

Keywords: Keywords: participatory action research, youth artists-researchers, community arts, co-theorizing, theories of change

Culture drives its own change
 Ayrah Taerb, *Making With Place* artist-researcher

Intentions of “change” predominate in community-based action initiatives. These inventions are often rooted in efforts to address identified gaps and failures resulting from inequities in social systems. Constructs of change that inform this work, however, sometimes inadvertently reproduce the very hegemonic neoliberal and colonial discourses they seek to challenge. Community arts approaches may offer unique tools to interrupt this pathway.

Community arts are part of a broader range of socially-engaged art practices that are increasingly being explored as modes of subjective, affective and experiential meaning making (Barrett & Bolt, 2019). While subject to systemic pressures to demonstrate impacts, arts-based engagement approaches are also located as alternative modes of knowledge production that seek to disrupt existing hierarchies and open space for underrepresented ways of knowing and reading the world. This article takes up articulations of change arising from *Making With Place*, a youth-driven community arts research project based in Toronto, Canada. *Making With Place* engages diverse young artist-researchers to create work and collectively make meaning from these experiences. As graduate students who actively facilitated and convened this project as part of our scholarly endeavors, we draw on reflections of the project’s creative action cycles and artistic productions to explore images and metaphors expressed in the artworks as emergent and plural theories of change.

Constructs of Change in Community Arts

Community arts initiatives are characterized by dialogue and co-creation (Novak, 2012). These approaches operate within broader ecosystems of community work, where change is taken up

and expressed most commonly in processes of evaluation and assessments of impact. Within this context, community arts initiatives are increasingly feeling pressure to substantiate the value of their work in social, arts and cultural sectors (Clift, 2012; Hamilton et al, 2003). However, alongside calls for “better evidence” are internal resistances to traditional evaluation methods, that conflict with creative processes implicit to community arts (Goulding, 2014; Putland, 2008). These are often characterized by imposed frameworks such as indicators and logic models that are widely used in the charitable sector and connected to neoliberal funding requirements. A key tension is emerging between these more instrumentalist approaches, which tend to position arts activities as tools to fulfill predetermined objectives, and a transformational approach more emergently grounded in participatory and creative integrity (Lombardo et al, submitted). Artists often report feeling marginalized by reductive research and evaluation discourses that focus on outputs and products, as opposed to artistic process (Daykin et al. 2017). As Badham (2010) contends, “socially engaged arts are inherently transformational because they are collaborative and engaging, especially when lead artists are determined to uphold the artistic integrity of the work. It is the art more than the social policy outcome that results in transformation, yet there has been limited discussion in the literature on these kinds of artistic processes” (p. 91). Reductionism can impact not only how community arts projects are valued and evaluated, but also project design and implementation. An emphasis or pressure to achieve individual and/or social policy outcomes (such as increased self-esteem and social inclusion) can interfere with more creative, collective and emergent artistic processes (Lombardo, 2021).

To address these epistemological challenges, some practitioners are calling for more efforts towards theorizing concepts of change in community arts practice (Galloway, 2009; Raw et al, 2012; Sonn & Baker, 2016). One popular approach centres around modeling a theory of

change that seeks to depict how interventions are supposed to work by extrapolating impact pathways and processes (Mayne, 2015). Often abbreviated as ToC and reified via capitalization, these models seek to articulate causal pathways identifying short and long term intended/desired outcomes thought to be necessary to achieve higher level outcomes and impacts. Though these ToC models grew out of the tradition of logic models, this evolution is positioned as providing more autonomy and flexibility for organizations to explore and represent change in a way that reflects complex, contextual and systemic understandings of how change happens (Stein & Valters, 2012). Yet, despite a degree of openness, for the most part, ToC models remain largely funder-driven tools (Stein & Valters, 2012) that too frequently reduce practice to something instrumental and operational (Van Stolk et al, 2011). Often applied in overly linear, prescribed and individually-focused ways, ToC models may serve to conflate community arts with other “charity”-type approaches, missing the iterative sensemaking of arts-based processes as deeply plural and relational.

ToC models draw from the idea that social programs are based on explicit or implicit theories about how and why the program will work (Weiss, 1997). Indigenous educator and theorist Eve Tuck problematizes and pluralizes this perspective through decolonial critique. In her seminal work *Suspending Damage*, Tuck (2009) names the “damage-centered” construct fundamental to colonial conceptualizations of social change as operating “even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 413). She discusses in-depth how this underlying theory of change operates to pathologize communities as being singularly defined by oppression. In this way, Tuck articulates a theory of change not as a tool or an operational model, but holistically as a lens or fundamental way of reading the world.

The implicit theory of change will have implications for the way in which a project unfolds, what we see as the start or end of a project, who is our audience, who is our “us,” how we think things are known, and how others can or need to be convinced. A theory of change helps to operationalize the ethical stance of the project, what are considered data, what constitutes evidence, how a finding is identified, and what is made public and kept private or sacred (Tuck, 2009 p.413).

In follow-up work, Tuck (2009) goes on to formulate theories of change from “alternate vantage points.” She calls forth Indigenous epistemologies that emphasize the power of narration for making place through stories and relationships. These, in turn, are shaped by personal interactions with our environment, as well as collected communal memories.

This article dialogues with tensions of change in community arts work, and advances a theories of change approach in keeping with Tuck’s plural and decolonial perspectives. We draw on *Making With Place*, a research creation initiative based in Toronto (Canada), which engages young artist-researchers to explore desires and intentions for place, community and culture. We discuss their discoveries and uncoverings through image and narrative-based storytelling in order to offer alternative ways of thinking about place-based processes and theories of change.

Making With Place Theories of Change

Making With Place is a research creation project and series of public art exhibitions that take up complexities of place, working with young community artists to animate and amplify hidden or silenced social histories. The project is an initiative of SKETCH Working Arts, a Toronto-based community arts organization with over twenty-five years of experience partnering with young people from equity seeking groups to create and sustain arts opportunities, and join their fights for social justice, fairness and inclusion. *Making With Place* engaged QT/BIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour)-identifying young people as artist-researchers in a participatory process from spring 2020 to fall 2022. Through artistic practice and production

experiments, the artists explored the complexities of place from both individual and collective perspectives. In this article, we discuss key resulting public artworks and the theories of change arising from this work. We draw on data generated from open-ended group discussions and one-on-one interviews with the youth artist-researchers throughout the project's creative exploration and production cycles, as well as our own participant observations and field notes (for a more detailed discussion of methods see Lombardo, 2023). Taking inspiration from Tuck (2009), we intentionally play with narrative form and storytelling as key elements in our approach to theorizing change.

the garden as an Indiqueer place

It's a cool afternoon in early October. A growing group of colorfully-dressed people assembles around an unusual plot of land in the middle of a downtown Toronto park space. The park is known as Garrison Commons, named after a creek that runs beneath the land, now hidden by development. The spot is walking distance from the shores of the great lake Ontario, and yet it is surrounded by condominium buildings so that one cannot view the water. In the middle of the space is a garden plot that was not here last fall. It was lovingly developed over the preceding months by a team of 2SLGBTQIA+³ young artists. Their project Queering Place is an earth-art installation which explores queer community-engagement with place, plants and medicines. The artists have planted and stewarded a garden patterned around the four quadrants of the medicine wheel, alongside planters built out of used decorated tires with QR codes that link to stories, poetry and songs (see image). With these cultivations, the project seeks to nurture gathering spaces that prompt deep "inQueery". To explore queer conceptualizations of nature and

³ The acronym 2SLGBTQIA+ seeks to encompass and acknowledge diverse non-normative gender identities, including 2-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and Asexual, for more information see <https://ok2bme.ca/resources/kids-teens/what-does-lgbtq-mean/>

relationality, to destable heterosexual and settler colonial norms on what is “natural”, as “imaginative work (that) is vital to the re-worlding before us” (Tallbear & Willey, 2019 p.5).



Image 6.1 Queering Place earth art installation.

Left: medicine wheel garden.

Right: tire planter with QR code for accessing stories, songs and poetry

On this autumn afternoon, as the garden prepares to move into rest, the artists are hosting a community gathering that will feature readings, performances, movement, dance, and Indigenous ceremony (see image 2). Activations will stretch to fill a weekend of connection, reflection and retreat. The “inQueeries” explored reveal creative articulations of fluidity, connection and interbeing; in the planter and tire sculpture designs and stories, and the group reflections they inspire. They materialize an emergent “queer theorizing” that re-envisages

spaces both internal and external for building relationships, knowledge and identities as cultural actors. As artist-resident T. J. Banate describes (Banate & Lombardo, 2022):

Queer experiences or lenses vary, queer identities, two spirit, LGBTQ+ are constantly changing. We should never cling too closely or too tightly to pre-set ideas. Living organisms are constantly growing, shedding, changing - a tree sheds its bark, leaves, in order to strengthen. We need to make space for this within our communities, creating place to re-experience and re-imagine our futures, embracing fluidity, expressing a broader, more inclusive understanding of the social system that we're trying to change.



Image 6.2. Queering Place talking circle gathering - sharing thoughts and “inQueeries”

Queering Place artist-stewards advance a theory of change that expresses learning on, with and within natural and social worlds in land-based placemaking. The medicine wheel garden is populated with plants from queer growers, queer homes and queer kinships, with sunflowers in the middle “for dynamic sight lines signaling to 2S folks & wilds to come, gather

here” (SKETCH, nd). The artists highlight the tensions of a queer placemaking in public spaces that are open, unprotected. Collaboration with the natural world adds its challenge, given identifications reported by the group with displacements or exclusions from connections with land, property or growing. Queer identity knows well the navigation of liminal space, the call to public placemaking, and the necessary considerations of risk and exposure. These realities made this project both a challenge, and an opening. Public space has visibility that reaches across communities; passersby approach with their children drawn by the sacred fire to experience Indigenous teachings offered to ground the dialogues. Local residents sow their own plants into the garden soil, alongside queer growers. Cycles of the natural world, exposed and explored, provide lessons of fluidity, accessibility, and exchange. The gardens grow native plant medicines to make soothing balms and teas for anxiety and all manner of unwellness. Relationship building, wisdom and knowledge transfer between diverse artists-researchers are cultivated through plants, medicines and soils rather than hyper focused on sexual identity. A cross-pollination of ideas, energies and activism is manifested, which in turn sows relationships and leadership for re-centering the margins with city staff and officials and the broader public. These seemingly small but powerful offerings go beyond well-known emblems of pride flags to offer medicines needed to enact agency, to queer place. They rejuvenate compacted soils to make space healing invitations for queer youth experiencing displacement. T. J. Banate further identifies and theorizes (Banate & Lombardo, 2022):

We learned that by law you cannot disrupt Indigenous persons from holding sacred fire ceremony in public space, that’s information that impacts even the city staff who are witness to us navigating fluidity, red tape, weather, etc. What we created is not necessarily very loud or very long lasting physical change, but it’s the social change that shifted. The artist residents have now created relationships, connected our communities, queer spaces were opened up, resisting structures that tell us how and what to know.

Prior to Queering Place my ideas about community organizing were a lot more rigid, (but) it doesn't always have to be so formally structured.
 Can we just gather? Can we commit to showing up?
 Can we make space for what is wanting to be built?
 Can we prioritize just being in space with one another?

This group drew on the physical potential and metaphorical notion of a public garden as a space for both queering and Indigenizing ideas about change. They generatively explored cycles of growth, ceremony, medicine, community, and celebration. Consequently, they managed to concretely change both the physical and social landscape for themselves and others passing through.

the bridge as radical place

There's a landscaped area under a highway in downtown Toronto with a unique sense of place. It was redeveloped into a park and cultural venue with a skating path and picnic tables. It regularly hosts public artworks, discussions and community events. Called The Bentway, after its large concrete pillars or "bents" that hold up the Gardiner Expressway above it, the area is widely praised as a project of innovative urban placemaking. It is known as a "reclaimed" public space. It has also been a place for community-building and alternative placemaking by under-housed people for decades.

On a breezy spring afternoon, a group is strolling through this space with purpose. Folks move between listening stations that have been placed amongst the bents (see image 4). The stations display QR codes which link to digital stories grounded in the experiences of young people who have lived homeless in Toronto. The exhibit called, A Wandering, invites audiences to hear and receive stories and wisdom from those with lived experience of homelessness. The exhibit is part of a larger initiative, Reconstructions of Home, which addresses stigmas and

celebrates the creativity of homeless communities by making the unseen visible. As curator Sue Cohen (2022) describes:

Cities are enriched by street artists, and homeless community culture is vibrant and thrives despite ongoing displacement and so much loss. Partnerships like this recognize this community's hidden legacies, wisdoms and histories, yet they're often not valued as contributions to community or city development, This needs to change. Toronto must recognize its many hidden histories – so HEAR US in the place we call home.



Image 6.3 A Wandering installation.

Left: phone booth to listen to stories or leave one's own

Right: QR code for accessing digital stories and augmented reality images and videos

Reconstructions of Home expresses a theory of change grounded in radical placemaking for community building and resistance. The area under the “bridge” of the expressway serves as location and metaphor for a place that both harbors and conceals. Under the Bentway, an audience moves through the story stations of A Wandering while cars buzz along the expressway

above. The digital stories tell of displaced young people remaking homes under bridges as acts of creative care and collective survival. They center not just experiences of erasure and grief, but also of celebration and joy. In one multimedia digital story, a scene of revelry is recreated featuring high energy music and dancing bodies in communal connection. In another part of the exhibit, tiny dioramas depict whimsical scenes of “home” that can be read in diverse ways - desired, remembered, romanticized, problematized. *A Wandering* speaks to structural violences of houselessness, of repeatedly being forced to vacate these dwelling sites, sometimes leading to the loss of all personal belongings. While firmly and proudly proclaiming the radical acts of care and community inherent to the reconstructing of these spaces for home-making. As *A Wandering*’s curatorial statement (Cohen, 2022) attests, “while potential is easy to miss and walk by (similar to those living homeless)..(we) demonstrate the layers and diversity of lived experience, beyond what is often presented in a reduced way as an “issue”, a “problem.” Later, as the sun sets, the Reconstructions of Home Curatorial Collective will host a gathering under the darkening Bents to commemorate underhoused community members lost to the opioid epidemic. While to the average viewer or property developer this area under the “bridge” of the highway may seem unclaimed and underused, for those who have found a haven here or in similar spaces it is a site rife with memory, meaning and creative resistance.

In a striking image from *A Wandering* called *Safe Landing*, artist Lisa Petrunia captures such a “reconstruction of home” as a nestlike space carved out under the highway bridge, experiencing it as a space of both resilience and vulnerability.



I imagine alternate ways of inhabiting space in solidarity with those who live outside of conventions.

If we can imagine possibilities, we can create them. I create an offering of safety, comfort, community, and home in a space where people's efforts to do so for themselves have historically been criminalized.

The Gardiner Expressway has been home to hundreds of houseless people over many years. We live in a society where the most vulnerable are repeatedly displaced from spaces where they attempt to create a sense of home. Where they are all too often abruptly and sometimes violently awakened by police. Where eviction notices are taped to tents, and bulldozers flatten possessions.

Image 6.4 Safe Landing by Lisa Petrunia (2022)
[Three-dimensional mixed media diorama 16'x16']

Like the string of lights above Lisa's Safe Landing nest, Reconstructions of Home illuminates possibilities for building relationships within and between communities. Because while bridges can conceal, they can also connect. Stretching across boundaries, the Reconstructions partnership with The Bentway has served as a bridge between cultural institutions and under-reached communities for more critical civic engagement. The two partners have co-hosted several community events, and members of the Reconstructions curatorial collective have been invited to sit on Bentway panels and inform planning recommendations for discussions that engage city officials, property developers and academics. This is a theory of change that elucidates the role

of storytelling, public art, and collaborating across differences for bridging radical placemaking and community equity. We use the term radical here to denote the use of critical, creative and intangible placemaking methods, such as memories, stories and sensemaking, by local yet displaced communities, to voice equity issues and advocate for justice (Gonsalves et al, 2020). As the Bentway's executive director Ilana Altman indicates (personal communication, June 10, 2022): "We recognize the importance of celebrating and learning from the many communities who have shaped and are shaping the lands under the Gardiner. We believe that public art can be powerful, helping us to see, hear, and better understand the stories of our neighbors. Together, we can continue to inform the evolution of our city's public spaces."

In this work, the physical bridge-like features of the highway and support bents are placed as metaphorical possibilities for change. Theorizing through this metaphor allowed young artists to imagine the potential results of collaborations and the productive possibilities for placemaking. Here, bridge is both noun and verb: a place and a transformative action.

the margins as embodied culture making

On a fall afternoon with the sun emerging after a threat of rain, Ayrah Taerb is preparing to take center stage under The Bentway. A crowd is assembling as music plays from a sound system. They have come to hear and support the launch of Ayrah's newest hip hop album, Indica; Omega. Today's performance will feature Ayrah's high energy lyricism, and dance and theatrical movement, alongside musical collaborators. Before launching into his hiphop pieces, Ayrah begins the performance at a colorfully painted piano. He plays a refrain from Claude Debussy's Reverie which features prominently as a sample in the album's sound bed. In his performance and lyrics, Ayrah explores what he terms as "blackness as it presents itself in popular culture," touching on themes of black creativity, mental health and harm reduction (Taerb, 2021). A core

feature of his creative explorations revolve around the role of hip hop as an expression of voice and emancipation while problematizing the ways in which mainstream culture can serve to commodify and co-opt “blackness”. As he articulates (Taerb & Lombardo, 2022):

Hip hop has a history, a genesis, in responding to, reflecting and resisting processes of marginalization. Claiming space, for black men in particular, to enact power and care within their communities. The history of hip hop has also manifested and reflected the history of black culture as a driver, and even a commodity, of popular, white culture. Hip hop is currently going through major shifts, building sociocultural awareness and power. This is an important moment and opportunity for social change.



Image 6.5 Indica; Omega performance at The Bentway by Ayrah Taerb (2021)
photos by Jahmal Nugent

Hip hop has been a key locus of action for community arts projects, precisely because of this history of coming from and tapping into experiences and processes of marginalization (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). In resonance to Tuck’s (2009) arguments on damage, starting from associations with marginalization can be both empowering and limiting. Ayrah himself resists

labels that locate individuals as “marginalized”, seeking to instead re-call a focus on systemic forces (Lombardo et al, 2023). His theory of change is rooted in contestation, reminding us that social change is fraught with challenge, protest and struggle. In dialogue about his experiences with community arts work, Ayrah emphasizes the assertion that it is not the community arts projects themselves that drive change. Rather “culture drives its own change” and community projects seek to leverage and amplify this. As he pointedly questions (Taerb, & Lombardo, 2022):

“Culture drives its own change.
Community is where the real work must get done, resourced or not.
True arts for social change should sustainably recognize, support and resource
community artists.”

Ayrah questions potentially overly benevolent ideas of arts for social change. He reminds us that community programs do not create culture, rather they harness and help support changemakers as part of a much broader resistance. And he highlights that community initiatives operate within inequitable systems that are themselves challenged to properly combat processes of marginalization (Lombardo et al, 2023). The unique role and need for culture from the “margins” is bound up in existing and ongoing processes of social change. Community arts projects seek to tap into this energy but can also risk objectifying and appropriating.

Ayrah calls us into the space of an artist hungry for opportunity, for audience, and for expression. He spotlights and problematizes the re-centering notions of community arts from both perspective and resistance at the margins.



Image 6.6 Indica; Omega video shoot, Metropolitan United Church

Community Arts as Sites of Resistance

The *Making With Place* projects Queering Place, Reconstructions of Home and Indica; Omega articulate rich, place-based theories of change which resist singular, instrumental interpretations. They capture aesthetic and embodied art-making by diverse young artists as intersections of making and critical thinking. They also highlight community arts collaborations and activations for re-storying under and misrepresented peoples' experiences, wisdoms, and readings of the world. In these ways, they take up Eve Tuck's (2009) invitation to move from a damage to desire-focussed lens. Desire is productive and plural; it resists a damage focus that pathologizes and limits. Instead, desire accounts for both loss and hope, for "the not yet and the not anymore" (Tuck, 2009 p.417). Foundational desire-based explorations (Anzaldúa, 2010; Didion, 2005; Gordon, 2008) evoke a ghostly, remnant quality; a longing and a haunting, emanating from the

past but seeking towards the future. Expressing such haunting as a theory of change, Tuck (2018) posits that the opposite of dispossession is not possession/accumulation, it is unforgetting.

Each of the *Making With Place* theories of change are a placemaking of unforgetting. Queering Place saw the assertion of suppressed yet immutable natural elements: the hidden river bed below, the lake to the south, and the grasses of the well-trodden communal park space. Here, young artists made space by sowing garden plots and stories that connected like a pollinator river, offering medicines and articulation for queer 2spirit young people who are often repressed and disengaged from public space and planning processes. The Indiqueer writer Jonathan Whitehead (2022 p.148) theorizes that moving into histories that have been carefully and politically removed or destroyed “is sometimes to move into a rupture that is beyond and outside space and time, into a wound, which is its own place”. Working within this rupture, within the wound, the Queering Place artists sow a garden of plants, medicines, and possibilities, calling forth a land-based experience of past, present and future (Whitehead, 2022). In doing so, their making feeds into queer theorizing that contests heteronormative readings of “nature”, and nourishes the queering of place, through a re-storying of environmental ethics, affect and desire (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010).

Reconstructions of Home, through *A Wandering*, marks place by young people living homeless via audio-visual symbols, stories and iconography, urging remembering, immersive storytelling and commemorating as part of change making. Moreover, the works do so by renouncing limiting and dehumanizing stereotypes, in favor of being and delight. The installation echoes the “abundant justice” inherent in Adrienne Maree Brown’s (2022, p. 23) conceptualization of pleasure activism: “the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy”.

The Reconstruction of Home artists embody an activism that resists state/colonial control to derive collective power from desire and aliveness. They highlight a making of community rooted in liberation and justice, which has much to teach us all about how to learn to live together, stay in relationship, and survive (Brown, 2017).

Indica; Omega confronts oppressive “placing” of “marginalized” youth, and surfaces culture as its own place, and responsible for its own change. In doing so, the work enacts, as bell hooks (1989) teaches, the margins as a space of resistance, of radical openness.

“I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance - as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which is difficult, challenging, hard and we know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfills desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.” (hooks, 1989 p.23)

In his artmaking and critique artist Ayrah Taerb works through pain and segregation towards a fulfillment of desire, yet one that is incomplete. He reminds us that projects of social change are complex and ongoing, and at once caught up in and railing against forces that seek to reduce and contain. He embodies, even demands, a need for aesthetic, plural and engaged theorizations of change.

As theories of change, the garden, the bridge and the margins tap into metaphors of place. They harken Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) seminal understandings of human thought and agency as largely metaphorically structured and defined:

“Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of.” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 p.3)

Queering Place, Reconstructions of Home and Indica; Omega surface metaphors of place ignited by resistance and desire, rooted in realities and histories of specific places and placings. They reveal universalizing themes arising from creative explorations of people in these places, rather than pre-determining impact pathways from outside perspectives. Through affective artworks, they engage sensemaking that springs from subjective aesthetic layers of interpretation, from the personal to the communal. They draw on arts processes as playing with metaphor, and as messy, uncontrollable and unable/uninterested in having all of the answers. The very act of art installation is already a changed place. These placemakings from the margins enact hooks' (1989) "new location from which to articulate our sense of the world". They are an expression of radical spaces from the conceptual to the tangible, from the ephemeral alterations of music, performance and storytelling, to the more physical change of a garden plot. They invite introspection, and even trust, into ripple effects that can not easily be measured.

Each *Making With Place* project sought to make such radical creative space by and through young people not often positioned as change makers. Artists offered a direct response and resistance to displacement. In the public art that emerged from these conversations, place has agency, place reveals repressed stories of haunting desire, theories of change of individual embodiment and collective body politic. Together, the projects resist predominant theories of pioneering, conquest, and power-over. Instead, they move towards decolonial framings of place and change as living processes. These are aesthetic and experiential expressions and enactments of change. As a collection, they allow for multiplicity and contradiction. As "alternatives to damage" they highlight how "what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression" (Gordon, 2008 p.xvi). The works illuminate complexities of human agency, complicity and resistance, of desire

and conscience (Sontag, 1977; Tuck, 2009). By revealing and learning from subjugated knowledge, the works move past trauma towards “a something-to-be done” to claim the right to theorize (Gordon, 2008 p.xvi).

Making With Place as dynamic theorizing and placemaking, as both outcome and causal pathway, pokes at static concepts in Theory of Change (ToC) models (Malovics et al, 2021). Here we intentionally, playfully repurpose constructs as active verbs. Community arts as an embodied and participatory practice of inquiry expands causal pathways or flips them. The practice has the potential to cast light on a new way of looking beyond change to *individuals* to that of *place, groups, systems and culture*. The *Making With Place* explorations of change speak to a growing critique of positivist views of evaluation and theory-building (Daykin et al, 2007; Friedman & Rogers, 2009). They respond to calls for an epistemology of evaluation that honors the spirit of the intervention and matches the values and integrity of arts-based processes (Galloway, 2009; Raw et al, 2012). They affirm an important role and need for theoretical frames that actualize principles like participatory practice, anti-oppression, and Indigenous ways of knowing (Friedman & Rogers, 2009; Lombardo, 2021). Critically attending to equity in ToC and evaluation approaches calls for space to think, to reposition “key performance indicators”, to reimagine a “learning from here” as room or direction for change. Rather than sticking to a logic model for understanding change, *Making With Place* adopted a more emergent framework almost entirely premised on curiosity. This allowed participants to articulate how they understood the purpose, value and success of their work at several points in time. This made space for a seeing, thinking and theorizing of change in ways that may never have been imagined through preconceived notions and conversations, “plans or strategies”.

Moreover, as explored here, it led to rich and nuanced theories of change that are far better aligned with our values. Offering authorship to communities to re-story themselves into culture and place on their own terms can be an act of transformation. Elements of place are rarely considered in traditional theories of change. Context is typically situated as “the problem” or condition we aim to change. Place in the *Making With Place* projects had more to say about itself emerging as a site of both “outcome” and “causal” consideration/pathway. Here place is an active collaborator, infused with multiple flows and dynamics, historic and current, of human and more-than-human beings (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). This collaboration revealed place as a site of resistance that goes beyond the artworks themselves. Place asserts itself as part of the change cycle, to be nurtured and livened.

Such arts and place-based processes can help realize more kinetic, fluid understandings of change. They can allow for an embracing of tensions and complexities in relation to notions of impact (Gustavsen, 2008; Malovics et al, 2021). They can suggest more dynamic and emergent ways of theorizing and measuring change. They propose alternatives, or even complements, to more prescribed frameworks or standardized instruments.

In capturing and re-imaging metaphors of place - the garden, the bridge, the margins - these makings with place resist dominant structures in favor of new practices of imagination, resistance and repair (Haraway, 2016). They refuse forgetting and call forth desire.

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7. Journal-zine feature

On Issues of Equity and Scarcity in Community Arts

by Ayrah Taerb and Charlotte Lombardo

Ayrah Taerb is a music maker, producer, and creative consultant. The excerpt below from our *Making With Place* dialogue discusses how communities navigating precarity engage art to drive social change, and how these experiences can be complicated and co-opted by entrenched hierarchies and inequities. Ayrah challenges us to consider how models of community engagement such as community arts, while working to address social inequities, can be similarly implicated in structures of power and politics of scarcity.

To see the full piece, and hear Ayrah's related hip hop music, visit our journal-zine at:
<https://www.makingwithplace.ca/2022/01/29/on-issues-of-equity-and-scarcity-in-community-arts>
(note: the featured music includes strong and potentially disturbing language)

On Equity & Scarcity in Community Arts

AYRAH TAERB AND CHARLOTTE LOMBARDO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAHMAL NUGENT AKA NINJAHMAL



Culture drives its own change

Culture is realized through communal experiences and actions.

This truth is too often lost in charitable models and orientations that reinforce unequal power dynamics.

Structures of power in community work can contribute to/perpetuate inequities and a politics of scarcity.

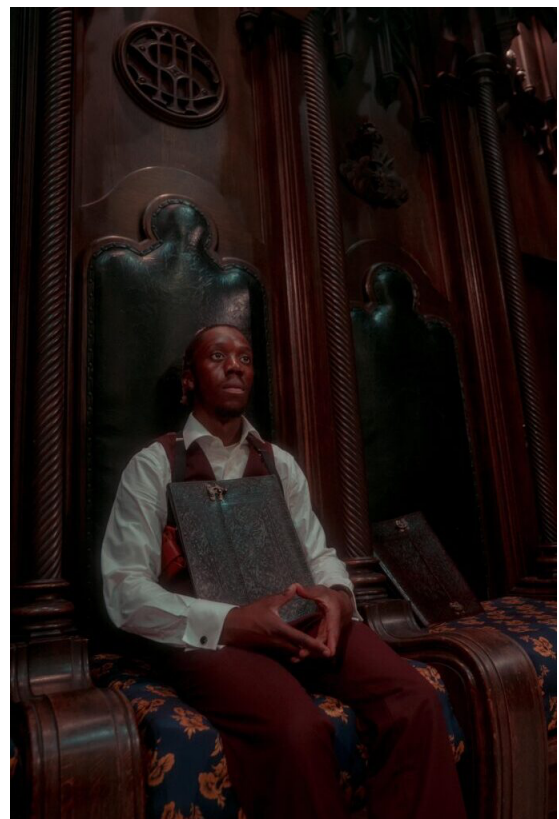
Cultural shifts arise and respond to what is happening in the culture

Hip hop has been a key locus of action for community arts projects.

Hip hop has a history, a genesis, in responding to, reflecting and resisting processes of marginalization.

Claiming space, for black men in particular, to enact power and care within their communities.

What has been critiqued as a culture of violence in hip hop is based on the need for protection of one's self and one's community, rooted in histories of scarcity and oppression.



The history of hip hop has also manifested and reflected the history of black culture as a driver, and even a commodity, of popular, white culture.

In 2005, during the summer of the gun, white people are seeing direct manifestations of gang violence for the first time in their neighborhoods. They are confronted by realities marginalized people had been living for years. Shocked, white leaders self-righteously proclaimed 'this is not Toronto'!

In response, many arts for social change organizations are born.

Forms of cultural expression important to these communities are uplifted, in particular hip hop, as response and resistance to anti-Black racism.

But funding flows inconsistently.

Relationships grow, but then they flail.

And yet we continue to do the work anyway, because we have always been rooted in art for social change, long before this was a buzzword or funder-speak.



We need more than sugar. We need water and baking soda and ovens and lights that work.



Even when we get the money to fund people, that doesn't put us into the positions of power that are necessary to prioritize them and their story.

This can only happen by properly recognizing and resourcing community artists as core influencers in these systems

Who is resourced to drive culture and who copes within unequal systems to survive?

8. Conclusion

This collection of academic manuscripts and community journal-zine articles captures *Making With Place* outcomes and contributions to knowledge and practices in the fields of community arts and social change. By centering and surfacing place-based and arts-informed perspectives from underrepresented voices, this scholarship makes key contributions to discourses and practices of critical pedagogy, participatory research and constructions of impact and studying change.

Critical Pedagogy

The *Making With Place* learnings take up perspectives and processes of spatialized and place-based critical pedagogy. The work is a living engagement with theorists like Paulo Freire (1970), Henry Giroux (1992), and David Gruenewald (2003), who have connected concepts of critical pedagogy and pedagogies of place. Through publicly engaged artworks, the *Making With Place* artists enact processes of conscientization that express places as both spatially and socially embedded contexts to be perceived and acted on. This dissertation describes place-based public art experiments and emergent themes and outcomes, locating these experiences as a relational placemaking of (re)mapping and (re)visioning. These discussions speak to Gruenewald's (2003) interconnected constructs of decolonization and reinhabitation. As he describes (p. 9), "decolonization involves learning to recognize disruption and injury and to address their causes...reinhabitation involves learning to live well socially and ecologically in places that have been disrupted and injured". Such a "critical pedagogy of place" necessitates not just recognition, but as per hooks (2006) and Bowers (2008), also calls for recovering, renewing and affirming repressed local and situated cultural knowledge.

From Bert Whiterow's *Acknowledge Place* (2020) video and poetic narrative uncovering Indigenous territory and teachings, to Jess DeVitt and Suzie Mensah's *An Invitation* (2020) to engage with decolonial image and text addressing gender based violence, *Making With Place* enacts such processes of resistance and repair. The projects also speak to debates that decry critical pedagogies of place for lacking land-based and settler colonial understanding. The need for a blending of critical pedagogy and place grew out of a recognition of parallel silences in both traditions, notably critical pedagogy's lack of attention to human culture as nested in ecological systems, and place-based education's oft distance from urban and multicultural context (Grunewald, 2003). Some scholars, however, have identified a new silence, rooted in rhetoric that tends to universalize processes of decolonization, and lacks attention to knowledge of place based in the land itself (Bowers, 2008; Calderone, 2014). Bowers (2008) names this unseeing as driven by a Western ideology of change that fails to take into account different land-based approaches, traditions and knowledge keepers, particularly those that represent alternatives to consumer-dependent models and ways of being. Calderone (2014) identifies how land-based conceptualizations of place, informed by Indigenous knowledge, work to render settler colonialism visible.

Making With Place artworks and theorizations connect to these interrogations of place and change. By surfacing the garden as a place of creative resistance, and the inherent Indiqueer histories and knowledge of the lands and the artists stewarding them, *Queering Place* (2021) offers a living exemplification of such problematizations of place. By revealing alternative histories and stories of a liminal space seen by some as a non-place and others as a place for home-making, *Reconstructions of Home* (2022) offers a place-based critique to consumer-driven notions of land and knowledge keeping. By articulating Black power and subjugation through the

language of hip hop, *Indica;Omega* (Tarb, 2021) resists external "placings" and highlights urban landscapes. *Making With Place* offers a critical pedagogy of place that combines pedagogies of situationality and oppression with place-based perspectives grounded in relationships between ecological and cultural systems. The project creatively explores what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved.

Participatory Research

Through exhibiting and theorizing place-based experiences of creative participatory research, *Making With Place* takes up spatialities of action research. Pain et al (2007) discuss the recent "spatial turn" in PAR, and its potential for a re-theorizing of empowerment.

"Conceiving of PAR as a spatial practice, we see that wherever initiatives occur (in a community centre or under a shady tree) and whether they are "invited" or "popular" in origin, they constitute special socio-spatial arenas governed by the discourses and practices of participation (such as "peer equality" and "facilitation"). Even in meritocratic societies these resources are often significantly different to those normally regulating everyday spaces. In communities sharply structured by social hierarchies they represent radically alternative modes of social interaction and can provide a "safe space" in which marginal groups can speak and critique everyday society." (Kesby et al, 2007 p.24)

The *Making With Place* projects represent such a spatiality, a taking up of space and an exploration of place from particular and historically disenfranchised points of view. As situated experiments in public art and discourse, they creatively surface tensions and critiques of "participation" and "community". The project installations answer Honor Ford-Smith's (2011) call for a more complex understanding of the concept of community, actualizing her questions on "whose art? whose community?" (p.84). This is particularly salient given the projects' time and place during the Covid-19 crisis, when space and bodies were even more regulated, particularly so for those for whom place was already problematic and contested. Such spatialities are beautifully evoked in Ammarah Syed's *Grounding and Activating* poetic collages, and in her

theorizations *On Fragmentation and Coming to Coherence*. With their focus on memory, desire, relationships and collective care, the *Making With Place* projects show how experiences of marginality, trauma and resilience can teach and heal communities, particularly in times of upheaval and change.

In these ways, they also speak to recent trends in PAR practice related to relationality and materiality. They capture the movement away from the rational and disembodied towards emotion and affect, emphasizing the power of non-verbal and pre-cognitive knowledge (Ahmed, 2014; Davidson et al, 2005; Thrift, 2007). Here the aesthetics of community arts are central to the participatory processes of both art and knowledge creation. *Making With Place* speaks to calls for methods of (re)search that draw on our range of senses, and that reach beyond the limits of text to the material and embodied (Thrift 1997; Whatmore, 2006). From the tactile and more than human landscapes of the *Queering Place* garden, to the creative confrontations of the *Indica; Omega* performance, to the relational care of *Medicine Mobiles* and *Cooking for Community*, the projects draw on artistic experiences to locate, communicate and actualize. *Making With Place* speaks to an epistemological shift in PAR practice which Pain et al (2007) identify as giving value “to matter as a means of understanding the relations between people and places” (p.28). This dissertation contributes by elaborating a model and process centered in participatory artmaking, relational becoming and aesthetic experiential knowledge.

In taking up such spatial, relational and material turns, our *Making With Place* praxis also illustrates limitations of PAR processes. While the projects succeed in creating a “language of possibility” for addressing and transforming relations of domination (Giroux, 1988), the artists also call out the as yet untransformed spaces surrounding them (Cahill & Torre, 2007). Ayrah Taerb gives personalized voice to this in our journal-zine piece *On Equity and Scarcity in*

Community Arts (Taerb & Lombardo, 2022). Ayrah names contradictions of participatory arts from the frustrations of an artist who succeeds in creating socially-engaged work but remains in precarity. He challenges the emancipatory aims of community arts and the self-congratulatory tone that social change initiatives can take, compelling recognition that project-based activities are not the real drivers of change, rather they harness and hopefully amplify cultural movements and social actions already taking place. Understanding PAR processes as embedded in place can help us ask and acknowledge how far participation truly extends. A critical participatory action, and a critical community arts, compels continued problematizations of “bounded empowerment” (Felner, 2020). To move beyond “isolated islands of empowerment” (Kesby et al, 2007 p.25), we need to identify how resources and processes can successfully be sustained over time and space, to other domains -- in particular those that govern social trajectories and mobilities (Kesby, 2007). For artists navigating marginality this requires a focus on questions of employment and development, not just in traditional areas of work and education, but also in domains of cultural production including artistic mentorship, more "formal" arts opportunities, and cultural policy. *Making With Place* sought to address or at least contribute to such needs and trajectories, but as our findings and co-theorizations attest, this "project-based" work is always incomplete and ongoing. We are working to action these learnings to inform the broader processes and systems that structure and govern how community arts are understood, resourced and actualized.

Impact and Change

Making With Place creatively addresses dynamics of power and agency within community arts and participatory research. Eve Tuck (2009) reminds us that Participatory Action Research is hinged upon theories of change, which are inherent in any PAR project's design but yet are often left implicit. The *Making With Place* artworks and writings respond to calls for more purposeful and emergent theorizations of community arts and social change (Cohen, 2009; Hampshire & Matthijsse, 2010; Raw et al, 2012; Sonn & Baker, 2016). Rooted in desires to open space for underrepresented ways of knowing, they address epistemological challenges related to notions of impact and change within the practice of community arts, and community work more broadly.

Driven by dominant discourse on the need for more “robust and credible” evidence, there are growing attempts to support research and evaluation on community arts practice through a proliferation of toolkits and frameworks. Some, however, critique such approaches for what has been referred to as an “over-reliance on a toolkit mentality”, problematizing the oversimplification inherent in seeking to identify an assessment of impact that is easily replicable across contexts and equally applicable to diverse art forms and audiences (Belfiore and Bennett, 2010, p.122). A key tension has been articulated between more instrumentalist approaches, which position arts activities as tools to fulfill policy or funder objectives (Belfiore, 2002), and creative or transformational approaches “that trust in the arts process itself to deliver outcomes” (Macnaughton et al. 2005, p. 336). Reductionism can impact not only how community arts projects are valued and evaluated, but also project design and implementation. Some fear this emphasis may be “throwing arts projects off track,” in particular through a shift toward outcome evaluation “with a consequent devaluing of other forms, such as process evaluation and reflective practice” (Daykin et al. 2017, p. 133). Despite or even because of their stated

intentions, instrumental approaches may actually diminish possible benefits that would more naturally emerge as a product of deeper exploratory, collective process. Underlying this critique is an epistemological concern related to reproducing neo-liberal ideologies of production and "worth". Spiegel & Parent (2017) question the ways in which initiatives for disenfranchised youth can tend to “harness the sense of alienation into a force that could be publicly celebrated and even "put to work" for the dominant culture” (p. 12). While often seeking to disrupt, community arts approaches are also at risk of reproducing and/or reinforcing normative social roles and systems.

Making With Place has surfaced an embodied aesthetic to theorizing change, which is markedly different from the static nature of more standardized methods of impact assessment. In doing so, we connect to epistemologies that explore and embrace change as a complex, plural process that is in many ways incompletely knowable. We also connect to the arts as playing a vital role in place and meaning-making as a lived, contextual knowing for addressing inequity. The theories of change embedded in and articulated through *Queering Place, Reconstructions of Home* and *Indica;Omega* - the garden, the bridge, the margins - invite such a situated understanding of change. These are arts projects much more inclined to open and expand as opposed to contain and reduce. They allow for alternate ways of seeing that can help us to better understand what is happening, and what more is possible. Böhm and Land (2009) discuss artistic activity as capital—human, social, and cultural—within “the simultaneous recognition of the value of culture and the difficulty of measuring that value” (p. 77). *Making With Place* centers notions of impact squarely in the stories and aesthetics of the artworks and artists themselves, as opposed to externally imposed measures and frameworks. This work embraces what we and others identify as a necessary becoming and in betweenness of Participatory Action Research

and its bid for social change (Pain et al, 2007). Echoed beautifully by Reuben Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) in his compelling reflection that the arts don't do something to people, they are *something people do*.

Placing in Practice

Throughout this research, particularly when met with challenges and tensions, we sought to truly center art-making as an inherent form of knowledge production. Partly due to the open space afforded by the pandemic, we were largely able to let ideas and artworks unfold. As the work deepened, we realized there were powerful theorizations emerging from aesthetic and affective understandings, informed by the artists' diverse readings of the world. We contend that these perspectives can provide complements and/or alternatives to existing models of impact, evaluation and change. It may not be feasible or even desirable to turn away completely from more deterministic approaches, which do represent forms of accountability and knowledge generation. But a more critical PAR, a more critical community arts, necessitates questioning whose worldview we are ultimately accountable to. *Making With Place* encourages us to consider and to live within these tensions.

The articles in this dissertation hope to inform community arts practice through arts-based readings of place and change from equity-seeking perspectives of youth artist-researchers. Reflecting on this scholarship as a whole, I offer the following key points of recommendation for how this learning may be summarized and taken up.

1. *Community Arts and Place*

- ❖ Locating and exploring places, both internal and external, and their historical, relational and dynamic aspects, can offer rich strategies and sites of inquiry for community arts with youth navigating and resisting on the margins.

- ❖ These explorations can uncover critical pedagogies of place, for re-mapping and re-visioning a view towards new, more equitable social relations.
- ❖ Politics of exclusion and repression can lead to external "placings" on individuals experiencing inequities, which must be critically located and resisted.

2. *Community Arts and (Re)Search*

- ❖ Artmaking in public space can be a process of (re)search for disrupting dominant and repressive ways of knowing and constructing people and places.
- ❖ Community arts are an inherent and affective form of knowledge that reach beyond the limits of text to the material and embodied.
- ❖ Participatory Action Research processes are embedded in place; uncovering such situationalities can inform a critical reflexivity into how far participation truly extends.

3. *Community Arts and Theorizing Change*

- ❖ Theories of change are implicit in community arts and Participatory Action Research, with inherent tensions around who defines how change is conceptualized and investigated.
- ❖ Community arts can surface alternative theorizations of change emergent from aesthetic and affective understandings and diverse readings of the world.
- ❖ Change is complex and incompletely knowable. The arts can play a vital role in revealing lived, contextual knowledges as place and change-making for addressing inequity.

Next Steps and New Places

In a testament to this work and the powerful learning and collaborations it has fostered, we have been working for almost a year now on key “next steps”, seeking to action in particular the insights into pedagogies of place, and the challenges surfaced around limits to participatory

benefits and empowerment. We have received a 3-year SSHRC Race, Gender and Diversity grant to explore and grow impacts of this work with an emphasis on cultural policy and policy advocacy. This new project draws from the implications for practice articulated above, to explore how under-represented voices, knowledges, and creative resistances can promote and build more dynamic and equitable cultural policy. I am a lead collaborator on this continued research, and I plan to undertake a postdoctoral fellowship contributing to this scholarship. SKETCH Working Arts is the lead community organization, through a new SKETCH platform initiative launched by Phyllis Novak and colleagues called FLIP Foundation - Foundation for Leadership, Imagination and Place. This next cycle also engages new academic partners at OCAD University as well as Mass Culture, a national arts organization focused on research and policy action. Our collective goal is to explore how community arts with emerging socially-engaged artists can move beyond project-based work, towards more sustainable and system-wide interventions and impacts. We have recruited twenty young emerging artists interested and engaged in social action. This group includes core leadership from key *Making With Place* artists Bert Whitecrow and Olympia Trypis. Through continued PAR cycles drawing on the *Making With Place* methodology, this group has identified three priority areas of action; identities and solidarities, land and nature relationships, and healing, care, spirit. We are marked by the ways in which these map to the *Making With Place* findings, and how they potentially disrupt traditional notions of cultural policy, in similar ways to the disruptions this dissertation articulates in relation to constructions of research, impact and change. We are excited for this continued unfolding.

My Personal Reflections and Practice

I have grown deeply professionally and personally as a result of this work. The in-depth, long-term engagement with the collaborators and artist-researchers has echoed, for me personally, the emphasis on relationality highlighted in the research findings. These relationships were built upon my existing well established engagement with SKETCH Working Arts and personal collaboration with Phyllis Novak, who I have known for over ten years and partnered with on previous community-based research and action projects, as well as academic teaching and learning initiatives. Despite this significant knowledge of context, I nonetheless occupied throughout a positionality that situates me outside of the core communities this work seeks to amplify and represent. I sought to remain reflective of this as a White cis-gendereed woman two decades older than the younger artist-researcher participants, and a graduate student with a lead role in the research. Gaining trust and connection with the group did take time. This was voiced by some of the artist-researchers who expressed initially feeling wary of me and my outsider status, but decided to participate despite uncertainties, largely because of previous positive experiences with SKETCH. I gratefully acknowledge the twenty years of SKETCH's service and leadership in the community for the entry and space that enabled *Making With Place*.

As discussed, participatory tensions were experienced and expressed throughout *Making With Place*. Particularly at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Phyllis Novak and I were very aware of our privilege in relation to the younger artists, most notably in the places both physical and mental, we were able to access to buffer and mitigate challenges. Related limits to participation were also expressed in the ways in which the artist-researchers themselves were "placed" not just by outsiders but also by us as research facilitators. Despite my power sharing intentions, and years of study and community experience in this area, I still made missteps. For

one conference presentation in particular I was "called-in" by two of the artist-researchers for failing to locate myself while locating them, and for using terminology, such as "homeless", that was not reflective of their personal location or experience. I realized that I was using a blanket description of the overall SKETCH target population, drawn from our grant proposal and from the organization's mission statement, that failed to take into consideration the individual situationality of the people participating in that presentation. While wanting to speak in an informed way about place, I had been selectively blind to it. I had chosen to too narrowly prioritize a narrative of marginalization in an effort to justify our work in that academic setting, but which left my co-researchers feeling externally identified and further distanced. This moment of challenge led to a wider discussion with the whole artist-researcher group, and further critical reflections on participation and power in our work and community arts in general. Though uncomfortable, this was ultimately a productive place of tension that informed subsequent theorizing and the outputs in this dissertation. As well as ongoing dialogue with SKETCH leadership.

These experiences speak to a hybrid place of insider-outsider in relational research. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discuss concepts of "insider" and "outsider" in qualitative research as a binary of two separate pre-existing entities, which thorough research engagement can be bridged or brought together to form "a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction" (p. 60). I did not represent an insider in this work, that is I am not a young person navigating experiences of oppression. I came in as an outsider, a justice-oriented graduate student undertaking this inquiry towards my doctoral research. Slowly, over time I then became a member of the *Making With Place* participatory collective and it was necessary for me to critically reflect on and locate myself as

such. This was particularly salient within the artmaking and creative sharing aspects of this work. In order to honor *Making With Place's* participatory values, and not be positioned simply as witness or worse as a bystander, it was important for myself and Phyllis to engage as creative participants as well as research facilitators. We regularly shared our personal artwork with the younger artist-researchers during the sharing circles, we created our own public art experiments, and we engaged in co-writing of several of the journal-zine articles with the youth artists. In this way, we occupied this "third space", of not exactly participant but not always facilitator.

This third space for me was one of particular paradox, and at times disjunction, in relation to the place or identity of "artist". I did not, and still do not, identify as an artist, and I had not shared "artwork" in such a manner in some time. It took some time for me to feel brave enough to share, and at first I was challenged even with determining what I wanted to create. It was through the openness of the younger artist-researchers, and the emotionality exposed by Covid isolation, that I eventually found creative inspiration. A particular spark was that early visual metaphor by Jess DeVitt, the dandelion growing and pushing up through the brain representing intrusive thoughts. This was a creative catalyst for the project, and also for me personally. The work I ended up making and sharing was also rooted first in an internal place, brought to the fore when finding myself alone with intrusive thoughts and feelings, in particular a difficult pregnancy loss I experienced just before the pandemic began. The honesties and vulnerabilities exhibited by my fellow artist-researchers compelled me to explore and share feelings that I had been struggling to express. I ended up creating a place-based vocalization drawing on interactions with a colony of cormorant birds in Toronto's Leslie Street Spit area, a green space in the east end of the city formed by landfill that extends into the waters of Lake Ontario, which is nearby to where I grew up. For me, and in our group discussions, this piece

connected to collective experiences of grief brought about by pandemic losses, and violences confronted and resisted by the Black Lives Matter movement. Later through analysis and writing, it came to echo theories of change of haunting and unforgetting.



Image 8.1 Kokolou by Charlotte Lombardo, with music by Jim Bravo

[*kokolou - lament in cycles*](#)

audio-imagery, for places of loss, grief, resistance, transformation

kokolou was created as place art experiment, through improvised vocalizations with a colony of cormorants living on Toronto's Leslie Street Spit, recorded on May 25, 2020

subsequently arranged against a solo guitar backing track written and performed by my friend and collaborator Jim Bravo

this audio-visual was briefly exhibited in an outdoor stairwell space at the Bentway on September 18, 2020 as part of the *Making With Place* public art experiments

Field critique and creative reflections

- ❖ Responding to the raw vocalizations, Jess and Bert gave me the note to consider looping in order to play with feelings of reality and time
- ❖ In the stairwell at the Bentway, Phyllis remarked that the visual, tilted upwards against the darkspace, was like "opening a portal in the sky"
- ❖ After exhibiting at the Bentway, Beerus (aka Ayrah) immediately recognized the emotional intention of a lullaby
- ❖ Co-theorizing with Ammarah taught me to understand this creative exploration as movement towards coming into coherence

At this culminating point in my dissertation journey, I am struck by how this piece reflects my participatory learning, and the intersecting ways in which my aesthetic experiences of art, community and meaning making have helped me grow as a person and a researcher. Through *Making With Place* we have articulated a community arts-centered process as a form of (re)search for meaning making, collective care, and relational becoming. My participatory experiences as arts-centered (re)searcher have been oriented around coming to coherence, within personal emotional experience, within the hybrid, paradoxical space of PAR facilitation, and the tensional space of community-engaged efforts towards social change. I know I will continue to learn and vision from the "piece of sky" this work, these insights, these relationships, have opened for me.

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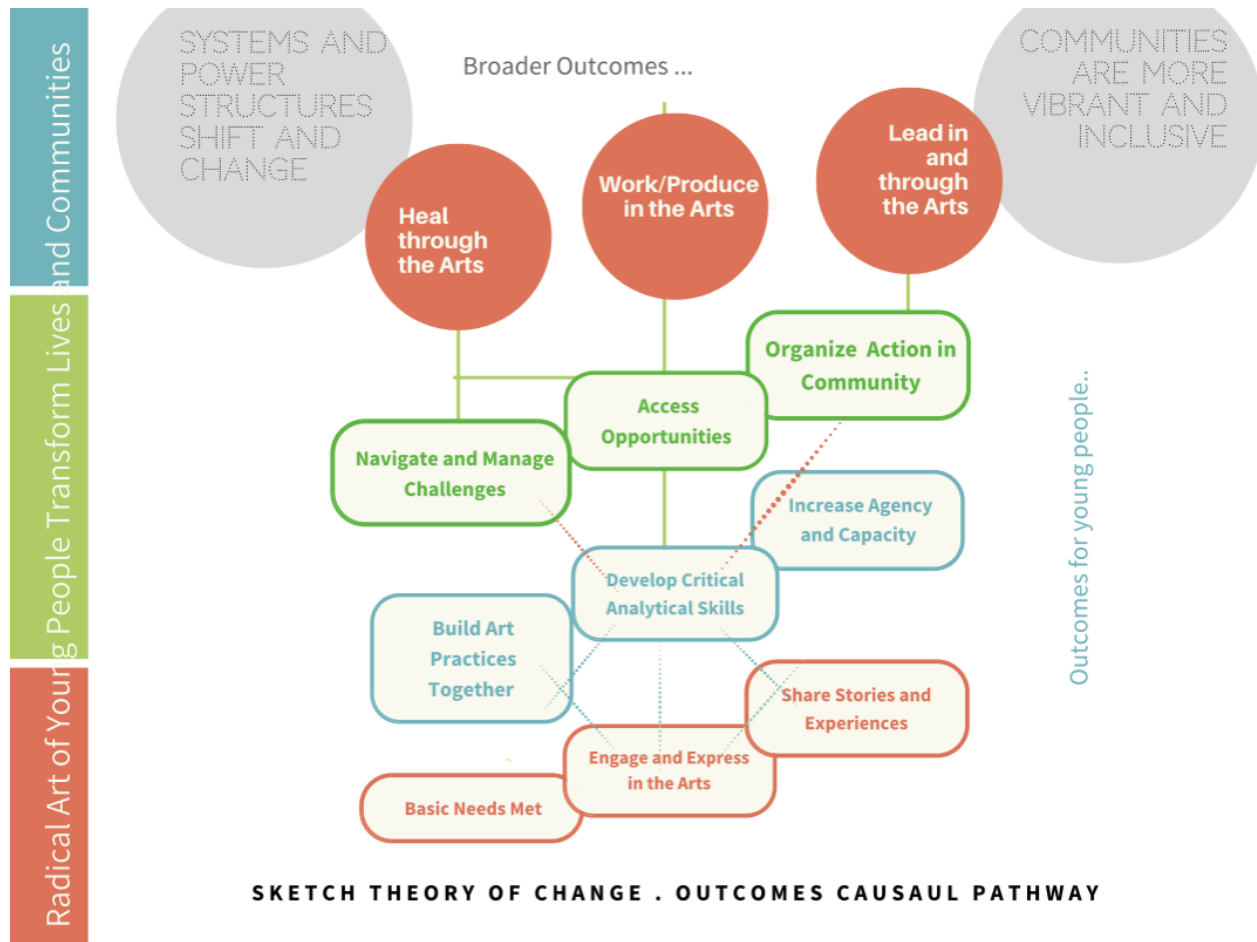
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Appendix A: SKETCH Working Arts Theory of Change



Sketch Theory of Change - Causal Pathway of Outcomes

- If we co-create and partner with young people to express, experiment and engage in the arts, in a supported environment that meets some of their basic needs, Then young people will engage in developing artistic practice together that supports, sharing/witnessing of each other's expressions, stories and experiences of creative resistance.
- If young people engage in developing artistic practice together, Then they will create shared critical analysis, and they will increase their sense of agency and capacity to make an impact.
- If they develop shared critical analysis and agency, Then they will gain capacity to navigate and manage challenges, self-organize and lead creative solo and collective action in community.
- If they gain capacity to navigate challenges and engage in collective action, Then young people will gain increased access to opportunities, organizations, institutions and systems.
- And they will heal, produce/work and lead in the arts...in radical ways that will ultimately shift our systems and our communities!

Appendix B: Youth Artist-Researcher bios

T.J. Banate (aka The Noise Witch) creates immersive and experiential art that explores questions around identity and the natural world, drawing on inspiration from their Filipino culture, precolonial history, spirituality, sexuality, and pop culture.

Jess DeVitt is a community visual artist educator, freelance designer and curatorial graduate. Jess is interested in creating socially engaged art, in a framework that holds inclusive practices, accessibility and transformative justice to collaborate and share experiences.

Jahmal Nugent is a visual media artist, primarily focused on digital photography and videography. Their works mostly focus on seeing the ordinary as extraordinary and reminding us of how beautiful and amazing elements we take for granted can be.

Pree Rehal is an artist educator currently based in Tkaronto, originally from Tiohtià:ke. They're the children of immigrant settlers from Punjab. Pree's work centres their identity as a queer, non-binary, trans, disabled, fat, and racialized individual. They have an interdisciplinary arts practice under the name: Sticky Mangos and co-founded the Non-Binary Colour Collective.

Ammarah Syed is an interdisciplinary artist interested in documenting how modern day discourses such as capitalism, colonialism, and various power dynamics have developed to inform mental health, identity and sexuality. Ammarah explores in her work, how words among other factors, influence emotion, culture and politics. Ammarah's performance alter-ego, AmmariCan't Even, Ammarah's likes to deconstruct and explore the little boxes our society and our minds like to put us in. Both of their processes involve sitting on their ass for 8 weeks (contemplating of course) & then creating something all in one go. They aspire to use the arts as a means to transform oppression into change.

Ayrah Taerb is a songwriter, recording artist & performer. His creative influences span the length of multiple generations in both rap and hip hop, with auxiliary influences coming from reggae, soul and electronic music.

Olympia Trypis is an artist who doesn't like labels, identifies as a human who is trying to live and create in harmony with earth, which is our home.

Bert Whitecrow is a 2 Spirited, Anishinaabe multidisciplinary artist from Seine River First Nation. Their work explores themes of healing, preserving and practicing ancestral knowledge. As a conceptual artist, Bert works with a variety of media, often combining traditional and unconventional materials. They are a founding member of the Weave and Mend collective, which is a mixed Indigenous collective that focuses on building relationships with Indigenous communities through art making workshops, facilitated conversation and permaculture.