

Embodied,
Intergenerational
Knowledge:
Reconceptualizing Leadership
Nurturing in Arts and Culture
Management Education

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2021

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ABSTRACT

To bridge the worlds we exist within, and the worlds we want to build within, we must first acknowledge the systems that we participate within. Simultaneously, we must give space for breath and creation of new ways of being. This is true yet not exclusive to the arts and culture sector and the study and practice of arts leadership and management. This arts-based exploration weaves the lived experiences of multiple arts nurturers who are codefining the meaning of equity across leadership conceptualizations and worlds. The author-artists operate from a belief in arts and culture workers' ability to breathe into new ways of being, to actualize creative justice, and to heal—together.

Keywords: arts, arts nurturing, emergent strategy, nonprofit industrial complex, white supremacy, intersectionality, cultural equity, creative justice, liberation, Arts Connect International, higher education, queer, trans, disabled, Black, Indigenous, person of color (QTDBIPOC+)

“Abolition is about presence, not absence.
It’s about building life-affirming institutions.”

-Ruth Wilson Gilmore

What is alive in you? What do the words bloom, care, seen, heard, and held evoke for you?
This art(icle) extends an invitation to...

create
be in your fullness
play in the sandbox
cocreate
futuraity

To open to and breathe into new ways of being, we must move with (in) community, flatten organizational structures rooted in white supremacy, move at the speed of trust (Brown, 2017), and practice the belief that knowledge is precious, sacred, and intergenerational (Kimmerer, 2016; Haili’ōpua Baker et al., 2021).

Your cicerones for this art(icle) are Micah Rosegrant, Mel Taing, and Marian Taylor Brown. The three author-artists offer their lived perspectives on arts leadership, the future of arts nurturing in the arts and culture sector, and the field of arts leadership and management education.

Rooted in arts-based inquiry and postqualitative methods, centered on story circles, Micah, Mel, and Marian cocreated artistic works, drawing on their trained and lived expertise as practicing artists in relationship to their embodied questions surrounding arts leadership (Leavy, 2016; Leavy, 2019; Leavy, 2020; St. Pierre, 2017; St. Pierre, 2017).

They offer this piece to you for contemplation, provocation, and reflection:

WE CONVINCED OURSELVES WE MUST BE ABLE TO NAME A THING FOR US TO LIVE IT - I CANNOT THINK OF A THOUGHT MORE FAR FROM THIS IMPOSSIBLE NOTION WE NAME 'TRUTH'

if I stayed in The Theft-Built City they paved "for u.s."
how would i kiss my peoples' lungs with my full chest?
learn to dream our tongues for our selves?*

**we know who was stolen to construct on all that is stealed*

their textbooks (like their living) are ahistorical

*isn't it like a man to scribble across space and call that our horizon?
and isn't a city like a man? how he plows into heavens he hold no halo for and titles anywhere
the smoke touches his kingdom?*

Millions of dollars are breaking Indigenous grounds to cement
another thorned palace of royalty we have named law
an 'ordered' crown of colonized clawing out the end of my friend's road
where their whole family homes: Brown and queer and brimming
with so much divine life desecrated by concrete pork drooling to cage*

**in fake money... what is currency to our forces of nature?...*

To Begin the Journey

To drop into requisite vulnerability on the path to healing, one must have an innate level of trust established with both oneself and their collaborators. For the author-artists to write authentically, openly, and unapologetically, the process first required community-building and opening to the surfacing of trauma—an opening made possible by the community care embedded in the process, the slowing down of production to breathe into new ways of being, and of embracing the messy paradoxes of progress and regression that surface(d).

We offer these reflections as you embark on this journey with us, for your own nurturing.

This is a work in process, as we all are on journeys toward meaning-making and actualizing our full selves in a sector and world that are built on and actively upholding patriarchal white supremacy (Brown, 2020). Moving through alternative methods of inquiry intentionally pushes back against our prioritized structures of “knowledge” upheld in academia and is a joyful act of resistance in the pursuit of creative justice (Banks, 2017). Creative justice, as summarized by Antonio Cuyler, is, “The manifestation of all people living creative and expressive lives on their own terms” (Banks, 2017; Cuyler, 2019).

The methodology we use for this authoring process is rooted in our respective group facilitation backgrounds as well as our collective study and evolving praxis of Adrienne Maree Brown’s Emergent Strategy (2017). We further grow this autobiographical art-research from Micah’s story circle mentorship with Márquez Rhyne, a cultural organizer from Memphis, Tennessee who is now based in Chicago. To honor this mentorship’s influence, we name and honor the communities and movements who shape Rhyne. Alternate ROOTS and the Highlander Research and Education Center strongly informed, and gave place for Rhyne to hone, their cultural organizing praxis. Rhyne learned story circle process through the lineage of a Black theatre practice at Highlander and The Carpetbag Theatre. Carpetbag formed from the Black Arts Movement, which was ignited by the Black Power Movement in the Civil Rights Movement. From the Black Arts Movement also emerged Junebug Productions. Junebug is a contemporary legacy of Free Southern Theater, which

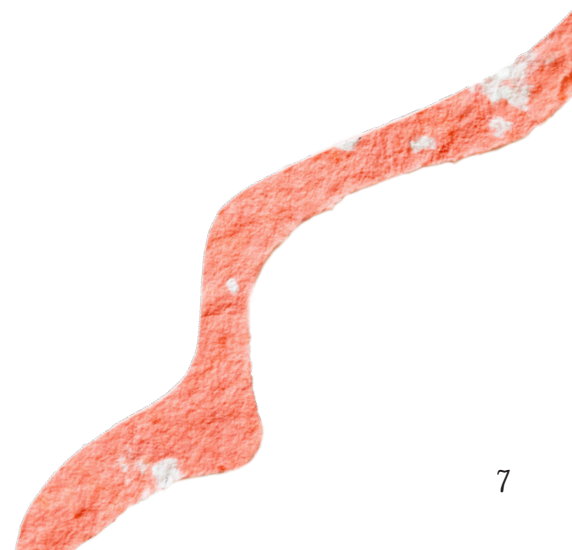
is where John O’Neal founded the story circle that Rhyne was first introduced to. Story circles originated as a way for culture workers to build history with the community, to both shape and archive culture by understanding how intersecting lives create our narrative past, present, and future (O’Neal et al., n.d.).

While this story circle practice is being passed down to Micah from the Black theatre lineages we trace above, both Rhyne and O’Neal teach that the elements and the practice are present in Indigenous traditions and communities all over the world. Core to story circles is equally distributing time; communing in the circle: a geometry of equal space; honoring the verbs of listen and respect; communicating from presence, with emergence, rather than preparation; and trusting in silence (O’Neal et al., n.d.). We leaned into these values as we collaboratively emerged this art(icle) from our distinct and interweaving narratives.

As you journey with us, we ask you to open to new ways of being with self. What are you noticing within as you read our narratives and stories? Have you heard these reflections in your own conscious and lived thoughts and experiences? Have you heard parallel provocations from your students or colleagues?

What parts of yourself do you bring to your leadership role(s) and which do you leave (intentionally or unintentionally) behind? Today, we bring you our full selves—bravely, unapologetically, and lovingly as we move toward a liberated future.

This is our love letter to the sector.



Our Culture Stories



Micah.



Like generations of trans peoples before me, I am a maker and unmaker of my own life, which equips me for a parallel phoenixian alchemy in cultural strategizing: the burning of a before—of the worlds we inherited—to seed ash into the (re)birth of an after—of our collective future. As A.R. Nirai writes in *River Furnace* (Issue 3, 2021):

“For those of us in the trans community, life comes after death. The afterdeath comes every time our chosen names are spoken, our pronouns are honored, our bodies respected. The afterdeath marks us because in its immediate wake we are often standing with one foot out of the grave that would have been a life buried. We are the children of a world where our names were assigned, and our genders were assigned; thoughts and dreams guiding us places that society and its assumptions could not. We awaken to how better we could live our lives, and so we die many deaths to achieve it.” (p. 05)

On my lola’s third month of daily rosaries, she learns that Mary answered the prayers of every woman in my family: for my mama to conceive a child. It is 1998, and my mother and I have just completed our first trimester. A full six months of rosaries continue being prayed toward my birth, and, 22 years later, this divinely wombed creature lives to tell how a Catholic past gives way to a queer af future. With so much spirit poured into my existence, I grew curious about God early on: Who they are and how we make them. In

the search for a divinity that loves me, I found queerness in my blood and across my chosen ancestry; I found generations of gender-expansive life outlasting centuries of imperialism; I found the sacred space of story, of movement, of shaping change through relationship (I borrow adrienne maree brown’s language around “shaping change” from *Emergent Strategy*, 2017). And I align this as part of my Tagalog bloodline’s legacy: wayfinding futures by the starshards of ancestral memory I meet along my living. In conversation with Bryan Washington, Ocean Vuong remarks:

“Often we see queerness as a deprivation, but when I look at my life, I saw that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me, I had to make alternative routes. It made me curious, it made me ask is this not enough for me because there’s nothing here for me” (Washington & Vuong, 2020).

In a pattern of being othered, finding my fellow othered, and building community amidst what others us (where our othering is shared and where it is not), I arrive to where I am today from following a sense of my “right work” in the communities I move within.

Theatre, more as a people than a field or form, serves as my longest artistic community. In my life, the practice continuously manifests as a site for vast communal learning: of self and of how we make and share a public space for public story.

When I leave the imagination-centered theatrical spaces of my childhood in Virginia for Boston’s highly institutionalized theatre scene, I quickly witness what happens when this sacred art worships a god of capital. Stories are no longer made for each other—for a stake in who we are together—but instead for what sells. I see my peoples selling our traumas to systems only designed to reproduce that harm.

In an equally true and rather different sense, I get to where I am now because, by the time of my birth, my parents navigated from their respective lower-middle-class upbringings into this settler nations middle-class. This means that, while I face interlocking oppressions embedded in U.S.

society and its arts and culture ecosystem, my access to capital offers me access to well-being and care, free time, and opportunity. This access affords me space to leverage the power I have toward creating a radically just future. In this journey, I realize it is not enough for me to infiltrate systems as an artist making my own creative life possible: I have a responsibility to move these systems to make all peoples' creative lives possible, i.e., a responsibility to change the gods we honor in public space.

Gratefully, I find many communities in Boston that hold and cultivate togetherness as we holistically grow into our interdependence. Before I even had the language to articulate the cultural organizing I do, Arts Connect International (ACI) recognized what I had yet to recognize in myself: our immense capacities to empower communities through artful, intentional living. Witnessing the artists who fluidly form the vessel of ACI move through the world, I felt/feel more possible.

Mel.



As I rise into my understanding of myself in the world, I don't see myself as an individual so much anymore as I am a node connected to an intricate, ever-expanding net of travelers, thinkers, and creators.

Tracing the lines of this net has led me to a few thoughts:

Being born American meant taking on so much of America's ideas, beliefs, and values. As I grow older, I find myself unraveling these narratives

and beliefs to learn the truths about America's origins, Cambodian history, and how so many intersecting Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities fight to survive in this country.

Becoming an artist, specifically a photographer, was initially an unconscious way of unraveling the narratives and creating ways of being seen. The more I unraveled, the more I saw myself in the communities that are under threat by broken systems and a prevailing history that centers patriarchy, whiteness, and productive capital gain. It led me to ask "Where do I fit into this? Can change be made?"

In the five years since graduating from art school, I have struggled to understand how I weave myself into the larger picture of the arts sector. I think that this is a shared experience for so many higher-arts-education graduates. Although we are inherently connected to a community of artists, educators, and designers who came before us, why are so many of us working in isolation, believing that the only way to succeed is to buy into the mindset that there isn't enough for all of us, so we have to do everything we can to "get ahead" and not become the "starving artist"?

I have worked in several different contexts within the arts sector and have struggled to find environments where I was seen and authentically invited to cocreate the changes that this sector needs. Then, I found ACI, and I learned about the work ACI imagines into being.

I felt a great calling to connect and learn, so I emailed a woman named Marian Taylor Brown. We vibed on so many levels. At the end of the call, I realized that this is how I could fit in—not in isolation but in community; not within a broken system but within a system that centers on healing and cocreation.

The work is ongoing.

Marian.



I am the product of unconditional love.

I recognize the deep privilege of this statement and, with that, my responsibilities within.

I came into the world as a synesthete, understanding human emotion through energetic color exchange. Overwhelmed by the daily intake of navigating the world through this lens, visual art became my vehicle for communication. Art is my innate meditative practice; it is where I find refuge and place the pieces of disconnect together, a practice of sense-making for my neurodivergent brain. Tested for learning disabilities at the tender age of five, a myriad of diagnoses confirmed that my brain, in fact, is quite different. Both exceptional and classified, navigating traditional schooling systems would prove an exercise in creativity and tenacity.

Art is my lifeline.

The ardent desire to learn remains insatiable. The result is that my brain, body, and spirit learned how to navigate higher-education spaces, and over decades I earned an alphabet soup of degrees. Knowing that the containers for knowledge extend far past credentialed, exclusionary, colonized degrees and institutions, what I share today deeply honors embodied, lived, and felt knowledge.

Practice continues to be my greatest teacher.

When does a white child become aware of their whiteness? Was it similar to naming my neurodivergence? The act and practice of understanding and classifying “difference” is a unique yet universal human experience. Brought up in a homogeneous, affluent suburb in Upstate New York, I was indoctrinated into the norms of white supremacy culture. The unlearning of said culture and harm (toward self and others) continues daily.

Although their lineages vary across dimensions of class, religion, and generational migrations from Europe, my parents’ whiteness remains constant, as does mine. My parents continue to do the work of breaking through transgenerational racial trauma. I embody their progress, and yet generations of work remain ahead. Within this healing work, I continue to find and unearth my queer ancestors and lineages as well, making way for new understandings of self within.

It is my ardent responsibility, then, to continue this path with intention, care, compassion, and love.

Unrelenting questions brought me to Boston in 2011, centralized on how to build equity within and through the arts. This decade of my life has been challenging, vibrant, and full in ways I cannot fully grasp. I dove into the depths of the nonprofit paradox and the nonprofit industrial complex, discovering in a multiplicity of ways how complicit organizations are in perpetuating harm, often more so than change, let alone justice (LaPiana, 2010; Morgan-Montoya, 2020; Rodriguez, 2017; Finley et al., 2012; Perez, 2017; Haber, 2018). I learned about my own collusion within this complex, and I continue to unearth aspects of white saviorism deeply embedded within my own subconscious.

My world has expanded through deep, meaningful collaborations with brilliant and creative queer, trans, disabled, Black, Indigenous, and person of color (QTDBIPOC+) artists, arts leaders, dear friends, and family. The generosity these humans have shown, and continue to show, is unparalleled. I am eternally grateful for their sharing of wisdom, community, art, and joy.

Since ACI’s founding in 2014, our core mission has remained consistent, i.e., building equity and

inclusion both in, and through, the arts. That said, every facet of the organization demands active evolution as we engage the complex systemic issues at play. At this stage in the work's development and trajectory, my role is one of deep listening, activation, weaving, meaning-making, and leveraging of assets toward equity.

Today, the work centers on collective impact, systems leadership, mutual aid, decolonization, and reparations frameworks, engaging emergent strategy and systems change for cultural equity and creative justice (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Senge et al., 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Bornstein, 2018; Chitnis; 2018; Villanueva & Barber, 2021; Brown, 2017; Stroh, 2015; Meadows, 2008; Brown & Brais, 2018; Brown et al., 2019; Banks, 2017; Cuyler, 2019).

My greatest joy comes in bidirectionally nurturing the next generation of arts and culture leaders, the Mels and Micahs, as they define the future of our work and world.

Image Descriptions:

Pg. 9: A circle-shaped portrait of Micah. They are seated in front of a sky blue backdrop wearing a mock neck cheetah print short sleeve shirt and long, sky blue tassel earrings that hang below their shoulders. Their right elbow is propped up on a pedestal next to them, and they hold a pen in between their fingers like a cigarette. On the pedestal is a small glass vase with tall, long purple flowers. Glitter is sparkling on Micah's softly smiling face.

Pg: 10: A circle-shaped self-portrait of Mel. She stands in front of a dual-color backdrop which gradients from a neon blue to deep orange. Mel wears a square neck baby blue long-sleeve shirt with her long black hair swept over one of her shoulders. She has a big smile on her face.

Pg. 11: A circle-shaped portrait of Marian. She is seated in front of a lavender backdrop, wearing a long-sleeve dark purple dress and a crystal necklace on a chain. On her left is a pedestal with a small blue vase filled with pink-purple hydrangeas set upon a small carved wooden stand. A heart-shaped crystal sits beside the flower vase. Marian holds a bloom of pink-purple hydrangea in her hand, with her long wavy brown hair worn down. Marian is gently smiling.

Stories of Being





Micah.

As I grow in community advancing creative justice, I embrace what I've known since early childhood: That I grow most organically through my practice of a relational memory, of learning through relationships with individuals and communities, including biomimicry with nature. I learn to archive, breathe, rest, facilitate, and infinite mores by witnessing and being and becoming with the planet's nonhuman forces. Embracing and honoring this practice becomes core for me in countering the supremacy of the written word, which enacts and perpetuates histories of violence against my queer, trans, and Tagalog ancestries.

In *Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM*, J. Neil Garcia (2018) traces how our Spanish colonizers infiltrated Philippine languages to corrupt life-affirming vocabulary grown for queer and gender-bending people into literal lexicons of sin, infertility, and demonism. I was blessed to be introduced to Garcia's scholarship by JP Moraga, a queer pilipinx kapwatid and artist. Our meeting is a site and legacy of our ancestors' oral histories and was aligned through the present-day organizing by diasporic communities: We met at the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists' 2018 Conference and Festival (CAATA's ConFest).

At that same gathering, I also began a relationship with kumu Haili'ōpua Baker. In study with her, a multihyphenate artist and teacher based on O'ahu whose work revitalizes kānaka maoli language and ways of life, I further understand how universities perpetuate colonial violence by gatekeeping knowledge. Academia routinely judges what "knowledge" is and is not and who deserves access to that learning. Arts institutions of the U.S. settler-nation posit that anyone can master, or at least be awarded a degree in any form of art as long as they complete the expectations of a given pedagogy.

This positioning of colleges and universities as conservatories of knowledge asserts that 1) art, and knowledge thereof, should be conserved and held within an institution, and 2) institutions have authority to determine the standards an artist must meet to be "qualified" in their art form.

This positionality is vastly different from that of various Indigenous modes of learning in which knowledge is passed down by elders who help nurture youths' strengths and roles within their communities (Haili'ōpua Baker et al., 2021).

I tether my "knowing" to ways that transcend colonial systems by learning and passing on learning through oral tradition. In relationship with queer and trans mentors like Márquez Rhyne, Karen Young, Sara Porkalob, Ty Defoe, and Harold Steward, I grow self via communal becoming. I lean into reciprocal kinships like these as I navigate new and remembered ways of being, such as the Co-Director Model we are exploring at Arts Connect International. Embodying this collective praxis of antihierarchical leadership requires presence, trust, and structures—e.g., oral history, relational learning, accountability, and more—that support the iterative process of transforming how our organization strategically occupies space and channels resources in the nonprofit industrial complex (Morgan-Montoya, 2020; Rodriguez, 2017; Finley et al., 2012; Perez, 2017; Haber, 2018).

Mel.

YOU ARE NEEDED IN YOUR FULLNESS

My parents fled Cambodia in the 1970s for North America to escape the Vietnam War and the ensuing Cambodian genocide. They were refugees who came from completely different class backgrounds: My father was the third son of a rice farmer; my mother was the youngest of nine and the daughter of a wealthy, influential army colonel. The war effectively brought them together after my dad, alone in a Christian foster home in Pennsylvania, published a newspaper ad asking to become friends with other Cambodian refugees in the area.

I grew up in a middle- to upper-class white suburban town in Massachusetts, where only a handful of fellow Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) families and one Black family lived. I went to grade school with little to no consciousness of my Asian identity, except when fellow classmates would pretend to retch at my lunches from home or that time I brought in a massive bowl of deep-fried shrimp chips to a school World Food Fair event, and no one ate them but me (I wonder

now “Did I really want to share anyways?”). I’ve since learned that these are not rare or unique experiences, especially for the children of immigrants.

Historically, survivors of traumatic events like war and genocide have many protective barriers that prevent them from reliving painful or associated memories. Though my parents have done their best to explain in very blunt terms our family history, many of the stories left me having to connect the dots by myself. I was left to read books with terrible titles like *Cambodia’s Curse* written by well-meaning white American journalists or Wikipedia articles that listed the tonnage of bombs dropped on Cambodian soil by American “allies” right next to Cambodia’s GDP rate, as if either of these facts could honestly tell me about the people who lived, died, and survived.

It was up to me to search the Internet and local library to discover stories, poems, and artworks created by Cambodians. It was also up to me to research the causes and effects of PTSD, to find mental health services for myself, to understand the phrase “intergenerational trauma,” and to find healing. Sokunthary Svay, Princess Moon, Ocean Vuong, Sopheak Sam—their voices and presence inspired so much affirmation and a feeling of truly belonging. While this journey of self-discovery and tracing history was as beautiful and transformative as it was painful, I did it in isolation. I held shame in my body for not having known this history earlier and further shame at the realization that my family history is not something that this country at large is willing to recognize.

The reason why I share my own personal history here is because I want to illuminate how important it is to create space to name the forces, systems, and the people who made us. As a recipient of the teachings of the American public school system and higher-arts education, there is little to no space to understand these relationships. Instead, there are one-sided histories of a perfect savior America or art school pedagogy so synonymous with exclusivity that any meaning is lost in obscurity. I did not see myself reflected nor was I ever invited to share my opinion. If I did, I was punished or made to feel wrong. Often, I had not seen enough of the world to know better.

This mentality was further reinforced when I entered the arts sector workforce. Since 2017, I

have been working primarily within arts institutions, e.g., museums, galleries, liberal arts universities, and with individual artists. My first museum job was in the guest services department, working the admissions desk. I was in awe of the space I was in and the ability to use my lunch breaks to experience new exhibitions. I remember painstakingly learning the hierarchy of the institution, witnessing the demure hush that fell over the admissions staff when a curator would walk by the desk, or noticing that the chief of marketing thought I was an intern for the first several months of me joining his department as a photographer and archivist.

Despite having landed my dream job as a photographer at an art museum, I felt in my bones that something was wrong.

At this institution, departments were always struggling against one another, i.e., communication was primarily through email, even though we could simply walk over to each other’s desks and talk. There were many cliques and little transparency about pay grades, the happenings of the executive leadership team, and how HR functioned.

When a diversity, equity, and inclusion task force was created, I emailed to ask about how I could be involved. I was told that I couldn’t because the executive director had handpicked the participants and no more voices were allowed. When my own manager and team members were behaving inappropriately, and I reported them to HR and the director of the department, nothing happened. Over my two years there, I witnessed several QTDBIPOC+ colleagues leave for hopefully greener grasses.

The hierarchy that prizes certain privileged voices over others, the constructed isolation, the intensive focus on product over process are all symptoms of the same systems that dominate the classroom. This is what QTDBIPOC+ folks experience when working in predominantly white institutions. I didn’t know this while it was happening. Instead, I felt alone, unsupported, and overworked. I felt, for many months, that I was to blame. If only I had read the signs earlier; if only I could have communicated in a less emotional way to my boss; if only I could keep my feelings out of it and just get my paycheck like everyone else.

After leaving this institution to work for myself as a freelance photographer at the end of 2019, I needed time to process what had happened to me. To see myself not as a victim but as a survivor and witness to the systems that created this way of operating in the arts sector. I am not the first to identify that school curriculums in public schools or higher education need to be overhauled. I am not the first to see that museum institutions function largely off of a broken hierarchical system and, therefore, become challenging places to maintain employee retention. But I do think that I have finally come to a place where I see all of these experiences as valid. All of these experiences of oppression and privilege together are my perspective—what happened to me is VALID. I learned that I was not alone. It was this acknowledgment that enabled me to seek change.

ACI came into my world because of my volunteerism as the Co-Chair of MassArt’s Alumni Leadership Council. After working closely with the Dean of the Justice, Equity and Transformation Office for the past year, creating programming for alumni and students of color, I was notified that MassArt would be undergoing something called the Cultural Equity Learning Community (CELC), an ACI program launched in 2020. The CELC aims to build a community focused on intersectional racial justice through reducing harm, increasing skills, building coconspiratorship and equitable organizations.

I also learned that the same organization was piloting the Cultural Equity Incubator, a collective-action shared workspace designed by and for arts and culture leaders committed to intersectional racial equity and creative justice. The first days of my work with ACI were spent moving furniture at the Midway Artist Studios and setting up a new home for me to start learning and supporting the changes that I wanted to see in the arts sector. I still get the same feeling that I did when I first started, i.e., a sort of floating awe that all of these people, representing 11 different organizations, could share the same values around intersectional racial equity and liberatory practices. The ability to name, recognize, and address inequities, the moments of pausing and processing through community dialogue, is a foundational culture within the Cultural Equity Incubator that truly feels like a safe haven to me.

In my work with ACI, I am invited in all of my

fullness to share my knowledge, to listen and test my edges learning new skills, and, above all, to authentically cocreate new ways of being based off of my lived experiences, which are not just a list of oppressions mixed in with privileges that I carry around like a badge representing my exact place in the world. My lived experiences are an activation point to transform from. I think that the best part of being a human being is our ability to change our minds—not just to decide differently but to literally alter the way that we think.

What would it look like to create a foundational culture that prioritizes healing through connection, community dialogues, bidirectional leadership structures, and the idea that, when we are invited to participate in our fullness, we can actually achieve so much more than we ever thought possible?

Marian.

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

—Maya Angelou

The teachers we are given in life, via educational systems and within family, are perhaps far less important than the teachers we choose. The teachers we choose can overlap with those we are given yet require a deeper expansiveness to continue challenging the paradigms in which we are conditioned and raised.

Who do you surround yourself with daily? Who challenges your ways of thinking, of being, and of knowing? Who pushes you to expand your world concept and concepts of self? Who demands growth?

One of the most profound gifts I was given by an educator was unfettered permission to ask questions. It’s silly to think one needs permission to do so; yet, this refocus on process over product, on asking the questions over answering them, reformed the ways I conceptualize value and meaning-making. It was through this permission that the question that catalyzed and serves as the foundation for ACI was penned:

How can we build and support equitable and inclusive communities in and through the arts?

When stepping into new ways of being, we have to make room not only for the questions but for the multiplicity of questions that come after finding “the question.”

The truth is that the unraveling process is endless, especially in systemic change.

Some of the humans who have contributed most directly to the evolution of ACI’s foundational question(s) and to the shaping of this work include:

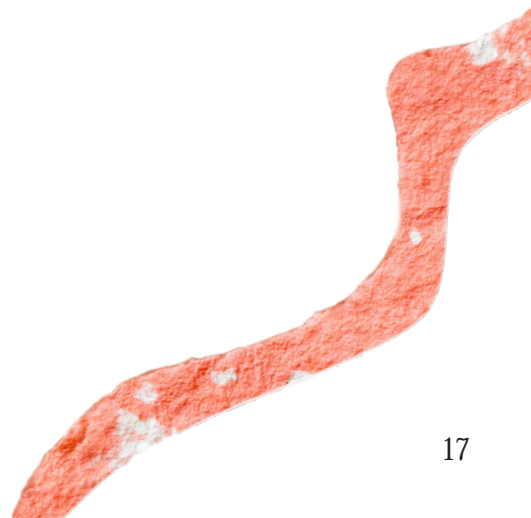
Basil Kincaid, Stephen Hamilton, Bes Young, Alia Ali, Miho Tsujii, Alva Mooses, Andre Mestré, Hyppolite Ntigurirwa, Andrea Gordillo, Chanel Matsunami Govreau, Sumeya Aden, Dashawn Borden, Alice Brito-Acevedo, Ny’lasia Brown, Jonathan Lopez, Jedidia Santana, Kimberly Curhan, Hanako Brais, Chase Chen, Cherry Hong, Peiwen Soh, Michelle Song, Joseph Quisol, Esther Kamau, Allegra Fletcher, Joy McDowell, Manny Martínez, Kelsey Karys, Sahara Zamundio, Micah Rosegrant, Mel Taing, Jessica Fei, David Brown, Jennifer Bartecchi, Shreyas Navare, Jennifer Bailey, Quanice Floyd, Richard Tiago Santiago, Meena Malik, Alyssa Liles-Amponsah, Deidra Montgomery, Zakiyyah Sutton, Dawn Meredith Simmons, Karthik Subramanian, Ellice Patterson, Andrew Choe, Romy St. Hilaire, Luke Blackadar, Jim Grace, Mar Parrilla, Lani Asuncion, Juwonni Cottle, Tri Quach, Marissa Molinar, Brian Lim, Jazzmin Bonner, Geena M. Forristall, Harold Steward, Amanda Shea, Karen Young, Aysha Upchurch, Nicole Agois, Antonio Cuyler, Lyssa Palu-ay, Michael Bobbit, Eva Rosenberg, Kara Elliot-Ortega, Mama Erdene Clark, Susan Taylor-Brown, and Sara Marie Ferrarone.*

*This list is imperfectly incomplete and will remain in both draft form and evolution, always.

Where does equity start?

The humans named above have taught me that equity starts in naming the structures in which we live, participate, and perpetuate. This includes naming the role(s) we all have in creating liberated futures. Recognizing our shared humanity is essential in ethically working to shift power and dismantle systems of oppression as we collectively build a just and liberated future.

The process of evolution is iterative, responsive, and emergent—and with that, we embrace messiness as an essential part of the journey.



ACI Nurturings



Since March 2020, marking the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, ACI's team(s) have:

- partnered in the formation of #culturalsalvation, a grassroots effort focused on collective action centering intersectional racial equity launched in March 2020
- hosted our second national Arts Equity Summit, reaching over 1K participants, reimaged virtually in April 2020
- created sector-wide antiracism and antioppression training with the Cultural Equity Learning Community, engaging over 1.5K arts leaders to date, launched in July 2020
- deepened our racial equity consulting arm and work; engaging increased clientele from January 2021 onward
- distributed \$74K in grants, a redistribution of monies via community care and mutual aid, in the summer of 2021
- became community nurturing partner of They Watch You Thrive, a collaborative series summoning the queer ancestors through folklore, ritual, and communal care, launched summer of 2021
- became the organizing partner and fiscal sponsor of the Cultural Equity Incubator, a collective action shared workspace and hub with 11 partners, launched in June 2021
- created space for new ways of being, structuring, and leading, launching our Co-Director Model with 12 Co-Directors in July 2021

We offer insight into three emergent components: the Cultural Equity Learning Community, Cultural Equity Incubator and the Co-Director Model (below).

Cultural Equity Learning Community (CELC)

The arts and culture sector reproduces institutional and systemic oppression through upholding and centering white supremacist structures, often unconsciously. Boston is not unique in this, nor is the arts and culture sector. This manifests in predominantly white-founded, white-led, and white-funded arts and culture organizations and institutions in Boston and nationally.

The Cultural Equity Learning Community (CELC) was created to support individuals, organizations, and institutions in progressing their intersectional racial equity practices. The CELC pilot comprised two units, with 16 weeks of materials. The CELC

is asynchronous, designed to be completed at one's own pace, with wrap-around support. Unit 1 focuses on examining self; Unit 2 focuses on examining systems in building equity.

The CELC is currently under reflection and re-design, and we will relaunch in partnership with the Massachusetts Cultural Council in July 2022. The training will be offered statewide across Massachusetts as well as to a national cohort, including but not limited to nonprofit organizations, for-profit organizations, foundations and philanthropists, state arts agencies, government entities, and higher-education institutions.

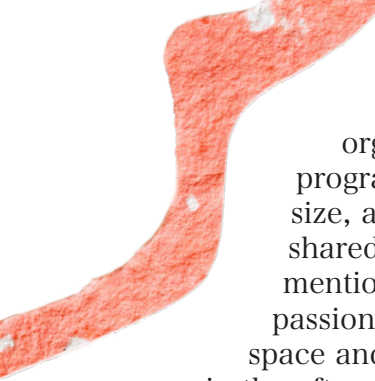
The CELC pilot was made possible through funding partnership with the Mayor's Office of Arts & Culture, The Boston Foundation, New England Foundation for the Arts, Foley Hoag Foundation, Mass Humanities, Cambridge Community Foundation, Cambridge Arts Council, and ArtistsThrive, an initiative of the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation.

More information can be found at www.culturalequitylc.org

Cultural Equity Incubator (CEI)

The Cultural Equity Incubator (CEI) is a collective action shared workspace designed by and for arts and culture leaders committed to intersectional racial equity and creative justice. The CEI is focused on resource sharing, community care, and creative collaboration in order to decenter the white supremacist work ethic embedded in the US nonprofit business model. The initiative is in a two-year residence at the Midway Artist Studios in Boston's Fort Point district. CEI core partners will test a shared approach toward nonprofit fundamentals like governance, fundraising, marketing, infrastructure, and programming.

Opened in June 2021, the CEI is a community of 11 core partner organizations: Abilities Dance Boston, Art in the Antilles, Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston, Danza Orgánica, Digital Soup, Dunamis, MASSCreative, Midday Movement Series, The Flavor Continues, StageSource, and ACI.



These groups range in their organizational growth timelines, programming capacities, budget size, and communities served; shared across them is the aforementioned value alignment and a passion to activate across communal space and time rather than continue in the often-siloing models that capitalism enforces. Of these organizations, 82% are QTDBIPOC+ led, with 55% representing artist collectives and 45% representing art service organizations. When the CEI began, the annual budget of each organization was under \$500K, with nearly 50% of partners with annual budgets under \$50K.

The CEI was born out of #culturalsalvation (#cs), a grassroots movement centering BIPOC-led and -serving arts organizations in Massachusetts. Organizations such as Culture Works Philadelphia, Social Impact Commons, and Boston Ujima Project served as inspiration for moving toward collective action and equity using a shared commons approach.

Although COVID-19 still impacts CEI core partners in utilizing the shared space at full capacity, the core partners conduct biweekly meetings in order to share resources and skills and codesign initiatives and programming. Recently, the CEI core partners MASSCreative and Dunamis, in tandem with other arts sector organizations, led Create the Vote Boston, a nonpartisan, grassroots campaign with a focus on increasing civic engagement and strengthening our democracy.

Create the Vote developed creative strategies to register people to vote, educate voters about casting ballots by mail, activate communities' participation in the electoral process, advocate for safer in-person elections, and turn people out to vote. This collaboration included a CTV Arts Voters Guide, which aired live before a WBUR mayoral candidate forum. The CEI created space for all core partners to provide support to Create the Vote, especially as the city of Boston seeks a new mayor.

Since its opening in June 2021, the CEI has become a hub of creative collaboration and joy. With a gallery exhibition space and a stage for performances, the CEI aims to open its doors not just to the core partners of CEI but to the arts and culture sector at large.

The CEI pilot is made possible through funding partnership with the Mayor's Office of Arts & Culture, The Boston Foundation, and the Barr Foundation, Arts & Creativity.

More information can be found at www.culturalequityincubator.org

Co-Director Model

A reflection we are synthesizing in community dialogues is that ACI serves well as a vessel for collective action, such as the responsive, community-driven development of the Cultural Equity Learning Community and the community-steward-ed Cultural Equity Incubator.

The individuals who make up ACI show up to the organization as a vessel: one container we can mold toward shaping change together.

Andrea Gordillo, Co-Director of Community Weaving, reminds us how we can "write our own job descriptions and liberated futures," as we apply for funding to further our collective work. The people of ACI, e.g., artists, consultants, fellows, and partners, frame the work not as exclusive nor inherent to us but as a constant practice we must build and tend to so we can live out shared values in our cultures and cultivate communal autonomy over resources and care.

Structurally as a nonprofit, ACI is strategically positioned to activate collective action through its charter, which distinctly gives ACI regranteeing powers. This empowers the organization to serve as mediator between communities in direct need, i.e., communities that ACI's individuals belong to.

With this backdrop, ACI inaugurated the Co-Director Model in July 2021 to experiment with a way of being that we hypothesize will empower us to more holistically embody our mission and values in the administration and programming of the organization. Recognizing that nonprofit boards and leadership structures are predicated on antiquated capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist principles valuing charity over self-determination and equity, ACI's Co-Director Model shares and redistributes power equitably among 12 QTDBIPOC+ team members who belong to the communities our programming centers, championing a board and staff that are one in the same.

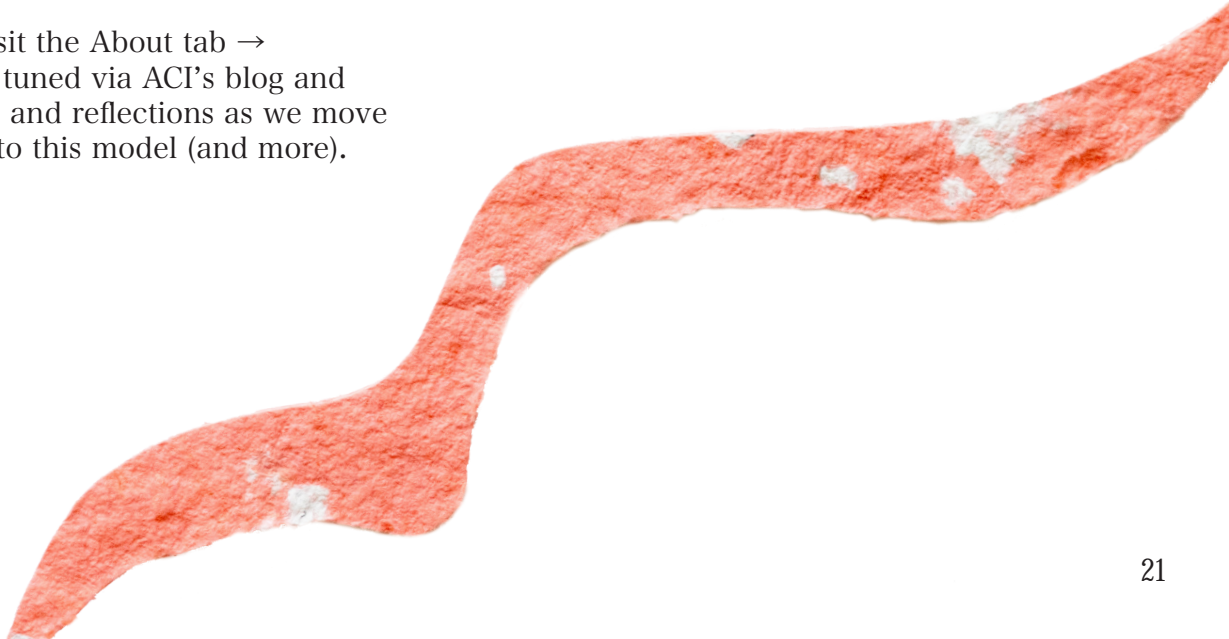
All of our team members have the same voting responsibility in this lateral leadership structure, and we do not prioritize our Co-Directors based on their position within (some Co-Directors are part-time employees, while others are consultants and others are neutral voting members not employed by ACI). The inflection point catalyzed by our shared leadership model is reflected in our programming and strategic vision as well.

What we are finding thus far is that this structure of organizing enables each Co-Director to show up more fully to themselves and thus to their work in the organization. By literally writing our own titles, then determining through relation and check-ins what responsibilities and verbs these positions necessitate, we are each growing our autonomy to operationalize the distinct histories and theories we arrive at collective action with. We directly address the nonprofit paradox by intentionally centering care: through our check-ins in every meeting, through embedding an accessible dance area and a no-work room in our shared physical space, and through benefits in our payment structure, which pays everyone equally for the myriad realms of labor we achieve (from consulting to administration to ideation and beyond) while building in paid time for art, wellness, and activism.

We reflect on this transformational leadership as both a new way of being (new to many of us, new to traditional nonprofit organizing) and an ancestral way of being that we must remember together through continuous pause, learning, and adaptation.

More information can be found at www.artsconnectinternational.org

To view the model, visit the About tab → Co-Directors and stay tuned via ACI's blog and newsletter for updates and reflections as we move through learning tied to this model (and more).



Seeds to Sow



Micah.

How do we form sustainable growth pathways for our futurity?

Ty Defoe, aforementioned friend and mentor, shares with me his practice of an Ojibwe seven-generations philosophy: it is a guiding idea that, when we are not dreaming seven generations beyond us, we are not dreaming big enough. This mindset invests us in a collective responsibility to see how the verbs of our today echo and shape the futures beyond this embodiment, beyond this one life.

There are futures where academic institutions, which currently wield and wage the largest masses of educational capital, root their teaching back in the communities they occupy.

On the microlevel, schools can fund local communities and organizations to make nonextractive pathways for students to experience bidirectional mentorship with artists and cultural workers in the neighborhood.

On the macrolevel (this requires mass organizing toward systems-level change), by divesting from prisons and fossil fuels (i.e., industries of killing) and investing in people and sustainable ecologies of care, we can make a deep investment in this species' relationship to this planet. We can move our frame of living from survival into reciprocal futurity, relating in ways that tell this earth and each other that we are integral to the most vibrant possibilities of this life's mysterious existence.

Mel.

Seeds for myself

To overcome imposter syndrome + move through the world trusting my knowing

To listen (to others, to the universe, to nature, to my body) with my full self

To leave perfectionism and sense of urgency at the door in the work that I do

Seeds for others

To uplift and hold the valid experiences that QTDBIPOC+ folx face in PWI/arts sector
NO MORE GASLIGHTING FOR US!

To center JOY + PLEASURE + RADIANCE in our work

To know that it's ok to move at the speed of trust and capacity (our attention is the most basic form of love

- sometimes all that a situation needs is attention)

Seeds for the arts sector

To believe that change is possible (not limited to but beginning at: naming + admitting complicity in the systems and forces that must be dismantled)

FAIR COMPENSATION FOR ARTISTS. Full stop. Open Lines of Communication between individuals, departments, organizations, and entire sectors. Sharing the facts - primarily thinking of wage here - can transform our lives by making pay more equitable.

Marian.

One wish

My one wish is to center, invest in, and build with the next generations of leaders*, actively seeding and shaping the arts and culture sector and our world.

*equitably, authentically, and with unconditional love

Releasing power is an act of radical love. Nurturing power in others is a joyful act of liberation.

Let us practice love and liberation.

i will be loved like the moon, 2021
 Micah Rosegrant, Marian Taylor Brown



Image Description: There are multiple layers of paper present. The background is a white paper, interspersed with purple and white flecked handmade recycled clothing paper. On top of that piece is a top layer that is made out of recycled clothing paper, with precision organic cuts made throughout. On the right side of the composition purple pieces of paper are interwoven in the blue paper, and there is an organically shaped pink imagination blanket strip of paper. There is also a small origami bird in the bottom left corner. The paper cuts make an almost mountain like scene with a purple crescent moon tucked away lovingly in the background. There is hand-writing on all layers of the paper, the words of which are below.

if i am loved on this planet, i will be loved like the moon:
all the way around, sun-mirror luminescent and more than a reflection
of any heavenly power—don't you ever call me "quarter",
"half" of anything; i am full even on my least bright nights

WE CONVINCED OURSELVES WE MUST BE ABLE TO NAME A THING FOR US TO LIVE
IT...

... I CANNOT THINK OF A THOUGHT MORE FAR FROM THIS IMPOSSIBLE NOTION WE
CALL 'TRUTH'

if i am loved on this Planet, i will be loved like the moon

thank goodness for each other: the levity of embraces that remind us
gravity is not our only constant

pronounce me whole and mean it
pronounce me whole and mean it
pronounce me whole and mean it

thank the sacred breath of our sacred throats humming us to a new home called tomorrow
where we abolish this U.S. for the abundance of us

say "i am a waxing gibbous" with your full chest
like you have stake in this ever-growing vessel of light

every day, i am a little closer to kindness for this flesh's infinite phases,
and reaching farther distance from who treat me as constant to their sky

DEEP AND NEAR ARE KNOWINGS WHO REMIND US DAWNS ARE BUBBLING
IN THE DIRT THAT WE ARE NOT ALL READY TO LEARN HOW TO LOVE

i am a rock to my own bloodtide ~ an orbit toward generations beyond our us...

LIKE ALL LIVING CRADLES OF OUR TOGETHERNESS, THIS CRANE HAS HEART:
FLEW TWO YEARS ON MY OWN BACK AFTER FOLDING THRU HIS HANDS INTO MINE

can something rise without
another to rise over(?)

treat this ever-molting vessel as a borrowed gift—as a cicada's burrowed dream:
mud-womb treasure ready for a brief, fucking glorious emergence
if i was catechised to be an earthstuck angel, let me follow our luciferic right to be
a god-damned sexy one: no secrets, just origami-alchemizing a bible into holier robes and
halo to strut a chosen family's gospel

THIS IS HOW OUR SPELL THRIVES: WINDING RIVERS; WEAVING FRACTALS; WE INCISE
CERTAIN WOUNDS TO HEAL THEM, SOME HEALINGS CALL FOR SUTURING; EVERY
VALLEY IS A PRESENCE OF DEPTH & SKY — NOT AN ABSENCE TO OVERCOME...

Conclusion



Thank you for taking the time to journey with us. To listen, to grapple, to explore.

Returning full circle to where we began, we once again ask: What is alive in you? What do the words bloom, care, seen, heard, and held evoke for you?

What did you notice within as you read our narratives and stories? Have you heard these reflections in your own conscious and lived thoughts and experiences? Have you heard parallel provocations from your students or colleagues? What parts of yourself do you bring to your leadership role(s) and which do you leave (intentionally or unintentionally) behind?

We'd love to hear from you, learn with you—this is an open offering to cocreation and an offering to engage with us in continuing study, together.

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culturalequityincubator.org

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