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## From Grassroots to Systems Change: Art for Social Justice

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### ABSTRACT

Art for social justice has long challenged notions of whose stories are told, how, and by whom, positioning it as a key body of practice to combat neoliberalism and other structures of domination. In the global struggle for liberation, art and social justice practices must be contextualized, requiring approaches and pedagogy that address the cultural landscapes in which they are rooted. Against this backdrop, the activist-authors explore two questions: 1) In what ways do practices in the arts and social justice differ and intersect across cultural contexts? and 2) What lessons can be gleaned from grassroots and systems-level approaches to arts for social justice? Here, three vignettes, explored through Chicane *testimonios* and story circles rooted in Black and Indigenous theater practice, elucidate approaches to building creative justice in the landwaters colonized into Colombia, Rwanda, and the United States. Across these three vignettes, questions of practice and lessons learned emerge.

### KEYWORDS

Art; social justice; grassroots; systems change; cultural equity; Colombia; Rwanda; United States of America; *testimonios*; story circles

## Introduction

In *Art Without Market, Art Without Education: Political Economy of Art*, Vidokle (2013) discusses the difference between economic and cultural value within the arts market. By challenging notions of whose stories are told, how, and by whom, art for social justice centers the cultural value of the arts, challenging the economic demands of hegemonic art markets. Although the arts for social justice have long been documented for their capacities to positively transform social realities, they face economic marginalization within the global arts market, exacerbated by neoliberal policies (Serra, Enríquez, and Johnson 2017; Smeyers and Depaepe 2018).

Artists with nonhegemonic social identities leading the field, although substantially marginalized within arts markets, have the most robust cultural capital, using their perspectives from the “margins” of society to shed light onto society’s inequalities and imagine equitable alternatives (hooks 2020). To center these artists in examining the arts for social justice, the activist-authors consider the framework of creative justice,

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which provides nuanced interplay between culture and economy, beginning with the inherent understanding that the global arts and culture sector are unequal and inequitable.

Coined by Banks (2017) in *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*, creative justice employs three working concepts: 1) objective respect, referring to the evaluation of cultural objects and practices in terms of their own objective qualities; 2) parity of participation, the support of legitimate cultural rights and statuses of persons by examining points of commensurability between justice claims; and 3) reduction of harms inflicted by cultural work, both physical and psychological, based on assessments of objective conditions and their human effects (Banks 2017; Brown 2020). Creative justice also offers a unique perspective on the arts for social justice, as its attention to context, equity, and reduction of harms is well positioned to combat the homogenizing, exploitative, neoliberal qualities of the arts landscape.

An exploration of the arts and social justice across cultural contexts requires an acute awareness of the economic, political, and social landscapes in which they are situated, rooting analysis in culturally relevant approaches. Through reflections of three arts practices around the globe, the activist-authors explore two questions: 1) In what ways do practices in the arts and social justice differ and intersect across cultural contexts? and 2) What lessons can be gleaned from grassroots and systems-level approaches to arts for social justice? Three vignettes, explored through Chicane *testimonios* and story circles rooted in Black and Indigenous theater practice, elucidate approaches toward building creative justice in the landwaters colonized into Colombia, Rwanda, and the United States of America, revealing questions of practice and the lessons learned.

## Methodology

As the activist-authors explore qualitative inquiry for this research, they identify *testimonio* and story circle methodologies as the best ways to share their knowledge within the auspices of academic research. Rooted in Chicane studies, *testimonio* methodology is part of a legacy of reflexive narratives of liberation that “[brings] to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action” (Blackmer and Rodríguez 2012, 525). Both intentional and political, *testimonio* methodology calls on the reader to listen deeply to the author’s account in relation to their own experiences and perspectives (Collins 1991). According to Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona (2012), *testimonios* “[challenge] objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression or resistance” (363). While the activist-authors do not identify as Chicane, they borrow the aforementioned aspects of *testimonio* methodology, translating them into their own realms of struggle, conscious in that their adaptation is not a true representation of *testimonios* as originally conceptualized.

*Testimonios* can be conducted via an interlocutor, who listens to accounts and stories and translates them into text, or by a *testimonialista*, who narrates their own story, intentionally challenging dominant notions of who can construct knowledge (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona 2012). The activist-authors employ both interlocutor

and *testimonialistas*, where the discussion section is created via an interlocutor based on vignettes created by the *testimonialistas*, and a story-circle-based *testimonio* involving the *testimonialistas* and interlocutor.

Story circle methodology, passed down through the interlocutor's mentorship with Márquez Rhyne, further enriches the activist-authors' hybrid methodological approach. Rhyne honed their organizing praxis at Alternate ROOTS and the Highlander Research and Education Center and learned story circle methodology through the lineage of a Black theater practice at Highlander and The Carpetbag Theater, which formed from the Black Arts Movement, in turn ignited by the Black Power Movement during the Civil Rights Movement (Rhyne 2020). From the Black Arts Movement also emerged Junebug Productions, a contemporary legacy of Free Southern Theater, where John O'Neal founded the story circle to which Rhyne was first introduced.

This story circle lineage originated as a way for culture creators to build history with their communities and shape and archive culture by understanding how intersecting lives create our narrative past, present, and future (O'Neal et al. n.d.). Both Rhyne and O'Neal teach that the practice and its elements are present in Indigenous traditions and communities worldwide. Core to story circles is the equal distribution of time and space, honoring listening and respect, communicating through presence and emergence rather than preparation, and trusting in silence (O'Neal et al. n.d.; Brown, Rosegrant, and Taing 2021).

## Artist introduction

The activist-authors penning this piece assert that no research is free of bias. This article explores the work propelled through our lived experiences and embodied knowledge. The activist-authors find one another through kinship and commitment to arts for social justice, woven together through the community affiliated with Arts Connect International (ACI), a Boston-based nonprofit focused on building equity in and through the arts. In what follows, Andrea, Hyppolite, and Marian present vignettes of their arts journeys and practices in different parts of the globe, informed by their personal journeys and contextualized in their respective territories. Following these vignettes, the interlocutor Micah engages in discussion, weaving together the vignettes to shed light on best practices, questions, and lessons learned in the arts for social justice. We begin with Andrea exploring the first tenant of creative justice: objective respect.

## Vignette I: Selva Records, Colombia

### *Why I am here, Andrea Gordillo*

When my family migrated to the United States of America from Perú in 1998 in search of a better future, I, like many other immigrant children, struggled with belonging in a xenophobic, racist society that treated my culture and identity as inferior to that of the dominant US culture (Adair 2015). The desire to heal led me to the arts, where I find the freedom to create the reality in which I want to live. Through an arts residency with Arts Connect International (ACI) from 2016 to 2017, I explored

themes of migration through video and music in a shelter for Central American migrants in Oaxaca, México. This experience set the stage for continued transnational awareness and collaboration through the arts, augmenting when I traveled to Colombia and met my partner, Silvana Velásquez. Together, we founded Selva Records in 2020, a transnational audiovisual and musical production company for artists of identities relegated to the margins of society. Currently, I weave together the transnational communities to which I belong as co-founder of Selva Records and co-director of ACI, working toward transnational collective liberation through the arts for social justice.

### ***Why We are here, Selva Records***

Selva Records was founded in Bogotá, Colombia, in response to the structural barriers, such as poverty, sexism, and racism, that prevented our friends from producing their music (Guerrero 2019). While statistics on male-to-female ratios of working artists in Colombia are scarce, studies show that female artists make up roughly 10%–35% of participants in Colombia's largest music festivals (Shock 2019), reflective of the worldwide music industry, which has historically excluded women and nonwhite people. For example, Smith et al. (2021) found that, in an analysis of 900 popular songs from 2012 to 2020, only 21.6% of the artists were female, that the ratio of male to female producers was 38:1, and that only nine out of 1,200 producing credits went to women of color. Our female, nonbinary, and racialized artist friends express frustration at a musical industry that instrumentalizes and victimizes them and does not offer them artistic or economic stability. Correspondingly, the art created by these artists questions powers of domination and subordination while spreading messages of community, healing, and justice.

Silvana and I mounted Selva Records in response to this structural exclusion and devaluation of artists' work, intentionally building community with artists of intersectional, marginal identities to combat the neoliberal, white supremacist, patriarchal world order.

### ***Activated in the now***

Selva Records has collaborated on songs and videos with more than 30 artists all over *Abya Yala*, the *Kuna* word for "Latin America." We work with women and gender-nonconforming people. Our centerpiece project is "Cyfemme" (Selva Records n.d.), an online platform that aims to create intersectional feminist culture. Cyfemmes draw from the extemporaneous and "underground" nature of hip hop's "cyphers," freestyle sessions among many rappers; we do not deeply engage in preproduction or cater to a wide audience with sales in mind but collaborate with artists improvisationally, centering interpersonal relationships and collective creative processes with an orientation toward social justice.

This is in direct challenge to the music industry's homogenizing and exploitative practices (Deggans 2015; Kreps 2015). In the twenty-first century, three major record labels (Universal Music Group, Sony Music, and Warner Music Group) hold a monopoly on the popular music market, which places significant cultural power in the hands of an elite few, allowing them to exploit artists and shape a cultural agenda that benefits

these labels. While these labels sign artists with a profit share that is often less than 20% (Recording Connection 2022), Selva Records affirms that any profits generated on a co-produced song belong to both the artists and producers equally. Selva Records challenges the neoliberal hegemony of the music industry by prioritizing relationships and social transformation over monetary generation.

When we invite artists to collaborate, we engage in critical discussions around power structures and modes of liberation before translating them into art. A rich history of activism, feminism, and public education in *Abya Yala* sets the stage for each artist to inform their music with unique perspectives based on personal and collective experiences, centering topics like patriarchy, racism, state violence, body liberation, self-love, sexual awakening, and more. Discussion at the beginning of the creative process allows for intentional pedagogical curation with an orientation toward intersectional feminist liberation.

Conscious discussion about audience and impact have led to difficult conversations that challenge our personal assumptions and invite us to center empathy. One of the most important contradictions with which we grapple internally is music production and cultural appropriation. We and the mestiza artists with whom we work create music deriving from Black struggle and celebration, adapting these traditions to our own contexts and circumstances as has been done worldwide for millennia. Given *mestizaje's* proximity to whiteness (Moreno Figueroa 2010) and its domination of the Latin American music industry, the cultural appropriation of Black music by mestiza people reinforces structural racial oppression in Latin America.

As we continue our praxis, we intentionally name and grapple with the contradiction of racial power imbalances in Latin America and music's capacity to hold resistance against imperialism and North centrism, which are, like white supremacy, pillars of colonialism. As we construct a feminist culture in music, it is impossible and irresponsible not to acknowledge the injustice of Black and Indigenous marginalization and to make reparations to rectify the imbalance of power. While imperfect, this manifests in our practice of centering and uplifting Black and Indigenous voices and constantly questioning white supremacy in our actions and discourses.

### ***Centering on creative justice, objective respect***

The hegemonic arts market's violence toward artists of non-hegemonic identities reflects the lack of "objective respect," i.e., the respect of cultural objects and practices when we evaluate them in terms of their own objective qualities as well as their subjective apprehension and values (Banks 2017; Cuyler 2019) inherent in the art world. Without objective respect situating art within subjective contexts, society filters culture to exclude from the dominant narrative works that do not echo dominant structures of power, denying artists of intersectional identities economic sustainability. This lack of objective respect does not just affect individuals; those who have the power to shape culture reinforce dominant power structures that harm us all.

Selva Records assigns an objective respect to the lives and cultural creations to women and gender non-conforming, including those who are racialized, poor, disabled, and queer. In a region that has some of the largest rates of femicides in the world

and is exploited by the Global North for raw materials and labor (Dorninger et al. 2021), Selva Records' challenges patriarchal and neoliberal norms that take away the lives and freedom of millions of people in the region. Music is our tool of resistance, activism, and healing. In the next section, Hyppolite discusses his arts practice in relation to Bank's second concept of creative justice: parity of participation.

## **Vignette II: Be the Peace, Rwanda**

### ***Why I am here, Hyppolite Ntigurirwa***

Months after the genocide against the Tutsi, which killed more than a million people in Rwanda in just 100 days, I started primary school. As a child, I barely spoke in class. Felman and Laub (1992), preeminent scholars of the 1941–1945 Holocaust, explain that the tragic experiences of war, violence, and genocide, can result in loss of verbal expression for survivors. This is a trauma response that impedes a survivor's ability to provide testimonials, which has remained true for me and many others. My primary school teachers founded a school theater club, desiring to support children in processing the severe trauma we endured. This theater club became an essential ground for healing and unity amongst the children and our families, many of whom were skeptical at first. Storytelling continues to be the bedrock of my work focused on intergenerational healing.

### ***Why we are here, Be the Peace***

The genocide resulted in hundreds of thousands of Tutsi orphans and widowers with millions more exiled. Infrastructures within Rwanda were destroyed; those who were left to rebuild the nation faced economic, educational, and political systems in peril (Akresh and de Walque 2008). Fear, hate, and trauma bestowed across generations.

In processing my healing and that of my nation at large, questions of empathy led me to found Be The Peace in 2014, a grassroots arts and healing organization focused on community storytelling as a means to halt the intergenerational transmission of hate. Art has long been used as an effective tool for building empathy, compassion, and shared understanding of disciplines and cultural contexts. For example, in *The Art of Peace*, Baily (2018) discusses the implementation of programs using art for reconciliation and peacebuilding after Colombia signed a peace accord between the rebel army and government in 2016. In Syria, the play *Prophecy 2015* incited feelings of hope and resilience amid the nation's conflicts (Baily 2018). In post-genocide Rwanda, art continues to play an essential role in reconciliation and peacebuilding.

While searching for tools to support Be The Peace's work, I came across Boal's work in *Theater of the Oppressed* (Boal 2000), which states that "theater is change and not a simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being" (pg. 28). Theater can unlock the individual, collective, and memorial emotions that are so challenging to access; it can rebuild empathy lost, inspiring hope and a peaceful future (Boal 2000). We draw from *Theatre of the Oppressed's* forum, image, playback, and invisible theaters because of their unique ability to honor conflicting emotions and truths of survivors and perpetrators of one of the twenty-first century's bloodiest



conflicts. Although there are varying experiences of the genocide, the manifestations of distrust in humanity and the loss of empathy affects everyone. The arts for social justice hinge on the practice of empathy, which requires stepping into another's experience, even when that experience differs from one's own. Perspective-taking presents an opportunity for audiences to position themselves in the process toward creating sustainable peace.

### ***Activated in the now***

Alongside Andrea, I became an artist in residence with Arts Connect International (ACI) from 2016 to 2017, where I worked with Alan O'Hare at Life Story Theatre. The learning that took place during my residency elevated my skills and my capacity to take creative risks, connecting to a global network of social justice artists that I continue to collaborate with today. Following my return to Rwanda, I became an arts program manager at the British Arts Council. In 2019, I took leave to produce a 100-day performance piece: the Be The Peace Walk.

This walk commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi, where the 100 days of performance represent the 100 days in which the massacre took place in 1994. Co-creators joined me from around the globe to walk through each of Rwanda's 30 districts, meeting and engaging with survivors and perpetrators of the genocide. It became clear that their lives were intertwined and represented in the collective play of life, recovery, resilience, and hope being penned.

Continuing the global work of Be The Peace, I became a postgraduate world fellow at Yale University in 2020 and then began a doctoral program at Coventry University in 2021. The transnational learning taking place at this juncture of my life, along with the work's trajectory, will have implications on the next steps of my journey and the work at large. Be The Peace plans to become a global movement with a long-term vision to build a community center on newly acquired land near Lake Cyohoha in Rwanda. Be The Peace's transformational work continues to take root while also continuing essential healing work on a global scale.

### ***Centering on creative justice, parity of participation***

In relationship to creative justice, parity of participation, which hinges on offering a point of reference between different claims of justice, is used to describe ideals of society where 1) all peoples are able to enter into cultural work and, within and through that work, will be treated justly and paid equitably, 2) it ensures that people are not prevented from entering cultural work based on grounds of discrimination, and 3) it focuses on developing cultural industries as democratic spaces where marginalized groups can advance representation and ownership in public spaces (Banks 2017).

Be The Peace represents parity of participation in that it works to ensure that all peoples have access to theater and, as stated in the Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1948), Article 27: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." Although Be The Peace is democratic in nature, we participate within a larger neoliberal structure predicated on international aid and economic



exchange. One of the challenges I face is the credentialing required to do this essential work. Although I am grateful for the opportunity to study for multiple degrees abroad, I question the cost associated with each. How do the institutions and persons I've interacted within each shape myself and *Be The Peace* through a transnational (and at times colonial) lens? Ultimately, how is success defined, and by whom?

In planning the next steps, I think about how to ensure that the work that *Be The Peace* generates is by and for Rwandans. This is a small but important act of resistance against neoliberalism. *Be The Peace* promotes parity of participation by extending access to the arts to all Rwandan people, addressing healing post-conflict, memory, reconciliation, and empathy, ultimately leading toward creative justice. In the next section, Marian discusses the last pillar of creative justice: reduction of harms.

### **Vignette III: Arts Connect International, USA**

#### ***Why I am here, Marian Taylor Brown***

Growing up neurodiverse, the visual arts became my guide to communicate, access curriculum, and demonstrate learning. Art is also where I find kinship, community, and meaning making. Recognizing the privilege of growing up with access to the arts, and high-quality public education, my focus blooms to center on building creative and inclusive environments. The roots that ground each of us within arts and social justice have varying depths—and yet, we all spring from familiar seeds and soil. My life focuses on ensuring that all seeds have the conditions necessary to grow, in whatever climate or geography they may choose to take root.

#### ***Why We are here, Arts Connect International***

I founded Arts Connect International (ACI) in 2014 with the belief that artists create innovative, community-contextualized solutions to pressing human rights issues. We launched with an international artist in residence (AiR) program that ran from 2014 to 2017, through which Andrea, Hyppolite, and I started collaborating, alongside many other social justice artists. The AiR program includes a financial grant, travel support, leadership training, and an artist community. Artists co-create programs, exhibitions, shows, and speaking engagements, and residency location and foci are defined by the artists, exploring questions like the ones Andrea and Hyppolite describe above on transmigration and intergenerational healing, respectively.

ACI launched with the assumption that, for social justice artists' work to be financially sustainable, entrepreneurial skill development is necessary, which is a facet of an artist's professional life that is not centralized in most arts higher-education spaces. This hypothesis led ACI's AiR program to focus on rendering essential cultural work financially sustainable. This hypothesis, however, fails to recognize the political economy of the arts in relationship to creative justice, situating economic success as paramount, in turn prioritizing product over process and economy over culture.

Looking back on ACI's origins and my own, I understand where this thinking originated. My life and training embody cultural racism, i.e., characteristics of white supremacy culture and neoliberalism (Okun and Jones 1999), as I'd grown up in an

upper-class suburb, in a two-parent household, as a cis-gendered white femme child. Although my family's commitment to social justice runs deep, so do the roots of colonization that formed the culture(s) that I grew up within.

The focus on material and capital wealth in the community I was raised in, along with an overwhelming commitment to the Catholic Church, shape all facets of how success is validated within social hierarchy. It is a culture that profits off assimilation and neoliberalism in sustaining order and dominance (Mckinley 2021). Similarly, the tenants of white supremacy culture offered by Okun and Jones (1999), such as perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity of quality, worship of the written word, paternalism, power hoarding, and fear of open conflict, resonate deeply, and are present in the public education systems and higher-education institutions I engaged within and was shaped by.

Through deep, intentional study, individually and within community, I have come to understand that it's not a question of if I am racist but rather when I am, and will be, racist (Kendi 2019). This is the product of existing within racist, ableist, classist, sexist, xenophobic structures, and societies, which actively profit from oppression. This is also where the white-savior industrial complex roots, often masked as compassionate progressive thought, actualized through the nonprofit industrial complex (La Piana 2010; Rodriguez 2017; Fisher 2017).

Once I become aware of the systems within which I participate, in relation to the aspects of my identity that hold privilege and power, I have no choice but to embrace the deep systems learning that must take place to mitigate harm and support liberation (Stroh 2015). I am unendingly grateful to the artists who see all the merits of ACI in its early days of evolution, while challenging me and the organization to invest in approaches that mitigate harm.

### ***Activated in the now***

Principal to the learning that took place in these early formative years of ACI is recognition that 1) social justice artists are uniquely poised to lead community-contextualized work that is under-recognized and resourced; 2) being a social justice artist, particularly for artists occupying multiple marginalized identities, demands a level of tenacity and resilience that is exhausting to sustain; and 3) the systems surrounding social justice artists are saturated with predominantly white institutions and individuals whom, however well-intentioned, perpetuate harm that reinforces white supremacy culture and neoliberalism. With these points of recognition and learning, ethically, I as an individual and ACI as an organization, have no choice but to shift into a systems-level orientation to intersectional liberatory work.

We start by stepping back to move at the speed of trust (Brown 2017). From 2017 to 2019, ACI embarks on a multimethod multiyear multiphase study on cultural equity in the arts, resulting in two reports: *Examining Cultural Equity in the Arts* (Brown and Brais 2018) and *Moves Toward Equity: Perspectives from Arts Leaders of Color* (Brown, Brais, and Fletcher 2019). In 2017, ACI hosts an artist-leader retreat for healing and community regeneration, and in 2017–2018, we examine our community facing programming, conducting an internal cultural competence audit. In 2019, we

pilot our Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) process with the Youth United Artists and launch the Arts Equity Summit.

Diving deeper into systems-level work, from 2020 to 2022, ACI continues to practice principles of emergence in: 1) developing the Cultural Equity Learning Community, an asynchronous intersectional antiracism training for sector leadership; 2) deepening our racial equity consulting arm; 3) distributing grants for mutual aid to queer, trans, disabled, Black, Indigenous, and person of color (QTDBIPOC+) arts leaders; 4) grow into the fiscal sponsor for several QTDBIPOC+ collectives; 5) bloom into the role of organizing partner for the Cultural Equity Incubator, a collective action-shared workspace and hub committed to intersectional racial equity; and 6) create space for new ways of being, structuring, and leading with ACI's co-director model. We are amidst many of these explorations and will continue to share as we go.

### **Centering on creative justice, reduction of harms**

Banks (2017) defines reduction of harms as reducing the physical and psychological harms and injustices inflicted by cultural work, based on the assessments of objective conditions and their human effects. Reduction of harms requires both an individual and systems-level approach to remediation. What does it look like for all cultural workers, including social justice arts practitioners, to flourish? How can the arts and culture sector work toward decreasing overworking, stress, bullying, intimidation, domination, aggression, and violence?

Many of these harms situate within social stratification along lines of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, geography, and nationality. To address these harms and to actively work toward creative justice, grassroots and systems-level justice work must continue concurrently. I've learned that, if systems-level inequities remain unaddressed, the harm is unequivocally violent. Change takes time, and, for the present and future, it is imperative that social justice arts leaders have the just and fertile grounds to root and grow.

The three vignettes based on *testimonios* methodology elucidate approaches and questions toward building creative justice in the landwaters colonized into Colombia, Rwanda, and United States of America. To facilitate a discussion amongst the three artist-authors, Micah assumes the role of circle facilitator and interlocutor, where findings and discussion bring us into the present.

### **Findings**

Through the story circle process in which Márquez mentors me, we sojourn through each other's personal histories invited by prompts such as "tell us about a time your cultural context catalyzed your artistry." We then make space for a communal story to crystallize by noticing patterns and asking questions. When we trust our circle and let our pasts arrive to us in a shared presence, truth-filled witnessing, and collective revelation spring up through us, and together they bubble into imaginations toward circular futures (Brown 2017).

What patterns and revelations do we witness, get curious about, and tend to in our circle? We offer the following findings, which form our discussion traversing our core

research questions: 1) In what ways do practices in the arts and social justice differ and intersect across cultural contexts? and 2) What lessons can be gleaned from grassroots and systems-level approaches to arts for social justice? It is important to note that we use the term “traversing” to describe our relationship to the questions themselves as we are indeed journeying. Departing from traditional research that aims to assert truths, our approach is to nurture awakenings surrounding questions. This iterative process is essential to transdisciplinary research (Leavy 2011). What we share is in evolution, and, within this, we invite you to awaken, share, and expand with us.

As we embark on our analyses, we notice that no findings are concretely generalizable. Examining the differences and similarities between arts praxes is not altogether possible or relevant; contextualization is rooted in social justice and does not allow for significant transferability. While we do find commonalities between our narratives and lived experiences, we find that parsing through the differences is limitless. In what follows, we highlight common denominators that transcend through all the *testimonios*, further explored in our story circle.

Findings include: 1) Love as a common denominator, 2) How we receive and share nutrients in our lineages informs our arts praxes, 3) Our cultures, and thus our arts praxes, value nourishment over production, 4) Weaving intentional transnational futures offers mirrors to observe, question, and reflect on who we choose to be and how we construct “home,” and 5) Research on arts praxis for social justice necessitates methodology rooted in lived experience. In the discussion that follows, we, as a collective of artists, expand upon our findings.

## Discussion

### *Love as a common denominator*

While our approaches to using the arts for social justice differ because of our contexts, they intersect when we acknowledge the political economy of the arts and, through love and relationship, counter the neoliberalism embedded within. In fact, love is the reason why all of us believe in the possibility and necessity for social justice. This love is present in both our *testimonios* and our story circle; we each express feeling warm, nurtured, and grateful in presence with one another. We identify “gratefulness” as the overflow of love and the desire to ripple that love outward. In hearing each other’s responses to the same prompts, we find ourselves reflected in each other across different lived experiences. This builds empathy, deeper connection, and belonging. As such, this process of reflection and storytelling transforms into an act of justice.

### *How we receive and share nutrients in our lineages informs our arts praxes*

When we gather to make art, we tend to each other’s senses by drawing from learned intergenerational expressions of love: cooking and sharing food, making music, rolling a joint, offering flowers. Although our contexts and upbringings differ, each of us approach our arts praxes from our personal family and community histories. For example, Andrea describes how their experiences as an immigrant leads them to a transnational cultural practice; Hyppolite explains how his experiences in Rwanda

inform his use of culture to heal and build empathy; and Marian discusses how her geographic upbringing in the United States informs her cultural values and assumptions. From the intimacy of our personal beings, we grow collective consciences by nurturing shared space. This process-centered approach orients us in shared human realities: by meeting needs in our immediate communities, we build a culture of justice that ripples from, beyond, and into our homes.

### ***Our cultures, and thus our arts praxes, value nourishment over production***

In and beyond our grassroots and systems-level approaches to art for social justice, we honor this value by organizing to dismantle the capitalist, neoliberal work ideology that tethers our sense of worth and belonging to productivity or output. Contextually, this is achieved differently in each space. For example, because Latin American culture reflects patriarchal, racist, and exploitative values, Selva Records focuses on relationships that produce cultural creations challenging these norms. In Rwanda, where access to the necessary healing qualities of theater is reserved for the elite few who have the privilege to study, Be The Peace democratizes the practice and makes it accessible. In the United States, a context hyper-focused on economic success, Arts Connect International practices an essential shift away from economic solvency and assimilation into capitalist structures, instead rooting in co-creation, centering shared liberation. While these approaches are different, they share the common theme of valuing nourishment, relationships, and community health over production. Within this, we conclude that both grassroots and systems-level approaches to arts for social justice challenge neoliberal ideals that permeate the current global arts and culture sector.

### ***Weaving intentional transnational futures offers mirrors to observe, question, and reflect on who we choose to be and how we construct “home.”***

Although we acknowledge that no universal truths are gleaned from our analyses, sharing our experiences serves to engage in reflection that might not arise otherwise. For example, in the story circle we bear witness to one another and collectively grapple with the challenges embedded within each context, with each of us vulnerably sharing the learnings and unlearnings taking place. The long-term friendship among us further adds to the intentional weaving of transnational futures, centering care for one another and our respective communities. Within this arc of noticing, we re-recognize that social justice is social. Justice is relational, spoken, embodied, communicated, felt, danced, and oscillated from the cellular to the universal. We each are a microcosm inside macrocosms who can activate justice across concentric circles of existence by glitch, i.e., the strategic occupation of systems we inhabit (Russell 2020).

“Social justice” as a term articulates *heart work*. We make and unmake language as part of how we understand and simultaneously move beyond intellectualizing ideas as an imagined necessity for evolving praxis. Art offers us the opportunity to embody without having all the “right words.” Further, creative justice is social justice. Social and interpersonal, creative justice offers us a framework to transcend the political

economy of the arts. Relating is justice work, and there is no social justice without listening and sharing.

### ***Research on arts praxis for social justice necessitates methodology rooted in experience***

The fact that all the common elements of our vignettes revolved around love, care, nourishment, and relationships is indicative of the human, emotional, and relational qualities of the arts for social justice. Therefore, storytelling is a particularly insightful methodology to explore the arts for social justice. At the core of storytelling is listening, which brews deep humanity and connection with self and others.

Through storytelling, we can, in stillness, see each other for who we are outside of societal constructs, allowing us room to construct new norms rooted in equity and justice. Perhaps if we remember each other outside these constructions, we can genuinely find each other again. Through this, social justice can be achieved through counter-humanism, i.e., dissecting the ways that the colonial ontologies of “human” identity have severed our kinships. Storytelling offers us a unique opportunity to examine the world through frameworks that validate a myriad of existences.

### **Conclusion**

Art for social justice has long-challenged notions of whose stories are told, how, and by whom. Within this article, the four activist-authors continue this lineage of exploration, pushing into new ways of recording and honoring knowledge through *testimonios* and story circle methodology. First-person narratives shape, intersect, and inform learning amongst arts for social justice.

The activist-authors traverse two questions: 1) In what ways do practices in the arts and social justice differ and intersect across cultural contexts? and 2) What lessons can be gleaned from grassroots and systems-level approaches to arts for social justice? Readers are invited to engage in co-creation, exploring the questions and lessons within one’s own cultural context, reflecting the ethos of care and listening embedded within the methodologies employed. As we look to the future for further research, we wonder what would emerge from a wider analysis with hundreds of oral and written vignettes and story circles with practitioners globally. What themes would emerge? How could one qualify or quantify the impact of those themes and lessons?

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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