

Title : Building Communities in Tense Times: Fostering Connectedness Between Cultures and Generations through Community Arts

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for offering their creation and exhibition spaces and for considering new ways to involve the community in the Museum. They would also like to thank the Art et Contes team from Parc-Extension organization and the Centre l'Unité for their participation in the projects described.

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [grant number 890-2014-0037].

Building Communities in Tense Times:

Fostering Connectedness Between Cultures and Generations through Community Arts

Associated with economic and political tensions, anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourses are increasingly prevalent in Europe and North America. In Canada, the recent increase in immigrants and asylum seekers influx is seen as representing a challenge to social homeostasis, in spite of the obvious shortage of manpower. The province of Quebec also meets these challenges but has its own specificities. Recently, the provincial government has adopted Bill No. 21: An Act respecting the laicity of the State (Jolin-Barrette, 2019). This bill will lead to the creation of a law prohibiting “certain people [e.g., policemen, judges, and teachers] from wearing religious symbols while exercising their functions”. While in theory the law targets everyone, in practice, foreigners and in particular Muslims already begin to feel the repercussions more. Unfortunately, the creation of this law has fueled anti-Islamic groups and general intolerance toward foreigners, which the rise in asylum seekers had already reinforced. It also bolstered negative stereotypes around foreigners that are conveyed through mass media. Consequently, anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourses are becoming more and more common in the public sphere and the once relatively tolerant and indulgent society is now torn apart.

While social diversity may be associated with an increased likelihood that communities adapt well to the arrival of migrants (Hickman & Mai, 2015), globalization and migration can also pose some challenges to community making. With people transcending territorial borders more easily, the idea of belonging to only one community is undermined as shifts in values and relationships are observed (Castles, 2002). These changes fuel the sociocultural diversity of communities and researchers maintain that when people perceive this diversity as a threat, their sense of community is affected (Mannarini, Talò, & Rochira, 2017). Social and ethnocultural diversities are also increasingly being perceived as contributing to the rise in tensions in the

social and school climate (Rousseau, Beauregard, & Michalon-Brodeur, 2017). These social polarizations, crystallized around identities, undermine social cohesion and shatter the well-being of vulnerable immigrant and refugee communities. Indeed, studies have long reported that perceived discrimination and social exclusion affect immigrants' sense of belonging, mental health and youths' academic successes (Rousseau, Ferradji, Mekki-Berrada, & Jamil, 2013; Caxaj & Berman, 2010; Siriwardhana, Ali, Roberts, & Stewart, 2014). Recently, a Canadian study reported that exposure to discrimination has become more significant for refugee mental health than exposure to pre-migratory trauma (Beiser & Hou, 2016), confirming the erosion of the protective nature of host societies.

Studies emphasize that social support and community resilience could act as buffers against these effects (Kouider, Koglin, & Petermann, 2015; Siriwardhana et al., 2014). Yet, newcomers face numerous ruptures, which erode the protective nature of their social support network (Beauregard, Gauthier, & Rousseau, 2014). Community art activities can be a way to strengthen these damaged social networks, as they have been shown to be powerful tools to facilitate connections between people from various backgrounds (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to describe various community art projects carried out in two different neighborhoods of Montreal (Canada) to address the present increase in intercommunity tensions and to document their influence on the social connections between people from diverse ethnocultural communities, migratory status and generations.

Community Resilience

Community resilience is a term often associated with environmental or human disasters (Nuwayhid, Zurayk, Yamout, & Cortas, 2011). Recently however, it has been extended to include social responses to intercommunity tensions and conflicts (Siriwardhana et al., 2014). The concept of community resilience includes the implicit notion of preventing and limiting the

impact of events that normally disturb the well-being of a community, such as violent extremism (Ellis & Abdi, 2017). Although not all communities experience violent extremism, community members may be confronted with other seemingly less extreme phenomena that can be very stressful and that may even be perceived as a threat, as may be the case with the influx of migrants. Micro communities like those found in community organizations might have to deal with a newfound diversity that does not please everyone. In these cases, a resilient community can handle stress and adjust positively by gaining new insights and reinforcing its sense of self (Murray & Zautra, 2012). However, these changes are not easy to recognize as they consist of continuing processes (Yan & Galloway, 2017). In Canada, there was a progressive shift in how people perceive refugees and asylum seekers. While the population was rather proud to be a country of asylum, it gradually began to perceive refugees as fraudsters and potential criminals, although many people still endorse both discourses.

Community resilience also refers to the capacity of community members to put together their capacities to adapt positively and work cohesively toward common objectives (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Ellis & Abdi, 2017). This requires its members to belong, trust each other and create social bonds. Feeling part of a community and participating meaningfully in its development enhance resilience for refugees and minority youth by offering opportunities to support and network with other people (Ellis & Abdi, 2017). Participation in joint activities allows members to exchange and discuss their experience and points of view, which helps in building a cohesive and trustful community (Houston, 2018). More precisely, the existence of strong social connections between members of a community increases the likelihood that a community remains or becomes resilient (Ellis & Abdi, 2017). Promoting connectedness between community art participants could then contribute significantly in the development of community resilience.

Social Connectedness

Broadly speaking, social connectedness refers to the quality and quantity of relationships individuals maintain with others around them (Yoon, Jung, Lee, & Felix-Mora, 2012). The concept embraces different areas such as family, peers, school and community and a positive sense of social connectedness in these different areas promotes well-being, increases adaptive capacity and enhances a sense of belonging (Foster et al., 2017). Developing a sense of connectedness among members of a community or between communities fosters cohesiveness and has protective effects in times of crisis (Patel, Rogers, Amlôt, & Rubin, 2017).

The study of connectedness is of particular importance for immigrants as feelings of being part of mainstream society may differ from their sense of being connected to their own cultural community (Yoon, Jung, et al., 2012). In an urban context of diversity, social connectedness is complex as possibilities for different communities of belonging are multiplied. Discrimination and racism may also challenge immigrants' sense of belonging and social connectedness (Yoon, Hacker, Hewitt, Abrams, & Cleary, 2012). As intergroup tensions had tended to rise recently (Rousseau et al., 2017), immigrants' and refugees' sense of social connectedness could be low (Vachon, Caldairou-Bessette, & Rousseau, 2017). Social connections between people from different cultural heritages can be encouraged through participation in joint activities (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). Community art activities can be a good way to engage people in a common venture and develop a sense of belonging by creating something meaningful together.

Community Arts to Foster a Sense of Community

Community arts refer to creative practices and processes undertaken by and with members of a given community (Stein & Faigin, 2015). Membership to a community is thus important for participating in community arts activities, more so than artistic skills (Mills, 2006). The beauty of community arts lies in its ability to create a sense of community, by bringing diverse people

together and encouraging connections between people who would not have been in contact before despite living in a contiguous space (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011). According to Youkhana (2014), community arts can create bonds that go beyond social norms, the social containment of institutions, and imposed collective identities. Community arts may promote inclusion (Moody & Phinney, 2012), intercultural exchanges with immigrant communities (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011; Westerling & Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2010) and intergenerational connections (Kim & Miyamoto, 2013). Indeed, different art forms foster awareness, understanding, recognition and dialogue across people from different backgrounds (Sonn, Quayle, Belanji, & Baker, 2015).

Lowe (2000) describes community art as involving processes that create a ritualistic setting for interactions, which can contribute to the construction of a community through the emergence of a collective identity and of social bonds of solidarity. Accordingly, community arts are powerful tools for social change because they foster both individual and community growth, promote cultural awareness and active social participation (Bell & Desai, 2011; Stein & Faigin, 2015). By challenging dominant discourses and identities, community arts facilitate the emergence of non-dominant stories and give a concrete form to the experience of groups whose stories are rendered invisible by dominant structures and discourses (Bell & Desai, 2011).

Neighborhood Communities

For this project, we focused our attention on neighborhood communities, which are geographical and social spaces having a meaning of their own for everyone. The neighborhood's social boundaries are constructed by their members and non-members. (Non)-membership to a given neighborhood influences daily interactions by generating boundaries between "us" and "them" (Sonn et al., 2015). Yet, it can also be associated with social connectedness as people feel part and attached to their social environment or not (Yoon, Lee, & Goh, 2008). In diverse neighborhoods, recent migrants cohabit with second and third generations of migrants as well as

with majority individuals. By generating intergroup contact, neighborhoods become important spaces for integrating newcomers (Bynner, 2017) and a fertile ground to examine how community arts foster intercommunity and intergenerational relationships.

The project started in two neighborhoods of Montreal, Parc-Extension and Saint-Laurent. Both are among, if not the most diverse districts of the city and show a high rate of deprivation. According to the Parc-Extension's local community service center, there were about twice as many immigrants in this neighborhood as in the rest of the city, with about two thirds of its population born abroad in 2011¹ (Centre de Santé et de Services Sociaux de la Montagne, 2014). Being the smallest neighborhood of Montreal with its 1,6 km², Parc-Extension is also the most diverse with more than a hundred different ethnic communities and close to 60 different languages spoken (Beck, Guay, & Paulson, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2017). Traditionally home to the Greek community, it is now hosting a large South Asian (37%) population in which Indians (8,6%), Sri Lankans (5,5%) and Bangladeshi (4,6%) represent the largest groups. Recently, the proportion of new Indian immigrants has risen to 20,9% of the neighborhood population while there were no new Greek immigrants listed. The feeling of religious belonging is also varied with 23% Muslims, 19,6% Orthodox Christians, 16,6% Catholics and 13,4% Hindus making up the neighborhood population. According to the socio-economic background index (IMSE), the neighborhoods' schools are considered to serve a highly disadvantaged population with a score of 10 out of 10 based on the mother's lack of diploma and parents' unemployment status (Ministère de l'éducation et de l'enseignement supérieur du Québec, 2017). Indeed, more than half the population of Parc-Extension has no degree or holds only a high school diploma and about a third

¹ Parc-Extension is part of the borough of Villeray-Saint-Michel-Parc-Extension. Recent statistics do not take into account the borough's three different neighborhoods' sociodemographic composition, hence the recourse to statistics from 2011.

of the population works in the sales and service sector (Ville de Montréal, 2017a). With a median income around the low-income cut-off, about 40% of Parc-Extension households do not have access to decent housing (Beck et al., 2019).

As for Saint-Laurent neighborhood, about half of its population are immigrants of which a quarter were recently settled in Canada, the most represented countries being Lebanon, China, Morocco and Syria (Ville de Montréal, 2018b). More than half the neighborhood's population is considered a visible minority, and religious belonging is quite diverse with 33,8% Catholics, 17% Muslims and 10,1% who are Orthodox Christians (Ville de Montréal, 2017b). Although the neighborhood shows a great socio-economic diversity, its schools are still classified with an IMSE between 8 and 10 (Ministère de l'éducation et de l'enseignement supérieur du Québec, 2017). A proportion of 38,5% of people that do not hold a degree or only a high school diploma as well as a mid-to low-income revenue (Ville de Montréal, 2017b) could explain this score.

The *What if?* Initiative: Objectives and Methodological Approach

The *What if?* initiative was born from a desire to address increasing intercommunity tensions and to trigger, on a small scale, a mending process in a polarized community. *What if?* is a research project centered on community arts projects in different neighborhoods of Montreal (Canada) where different sociocultural and religious groups coexist. Its main objective is to better understand the processes through which community arts can contribute to strengthening intergenerational and intercommunity relations. Before starting the project, we obtained Institutional Review Board approval from McGill University. In its first phase, we offered different community arts project presenting a range of artistic modalities (visual arts, photography, video, dance, music, drama, etc.) in various settings (e.g., daycares, schools, community organizations) in different neighborhoods. The idea was to expose participants to a range of art forms so that they could decide as a group, what and how they would like to create in

a second phase. The resulting arts projects were as diverse as their populations with projects ranging from storytelling, dance, painting to clay and were reunited in an art exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA). MMFA's collaboration was an important aspect of the *What if?* initiative. The museum adapted its practice from experiences lived during the project and this is going to be the main subject of another article.

Given that the understanding of community arts and resilience is embedded in an inclusive framework, we have opted for a community-based participatory approach in designing the research. Participatory methods empower a community and foster its resilience by engaging community participants in the reflection, comprehension and learning processes (Ross & Berkes, 2014). To reflect this position, school and community partners were involved. Participatory approaches also allow the integration of unconventional data collection methods (Mulligan, Scanlon, & Welch, 2008; Ross & Berkes, 2014) and have been shown to be culturally sensitive by responding to communities' specific needs through close collaboration (Leff et al., 2010).

Using a multiple case study approach, this paper documents three projects in two neighborhoods, analyzing the participant observation reports as well as the art material, performances and videos produced. Case study research method is used to deeply explore, describe and explain a phenomenon inscribed in time and space (Yin, 2017), such as social connections between communities and generations in specific neighborhoods. In the context of this paper, we considered each art project to be a "case". The cases we chose represent a range of different manifestations of social connectedness and population characteristics. By studying these cases, we hope to highlight the commonalities and discrepancies between neighborhoods and to understand in a more complex way how community arts influence social connections between people (Stake, 1995). Multiple case studies have the advantage of increasing the potential for a generalization of results and of identifying the conditions necessary to achieve such results (Lune

& Berg, 2016). Case studies also allow the creation of a rich portrait of the phenomenon under study by resorting to different sources of data and data collection techniques (Yin, 2017).

Participant Observation : The Story Collectors

One way we collected data was through participant observation performed by research assistants and/or by workshop facilitators. All workshop facilitators had experience in animation of expression workshops as visual or performance artists, or as creative arts therapists. Most were of Canadian or European descent (France and Belgium) with some who had Latin American, African or Indian origins. For each project, we strived as much as possible to have a team representing different origins. One person was responsible for each project and was required to attend the research meetings. We decided to name them “Story collectors” in order to highlight their role of transmitting the stories unfolding during the project.

Research assistants who collected stories were prepared by a training session with principal investigator in order to orient them towards the approach and were given a template for their story collection. During their training, we put emphasis on what they could do to allow participants to come to them to share their reflections and on techniques for gathering partial perspectives from the majority of participants. Story collectors were then accompanied for their first observation session and given feedback afterwards to continue to tailor their approach to participating in the workshops, interacting with participants and recording.

Story collectors had the instruction of collecting stories that either participants deemed important to remember or that they thought were illustrating the concept of harmonious intercommunity relations well, defined in Quebec as “living together”. These stories could either be relational, institutional, physical, procedural, etc. Researchers encouraged them to use whatever documentation was best suited to the activity they were participating in, including video, photo, audio recording and note taking. They recorded the art making process from the

preparation before each workshop, to the group activities, to the debriefing and clean-up afterwards. After participants left, story collectors recorded the debriefing session with the artists and community partners. They then gathered all this information into a folder and created a document that acted as a guide to this material. This document could include other observations that they had made throughout the activity. In the process of amassing stories, story collectors had to keep in mind that they must not analyze or interpret what they witness. They rather had to increase their awareness of what was going on, on an explicit and implicit level (Spradley, 2016), in order to be able to pass on raw data rich in dynamics or meaning instead of simple descriptions of what happened. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of each project and when new participants joined the group. After each activity, story collectors did a debriefing session that was audio recorded. They also took care to record their observations in a grid as soon as they were over.

Art Productions

Apart from story collectors' field notes, we documented the creation process and art productions stemming from the community art activities. Thereby, research assistants took photographs and made video recordings of the activities that story collectors commented, creating data for later analysis. Each participant could indicate that she or he did not wish to be part of the video recordings at any time by making a discreet sign to research assistants. We also analyzed the resulting art productions that took on different forms such as sound and video recordings, paintings, drawings, clay sculptures, etc. Collecting data through artistic means allowed us to include the voice of participants who might have been left out otherwise (Harrison, 2014). Choosing arts-based research was also a good way to generate and sustain interconnected meanings because of its open-ended nature (Mulligan et al., 2008).

Data Analysis

The material we analyzed for this paper, represents different arts-based, experiential and relational modalities resulting from the community arts activities: the sound production for the storytelling of the Cow and the magic flower, the video for the Dance across generations and the paintings, drawings, poetic texts and photos for the migratory birds. The qualitative analysis was based both on an inductive approach, in which researchers try to find patterns within the observations in order to generate meaning and theories and a deductive approach in which researchers start with theories and want to test them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Analysis was carried out on a continuous basis starting with story collectors who provided spontaneous and intuitive material during their debriefing sessions. Because the amount of data collected during the research project was enormous, this allowed the research team to focus their analysis on most salient moments of the different projects. Indeed, there were between 12 and 16 story collections per project, one for each collective meeting of participants. Each story collection contained a document that acted as a guide to the session, along with the accompanying documentation that could include video, audio, photos, drawings, fictional stories written by the participants from the workshops themselves, workshop plans made by the artist, audio files of debriefing meetings between the artist and the community workers. Story collectors also included observations that were not captured in the other documentation and that helped create continuity from session to session. Each story collections ranged between two and five pages of notes and references to other documents.

Continuous analysis from story collectors' spontaneous material obtained during debriefing sessions also increased the credibility of findings as story collectors were present on site and actively involved in the activities (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). However, we also took care to include members of the research team who were not involved in participant observation as a

way to provide an external perspective. A different team was thus constituted for each case. Then, while immersing ourselves in the texts, sounds and images, we open coded their content to highlight patterns across cases which allowed us to come up with themes similar to the four key interaction processes associated with community arts according to Barndt (2008): collaboration, participation in the creative practice, critical social analysis and commitment. The most recurring codes within and across cases were then built into themes before being presented to co-researchers, story collectors and workshop facilitators who were involved in each specific project. Research assistants were invited to contribute to the construction of the theme until all agreed and validated its final form. The authors have no conflict of interest pertaining to this study.

Results

The projects we present in this section reflect various traditions. Projects were either embedded in an already-existing structure (*The Cow and the Magic flower*), new projects based on previous collaborations (*Migratory birds*) or were created from scratch (*Dancing across generations*). Dynamics between participants, organizers and facilitators were thus different.

A Collective Story of Resilience: The Cow and the Magic Flower

Between January and May 2017, expressive art therapists from the *Art et Contes* Department of Parc-Extension Youth Organization (PEYO) led a project involving 20 women from various communities living in the Parc-Extension neighborhood. These women worked together during 11 workshops with the joint objective of creating a collective story. We initially invited people through a parents' group ran by a neighborhood community organizer, but rapidly, women also invited other women they thought would be interested in joining the group.

Communication among participants was not always easy, since it relied a lot on translation to be effective. Certain participants whose mother tongue was not spoken by others

(e.g., Vietnamese) could find it difficult at times to ask for help to comprehend what the activities consisted of or what others were saying. To foster the participation of all, facilitators led sessions, making sure to provide summaries of the activity in French and English, while also inviting some participants to translate for others. Doing this, participants were just as involved as facilitators in ensuring that every group member understood what was going on and felt at ease to express him or herself. Facilitators were nevertheless sensitive to the importance of working on group cohesion and were thus attentive to the subgroups based on shared languages. Their role was to make sure everyone had their place within the group. Facilitators were also in a position in which they had to speak a language that was not their first tongue. This probably contributed to the building of trust between participants, which was just as important as building trust between participants and facilitators. Women could thus build a sense of community through engagement in the creation of a collective story, which was gradually designed over workshops.

The project began with two multi-art modalities workshops that helped warm up participants who had not necessarily been initiated to the arts before. These warm-up sessions also promoted involvement in the creation of the collective story that group members elaborated during the following six workshops. Every workshop began with an opening ritual, followed by a storytelling session that would then lead to a period of creation in which participants explored each theme through various mediums such as dance, theater, and drawing. Workshops were based on the stages of the 6 Part Story Making (6PSM), a drama-therapy story-making technique described by Lahad (1992) in which a story is developed according to the following steps: 1) main characters in their setting; 2) mission; 3) obstacles; 4) allies; 5) main action/climax; and 6) aftermath. For example, during workshop #1 on main characters, participants suggested different personages along with their characteristics in a group discussion. Facilitators drew pictograms of participants' ideas and placed them on a big poster to facilitate decision-making (see Figure 1).

Each participant then drew one character and presented its characteristics. Before the following workshop, facilitators synthesized the different propositions into a summary that they presented to the group. The following step in the story creation took from there and facilitators presented the story in its actual state in a theatrical way, while leftover pictograms were still available to be included later in the story. The same process took place for the remaining five steps. During these sharing and brainstorming sessions, women shared stories from their own personal experience, sometimes bringing in stories from their home country or stories that they wished to transmit to their children. One such story is the following:

There is a man bird and woman bird. The man bird wants to eat a specific dessert. The woman bird says, “We don’t have the sugar and flour we need”. So the man bird agrees to go to the market and flies away. On the road he meets some dangerous animals. The animals want to eat him, but the man bird tells them not to eat him and instead to come to his house and eat the sweets his wife will prepare. He goes to the market, returns home and they prepare their dish. They eat the entire thing, not thinking about guests who might come. After they finish, the guests come. They decide to hide in a large metal rice drum. The dangerous animals come and the birds are hidden, but they ate too much and they fart. It makes a really big sound and all the dangerous animals are afraid and run away.

This story is very common throughout South Asia and everyone tells it to their children.

Elements of stories such as this one contributed to the creation of the collective tale that reflected thus a variety of personal and cultural experiences.

The resulting story, *The Cow and the Magic flower*, evokes themes of intergenerational and intercommunity cooperation. The story recounts the journey of a young cow in search of a magic flower that could heal her old, sick friend. In her quest, she overcomes many obstacles with the help and protection from different animals in the forest and from children of a foreign

village. In the story, every new encounter is an occasion for mutual help (e.g., after the young cow offers some of her milk to relieve the tiger's bone pain, the tiger calls the forest squirrels and monkeys who are able to indicate the right path to the lost cow).

When the research team examined the story of *The Cow and the Magic flower* along with the facilitators, team members thought that the story could be considered a mirror of the relationships between the project's participants and a good example of how community resilience can emerge. Like the animals in the story, participants from the same community but who may have been uncomfortable and who may even have distrusted each other at first (e.g., the cow who is afraid of the tiger before she asks for his help), came together on a joint venture to create a collective story. Actually, different authors such as Berkes and Ross (2013) as well as Ellis and Abdi (2017) underline the importance of collaborating and trust each other in order to achieve a common goal and work toward community resilience. In that sense, community arts may represent a first step toward the goal of getting closer to community resilience.

Another important aspect to consider in the resulting story is how participants combined different cultural signifiers into a coherent new hybridized whole, albeit at times unconsciously. Paradoxically, hybridization combines both the concept of difference and similarity as "the very process of hybridization shows the difference to be relative and, with a slight shift of perspective, the relationship can also be described in terms of an affirmation of similarity" (Pieterse, 2018, p. 47). The idea of bringing together different yet not so different elements is found in the choice of components for the story. Indeed, the cow is an important symbol in many different cultures worldwide, especially in India where it has been elevated to a sacred status (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1997). In the story, the cow, a prey, meets a tiger. Both animals are different but instead of considering their differences as an obstacle, they rely on these distinct features in order to help each other. This element of the story may be a metaphor for how people with different

backgrounds and characteristics can come together and rely on each other to overcome difficulties. This may reflect or not the actual relationships in the group, but because arts are a reflection of the inner worlds of people (Anzieu, Barbey, Bernard-Nez, & Daymas, 2012), we believe community arts activities offered participants a space where they could explore the diversity-community dialogue.

Furthermore, at one point in the story, the cow needs to sing a song to get help to cross a river. One woman in the group suggested that the song should be in French, the language of the majority in Quebec which newcomers must learn through institutionalized French classes. The learning process is often hard and unnerving for newcomers and others probably found echo in this woman's experience since this was one of the obstacles chosen for the story: "It's really a difficult obstacle and if the bird wanted a song in English, it would be much easier" according to several mothers. Interestingly, group members constantly postponed the choice of song, until they had no choice. The group chose a pop song, which could show a desire to melt into the majority as popular music usually has the favor of the greatest number. It could also illustrate how hybridization is a process of fluid exchanges between different cultures, as supported by Pieterse (2018). By bringing together different cultural signifiers, group members showed how they could adapt in a positive and cohesive way, which is an important characteristic of community resilience (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Ellis & Abdi, 2017). The story also ends with the dragon coming back to the village by flying over all the places and characters before becoming a central element of the community by producing campfires around which people gather and tell stories. As such, the symbol of the dragon unites and bonds the community.

Furthermore, many participants showed a strong commitment in the creative process even though the conditions for the creation of social connections were not always optimal. For instance, in spite of the fact that no participants or facilitators shared a common language with

her, a woman participated to 6 workshops out of 11, and was present for the play and the closure activity, despite showing little interest in the creation itself. This example illustrates how community arts provide an occasion for participants to commit to a project and to gradually become active transforming agents of their community (Barndt, 2008). Despite not being able to communicate verbally with other participants, this woman found a way to contribute to the common task and thus, participated in building a climate conducive to community resilience. Another woman, who first came for her children, also showed strong commitment when she decided to continue to attend the workshops for her own benefit and ended up being one of the most involved participants. Also, seven other women presented the final story on stage (Figure 2) and six of them came back one year later to translate the story and create audio recordings in Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, French and English (recordings available on <https://soundcloud.com/user-234860125/sets/la-vache-et-la-fleur-magique>). Finally, the boundaries of the community art project expanded through individual and collective initiatives. For example, when one woman took the initiative, every week, to share the story with her children at home and come back with drawings they had made.

Migratory Birds as a Metaphor of Immigration Hardships and of Resilience

In the spring of 2016 in Parc-Extension, an elementary school, a community organization (*Art et Contes-PEYO*) and a visual artist and researcher (Tremblay) came together for ten workshops over a two-year period to work on a mural project on the theme of migratory birds. In (Tremblay)'s community art practice of *l'Art qui relie* (Art that connects), allowing time for the encounter to unfold is necessary to establish a connection with the community, before taking action. This period gives the chance to get to know each other, build trust and to avoid excluding the most vulnerable (Tremblay, 2012, 2013). However, research assistants had the impression that this approach destabilized participants and that a time of adaptation was necessary, because

people were more accustomed to participate in more directed projects. Still, the artist designed the workshops to be both structured and open in order to leave room for creation, unpredictable by nature.

In the first year, PEYO and the artist organized a one-day intergenerational painting workshop for the families of children attending the neighboring school. Parents as well as older and younger siblings were invited to paint birds. This theme was initially chosen by participants from another neighborhood because migratory birds evoke both the end of winter and migration hardships. These participants thought that just like migrant families, migratory birds must travel to survive or improve their life conditions in order to raise their family. After having immersed herself in the neighborhood during the preceding months, the artist thought the theme was evocative, especially for a migrant district like Parc-Extension. She decided to suggest it to the group, who agreed to the suggestion, thinking that sharing a common theme across communities could be a good pretext for discussing and exchanging ideas. As a source of inspiration, the artist brought reproductions of artworks representing birds painted throughout history and carved by Canadian First Nations artists, in collaboration with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Children and parents were invited to sketch birds (Figure 3) and then to paint jointly on wooden squared panels. A limited range of colors was provided to procure a certain unity among paintings, while the birds' shape would vary widely, sometimes reflecting the work of a six-year-old, sometimes of a much more mature person. During these workshops, individual productions triggered personal narratives that nourished the rest of the collective project. These narratives were expressed through poetry and were developed as the project progressed.

In the second year, some first-year participants along with the same artist and community organization moved toward creating the collective mural. The group chose to elaborate on the theme and to work on the back of the wooden panels that families painted the first year (Figure

4). In order to establish the collective aspect of the project, participants worked together on the mural's background by spontaneously choosing its composition and colors. This joint activity, realized with sponges, allowed the fading of timidity and the creation of connections between participants. While the wooded panels were drying, individuals sketched birds once more and chose one image each that they later stitched together using masking tape. In the case where someone was less skilled in drawing, this technique removed the fear of making mistakes and of being ashamed. It also allowed participants to try again immediately and to explore different solutions. For a participating mother, it was an opportunity to redo the tape drawing technique at home with her children, which had greatly amused them.

In retrospect, the research team thought that the metaphor of the migratory birds was a way to express contrasted emotional and relational experiences. Indeed, observing the resulting mural, participants noticed the presence of joy, remarking that “all birds are happy” or sharing that “birds are dancing”. They also mentioned uncertainties, sharing that “the birds are lost”, or noting relationships among birds (one bird was seen as helping another, another as being in love). One woman told a story about a sick migrant who sent a bird as a messenger to tell his wife about his illness. But while traveling, the bird saw some food and forgot his message. “Since then”, the woman concluded, “this bird is red, the color of blood”. Participants also mentioned racism and discrimination experiences in the host country, although seldom. Through different stories, participants spoke about the hardships of migration and symbolically represented losses, conflicts of loyalty and struggle for survival.

A few turning points illustrate the appropriation but also the tensions associated with the collective creation process. First, the women, in majority from South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) suggested adding henna or sparkles to the painting (Figure 5). On one part, workshop facilitators and researchers consider that this showed participants' commitment to

the process, which they gradually took over by personalizing the creation process. On the other hand, it also represented a technical challenge the artist needed to solve: how to stabilize henna and sparkles on acrylic paint? She did a few tests and the women were able to rework and enrich the collective creation with henna and sparkles, a process through which, according to the researchers, they were clearly claiming ownership of the painting by emphasizing its relation to their cultural universes and to their sense of beauty.

Another turning point was the introduction of texts and poems into the mural. Although all participants agreed on the idea, this became a source of tensions among them because it activated the French-English linguistic divide, which is very sensitive in Quebec. Being immigrant and refugee women mostly from South Asia, their shared second language was English. However for the French-speaking majority in Quebec, English evokes oppression, colonialism and the risk of losing one culture. In turn, French, which is a very important identity marker, often evokes an unfair imposition for most South Asian migrants who must school their children in French. Besides, the artist felt it was important to raise the issue that the resulting mural was going to be exhibited in a public space and to think together about how people in Quebec would react to immigrant women's identification with the English language in a context of social polarization and potential racism toward immigrants. Thus, choosing a language to have a voice on the mural replayed several local social tensions, which were addressed by participants in a discussion led by the artist. The exchange made it possible to find a satisfactory solution for all participants who finally agreed to write in a variety of languages, English and French, but also the families' mother tongue, although it was difficult for some: "This, this is difficult. Not because it is difficult to write in my own language, but because I think nobody will understand me". This quote highlights again the tension between the desire to express one's individuality and the desire to connect with people different from yourself.

Toward the end, participants expressed that working as a team felt good and that working on the mural has strengthened their relationships. The beauty of the result made them proud and they did not want to stop adding details. They emphasized the importance of the creative process as both a collective and an individual experience. Coming back to the metaphor of birds, they commented on the fact that diversity can be overcome and that living together and sharing resources is possible as illustrated by the following comment: “Birds are not born in the same nest, but they can all eat at the same place”. Another participant also said that “a bird left his country and met lots of other birds from different countries and they all lived together”. The story of the Phoenix, often perceived as a tale of personal survival to trauma, was also presented by another group member as portraying the idea that “if you succeed, you should take others with you”. One member also raised the importance of community as support and as a source of well-being when she brought that “it’s good to work as a team. We have a lot to say and now, it is time to express ourselves. If we do not share what we keep in us, we may become sick”. This idea was later put into action when a participant, who had just confided a very sad event of his life, led a dance. The positive contribution of community art activities was very beautifully summed up in a participant’s poem that was a message of courage and hope: “We get out of the black, we encounter color”. The visual metaphor represented both resilience and the role of collective interaction in supporting it.

Dancing across Generations

This *Dancing across generations* project took place over the course of four months in a senior home of the Saint-Laurent neighborhood, in collaboration with a neighboring community organization, Centre l’Unité. The project revolved around dance and movement expression activities specifically designed to bring together 15 youths from an elementary school with approximately 10 elders from a senior home (Figure 6). We filmed the end product which is

available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QO544-nbIq4>. The facilitators calibrated the activities in such a way that young people who had more energy could be satisfied, without older people feeling they were left behind, because they were less mobile. For instance, participants could achieve movements either sitting or standing or could dance them at various amplitudes (see Figure 7). By offering these choices, facilitators hoped to go toward the lowest common denominator around which the two groups could connect. Moreover, both groups had a relation to their body that was marked by a period of change, be it physical changes due to growth for youths or getting to know their aging body for the elderly. Yet, this rapport to their body was reverse. On one part, seniors were often afraid of injuries. They frequently highlighted their physical constraints and illnesses, which required an emancipatory work from the part of animators. On another part, youths' desire to move was strong and at times, it even became a sort of overflowing agitation that facilitators found difficult to contain. Still, this broad spectrum allowed subtle exchanges of energy between participants through their body, which went beyond words. Seniors shared that youths' energy was contagious, and facilitators noticed that youths were calmer when in contact with the elderly.

The team also had to consider another important aspect of working with very different age groups. The team planned the workshops in order to ensure that both the youth group and the elderly group would share time but that they would also have time on their own. These separate times allowed for participants to share their apprehensions and concerns about working with the other age group. In the younger group, children voiced concerns about elders' musical preferences and reactions to working with younger ones, but they also stressed the importance of being polite and careful around them. As for the older group, apart from logistical questions regarding the project, some participants were curious about the children's age and gender or the fact that they had grandparents or not. The latter idea was brought at the end of the first workshop

with elders, when one participant, who happened to have lost her grandmother owing to the Holocaust, shared how she considered the role of a grandmother as being important for knowledge transmission to the next generation and for listening to children. In participating in the project, she wished she could give children the chance to build intergenerational relationships.

Tolerance to difference and to compromises allowed the project to unfold in a pleasurable atmosphere, although interactions between the two age groups were not always spontaneous. Several times, facilitators had to invite participants to mix as they were naturally attracted to go toward their own group. At one point, some elderly people confessed they felt isolated from youth during free dancing time, sometimes due to physical impairment (e.g., difficulty in hearing, seeing or moving) but also because children were drawn to dance with other people their age. Nevertheless, during the project, some youth took the initiative to create a rapprochement with elders and there was increasing interaction and complicity among members of the whole group. Another youth also naturally acted as a mediator between both age groups. When she noticed that the aggressive movements suggested by two boys did not please neither her nor the elders of her group, she engaged in a dialogue that ended in the choice of more consensual movements, evoking joy. As workshops unfolded and as participants became more engaged in the arts activity, they became more at ease with the others' presence. According to facilitators, this change was also noticeable within workshops. As an example, the team invited youths and elders to face each other in a circle. Each elder then had to initiate a movement that the youth in front of her had to repeat before changing partners (Figure 8). At first, facilitators thought that participants seemed rather shy to face each other and most were dancing alone. But the more people change partners, the more they seemed comfortable with the exercise, and the more they communicated through movement with their partner. This example shows how participants could dose the intensity of their contact since contact between participants was direct (face to face) but

ephemeral (changing partners). While this highlights that intercommunity relationships are woven through this just and appropriate distance, it also emphasizes that through dancing, youths and elders were able to bypass the invisible enclosure of their respective age group and find connection points (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011; Youkhana, 2014).

More than creating a space for workshop participants to engage in a body dialogue, the *Dancing across generations* project also created an intermediate space for “outsiders” to participate. Because the workshops took place in the community hall of a senior home, other residents were also present in the room. Not only the number of people in the audience increased over the course of workshops, their involvement also became more noticeable. Some residents started by repeating the movement made by workshop participants, but from a “safe” distance as one resident asked: “It’s OK if I make movements from afar?” Interestingly, these “outsiders” got physically closer every workshop, even if they stayed in that intermediate space. This in between space also allowed injured participants to still be part of the group by seating in the room. This illustrates the different levels of membership and how community boundaries are constructed by people. It also stresses the importance of respecting individual rhythm and needs for space.

Discussion

What if? brought together people of different ages and sociocultural backgrounds living in the same neighborhood through different community art projects, of which three were described in this article. The three projects showed how community arts could foster a sense of individual and collective pride and of community belonging in two neighborhoods of Montreal. This was achieved through three principles: 1) interactive processes, 2) transmission and hybridization of stories and images of adversity and resiliency and 3) accessing a collective voice.

Interactive Processes

We found Deborah Barndt's (2008) approach to community arts, consisting of four interactive processes, as being illuminating to understand the underlying processes at play in the *What if?* initiative. The first process, **collaboration**, was central to every community arts project. Depending on the project or the moment during the project, this collaboration took on different forms, such as parents-children, youths-elders, or participants-facilitators. This last type of collaboration was often the cornerstone for enabling other types of collaborations. Indeed, workshop facilitators were often central to participation and acted as important catalysts in creating connections between group members. For instance, workshop facilitators played an important role in creating bonds between people by inviting different age groups to mix in the dance project, proposing themes to work on in the migratory bird project or by acting as ideas gatherers in the storytelling project. Their pivotal role facilitated the establishment of trust, essential to the emergence of collaborations between participants, and allowed them to work toward a common goal (Berkes & Ross, 2013).

This safe relational space fostered the development of strong connections between participants, an important factor in the building or restoration of community resilience (Ellis & Abdi, 2017). The safe space probably also contributed to the creation of a sense of community among participants who were able to activate similarities among them and who felt they could count on their teammates to achieve their common goal (Barbieri & Zani, 2015). However, in order to prevent the facilitators' bond-making role to interfere with empowerment processes and to replicate unequal relations of power, a certain reversal of power needed to occur between workshop facilitators and participants. This shift in power relations was illustrated when the migratory birds participants wanted to add henna to acrylic paint, which was both unconventional and a challenge for the artist-facilitator who, because of her Canadian origins, was not as accustomed to use henna as the women participating in the workshops. She was able to adapt to

the participants' desire of what the art production should be and in doing so, participated in empowering participants by valuing their vision, which in turn contributed to community resilience (Cadell, Karabanow, & Sanchez, 2009) and in our view, was a first step toward re-establishing a balance in power relations between majority and minority cultures.

The wish to integrate henna in the painting also illustrates all the **creativity** shown by participants. As suggested by Barndt (2008), community arts practices should allow the creativity inside everyone to be nurtured so that it can then flourish. In the *What if?* initiative, participants had to overcome their sense of incompetence in order for their inner creativity to bloom and for their authenticity to emerge. While it occurred in the migratory birds project, this also took place in the dance project, albeit in a different way. With time passing, participants were proud to show their creative moves to their partner, which created a special bond and complicity between them that is similar to a sense of community. When group members engage genuinely in creative art practices, strong relationships are more likely to be established, which in turn fosters well-being. As one participant of the migratory birds project implied, the fact of sharing with others through the arts acts as a buffer against feeling ill, thus supporting what is found in the literature (Foster et al., 2017; Patel et al., 2017).

Being in a position to affirm their creativity, some participants were also able to use art as a way to produce a **critical social analysis** of their environment. According to Barndt (2008), the collective act of creating offers participants a space for criticizing majority discourses but also for coming with one's own vision. In the *What if?* initiative, critical social analysis was rarely directly present and emerged with time and trust. As an example, through the migratory bird project, group members were able to name, though infrequently, experiences of racism and discrimination that touched them from near or far. The paucity of these moments may be explained, in part, by a reluctance from workshop participants to share difficult experiences with

people they could associate with perpetrators, because of their perceived belonging to the majority culture. Difficulties related to their immigration experience also emerged, such as those related to language. By choosing a French song as an obstacle, participants of the storytelling project brought a critical look to what their host society is expecting from them and overcame these difficulties through imagination and creation, thus destabilizing current power relations. Furthermore, the decision to add texts and poetry to the migratory birds painting allowed participants to make visible the French-English divide and to discuss around a particularly sensitive topic in Quebec, which could have been very difficult without art, and especially because some story collectors were identified as French-Quebecers. The art process thus allowed participants' different voices to begin being heard. However, it is to be noted that the level of social critique expressed is far from what can sometimes be achieved through Forum Theater as initiated by Augusto Boal (1979). On one part, the heterogeneity of the groups could partially explain the relative absence of the use of art as a critical social analysis. Critical analysis skills may have differed from one participant to the other because of age or education level, for instance. In addition, each participant's relationship to the majority group could be different based on his/her sociocultural background or length of time since arrival which could lead to different levels of needs or comfort for criticism. On another part, the fact that protest could target other members of the groups (as was the case for the language tensions), could also explain this relative avoidance of harsh critique, as a strategy to maintain dialogue, preserve good intercommunity relationships and avoid open conflicts.

Finally, **commitment** is the last most important interactional process in Barndt's perspective (2008). In order for strong commitment to emerge, there should be an open and respectful creative climate, which the artist-facilitator can promote. But in spite of all the efforts of the project team, commitment to every project in the *What if?* initiative was a fluctuating

process. Whether it is the shifting number of participants every week (storytelling), the distance with which one partakes in the activity (dance), or the commitment to a project despite not sharing a common language with other participants, involvement differed according to each group member. A number of hypotheses may explain these fluctuations. First, the socio-economic precarity of the participating parents certainly restricted their involvement: when life is already a burden, adding activities, even if they are beneficial and pleasurable, may just add to the overall burden. Also, people living in socio-economic insecurity may have difficulty trusting each other (Sturgis, Brunton-Smith, Read, & Allum, 2011). Second, creation is a demanding process, which requires a certain level of self-disclosure. Again, in situations of adversity and of power relationships, self-disclosure may sometimes be fragilizing, as it places someone in a vulnerable position, even though it may reinforce connection between people afterwards (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005). Even considering these variations, most participants in the projects we described were committed to the collective project and were open to be transformed, as illustrated by the mother who first came to the storytelling workshops for her children and decided to stay for herself or the dance participants who found more consensual movements.

Transmitting and Hybridizing Stories and Images of Adversity and Resiliency

Sharing verbal and non-verbal stories appeared to be a way for participants to build bridges across a number of social divides (linguistic, national/cultural, religious and age related). The different projects became more than spaces where people created together. The space offered through the different community arts activities became what Pratt (1991) described as “contact zones”. In these zones, the circumstances of both the encounter and the broader context in which it occurs shape the relationships between people and thus transform their identity. Also, intersectionality theory (Collins & Bilge, 2016) proposes that a person’s identity is plural, and that diverse identities interact in social exclusion or privilege situations (Kustatscher, 2017). This

is, in our experience also true in collective empowerment processes: participants' experiences of adversity may intensify oppositions between people and replicate social divisions (for example, in the case of language), but simultaneously, someone's story may echo the personal experience of the person she or he just opposes (as a mother, as a woman, as a migrant for example). In the different projects, we observed that the elaboration of common artworks, performances and stories was a way to share and value participants' stories and to listen and welcome other stories. It was also, although often at the non-verbal level, a way to work on commonalities, which included the inevitable divides as a core feature of humanity.

Accessing a Collective Voice

Although this was one of our objectives, we cannot state that participants accessed a collective voice: it would be speaking on their behalf and interpreting what we think they collectively said. Neither can we affirm that what was produced and created was *not* a collective voice. If having a collective voice is accessing to an explicit social or political shared discourse, as is often presented, then we can recognize that this was not the case. Maybe this was due in part to the relatively short duration of the project and to the heterogeneity of participants. As mentioned in relation to the critical social analysis interactive process of community arts, participants can present very different experiences with the majority group which would make it more difficult, though not impossible, to produce a shared discourse in a relatively short period of time. In the convergence process toward shared owning of the projects, diverging individual responses can coexist. Indeed, "as intersectional human beings, all community members [bring] diversity to their communities along with many important shared characteristics, recognition of which could also lead to unity" (Buckingham et al., 2018, p. 37). But if having a collective voice is being able to express collectively the texture of daily life, the color of dreams, the emotions which describe belonging and exclusion, then yes, we believe participants expressed their

collective voice. In the various art projects, participants talked about shared humanity and they wove their stories in works of art and performances that they wished to present to the other participants, to their family and to the wider society through an exhibit.

Limitations

Although community-based participatory approaches have the advantage of engaging and empowering participants in the research process, they also bring some methodological limitations that we need to consider. Firstly, the participative aspect of the research initiative meant that group members were largely responsible for choosing the art modalities they wanted to get involved with. This could have led to disparities between projects in terms of engagement, since it is well known that different art modalities could involve different degrees of emotional engagement from the part of the creator (Malchiodi, 2012). Each art modality may elicit a very different response from each person based on her previous experience with diverse art materials. For instance, a person may be very attracted by the idea of using paint, remembering good moments in her childhood when she used to paint or she could be repelled by painting by fear of getting dirty. A future research could specifically address the extent to which the art modality influences intergenerational and intercommunity relations, community resilience and social connectedness in socioculturally diverse neighborhoods. Nonetheless, the fact that participants chose a certain art modality over another could also mean they were ready to get involved with it, regardless of the emotional distance they were at.

A second limitation relates to the groups' composition. As a reminder, the objective of the *What if?* initiative was to better understand how community arts projects strengthened intergenerational and intercommunity relations. However, the extent to which groups' composition reflected the actual neighborhoods' sociocultural and age diversity varied widely from project to project. Indeed, because recruitment relied mainly on participants' referral, a

significant number of representatives of the same country were often involved in the same project, decreasing the possibilities for intercommunity relationships. This was also true for age diversity, although to a lesser extent.

Lastly, data collection relied mainly on story collectors and required them to select and document stories they deemed important to remember. However, what is important for one person may not necessarily be important for another person, thus possibly resulting in disparities in the information collected from project to project. Moreover, the selection and analysis of stories we presented in this article represent only one possible way of making sense of what happened during the *What if?* project. Even though we tried to have teams of story collectors who came from different sociocultural backgrounds, there were inevitably representatives of the majority culture and language and this may have affected how workshop participants shared and expressed their stories. The issue of tensions between majority and minority groups surely needs to be given special attention in future research, both in terms of within group interactions (between participants) and between group interactions (between art project participants and the wider society).

The composition of the research team may also have influenced the interpretation of these stories. As brought by Elkad-Lehman and Greensfeld (2011), “stories ‘echo’ the cultural, social, ideological and political context in which they were conceived and in which they are heard or read. Stories thus do not bear a single static meaning, but the potential of multiple meanings” (pp. 264-265). These authors suggest listening and reading the stories multiple times in order to bring out most salient elements. Through regular debriefing sessions among workshop facilitators and story collectors, we strived to reach a certain consensus, at least within the same project, about the most probable meaning of different stories. While this does not erase the impact

intertextuality may have on the interpretation of data, it does offer a story that does justice to the participants' experience.

Conclusion

The *What if?* project was both a difficult, but fascinating and rewarding journey. Co-constructed with the participants, it entailed a partial loss of control from the research and facilitator team, akin to the messiness of research involving participatory art (Askins & Pain, 2011), which in our mind reflected some of the ongoing power negotiations. Participants and researchers had the conviction that it created significant social connections, represented stories of adversity and resilience, and articulated some of the social tensions among majority and minorities. These real achievements are, however, only a drop of water in a sea of adversity. As xenophobia and anti-immigrant and refugee feelings increase in Europe and North America, much more is needed to mend intercommunity tensions. Nonetheless, small initiatives based on community art projects may contribute small solutions to this important challenge for which there is no easy fix.

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