

Making With Place: Community Artists Theorizing Change

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Abstract

This article confronts tensions of “risk” and “change” in youth engagement and community arts, towards insights for alternate world-building. We problematize overly instrumental approaches, by examining aesthetic and inductive theories of change arising from *Making With Place*, a research creation initiative based in Toronto, Canada. From Spring 2020 to Fall 2022, we engaged diverse young people as artist-researchers in community arts production experiments exploring concepts of place from individual and collective perspectives. We draw here on resulting public artworks, discussions with the artists, and our own field notes to surface the theories of change arising from this work. We identify three emergent metaphors—the garden, the bridge, the margins—and the ways in which they resist dominant discourses in favor of new practices of imagination and repair. We explore how these creative explorations articulate theories of change that refuse forgetting and call forth desire.

Introduction

“Culture drives its own change.”

Ayrah Taerb, Making With Place artist-researcher

Intentions of “change” predominate in efforts towards “youth engagement” and “empowerment,” which are often rooted in addressing identified gaps and failures resulting from inequities in social systems. And yet, despite these principles, constructs of change are generally externally and hierarchically imposed, and can inadvertently reproduce the very hegemonic neoliberal and colonial discourses they seek to challenge. This article confronts these tensions to uncover aesthetic and affective articulations of change by youth artist-researchers as creative resistances and insights for alternate world-building.

The last several decades have witnessed a participatory turn in diverse arenas, from research, to democracy, to the arts (Badham, 2013; Bardnt, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Purcell, 2007; Sepala et al., 2016; Wyatt et al., 2013). Within this widening of participatory traditions and methods, arts-based strategies have increasingly been employed as hopeful opportunities for youth voice, agency, and re-storying (Cahill et al., 2010; Domínguez & Cammarota, 2022; Wright, 2019). Unlike alienating deficit-oriented constructions of youth, arts-based approaches engage young people as assets and advocates (Carson et al., 2007; Mutere et al 2014; Prescott et al., 2008; Spiegel & Parent, 2017). This emphasis counters a dominant deficiency model in youth work which places a focus on negative images of youth as “at risk” or “in need” (Foster & Spencer, 2010; Kelly, 2001; te Riele, 2006). Risk/needs-based perspectives have been critiqued for reinforcing external and internal processes of stigmatization, fragmenting efforts to find solutions, underlining the

perception that only outside experts can help, and ultimately deepening cycles of dependence (Kelly, 2001; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Kwon, 2013). Foster and Spencer (2010) identify such discourses as a form of “symbolic violence.” Rooted in individualized notions of risk, they maintain power differentials by placing burden and responsibility on young people and those who care for them, downplaying or neglecting attention to structural forces and inequities. Arts-based approaches contest discourses of youth risk and deficit by focusing on skills and capacities of imagination, creativity, and vision (Hickey-Moody, 2010; Rhodes & Schecter, 2014; Wright, 2019). Creative arts projects can spark “aesthetic openings” into more critical understandings of social worlds, and new insights into how things might be otherwise (Fine & Torre, 2021).

Constructs of Change in Community Arts

Community arts in particular have been leveraged as part of a broader range of socially engaged art practices characterized by dialogue and co-creation (Novak, 2012). These approaches operate within broader ecosystems of community work, where change is taken up and expressed most commonly in processes of evaluation and assessments of impact. Within this context, community arts initiatives are increasingly feeling pressure to substantiate the value of their work in social, arts and cultural sectors (Clift, 2012; Hamilton et al., 2003). However, alongside calls for “better evidence” are internal resistances to traditional evaluation methods that conflict with creative processes implicit to community arts (Goulding, 2014; Putland, 2008). These are often characterized by imposed frameworks such as indicators and logic models that are widely used in the charitable sector and connected to neoliberal funding requirements. A key tension is emerging between these more instrumentalist approaches, which tend to position arts activities as tools to fulfill predetermined objectives, and a more transformational approach that is more grounded in participatory and creative integrity (Lombardo, 2021). Artists often report feeling marginalized by reductive research and evaluation discourses that focus on outputs and products, as opposed to artistic process (Daykin et al. 2016). As Badham (2010) contends:

Socially engaged arts are inherently transformational because they are collaborative and engaging, especially when lead artists are determined to uphold the artistic integrity of the work. It is the art more than the social policy outcome that results in transformation, yet there has been limited discussion in the literature on these kinds of artistic processes. (p. 91)

Reductionism can impact not only how community arts projects are valued and evaluated, but also project design and implementation. An emphasis or pressure to achieve individual and/or social policy outcomes (such as increased self-esteem and social inclusion) can interfere with more creative, collective and emergent artistic processes (Lombardo, 2021).

To address these epistemological challenges, some practitioners are calling for more efforts towards theorizing concepts of change in community arts practice (Galloway, 2009; Raw et al., 2012; Sonn & Baker, 2016). One popular approach centers around modeling a *theory of change* that seeks to depict how interventions are supposed to work by extrapolating impact pathways and processes (Mayne, 2015). Often abbreviated as ToC and reified via capitalization, these models seek to articulate causal pathways identifying short- and long-term intended/desired outcomes thought to be necessary to achieve

higher-level outcomes and impacts. Though these ToC models grew out of the tradition of logic models, this evolution is positioned as providing more autonomy and flexibility for organizations to explore and represent change in a way that reflects complex, contextual, and systemic understandings of how change happens (Stein & Valters, 2012). Yet, despite a degree of openness, for the most part, ToC models remain largely funder-driven tools (Stein & Valters, 2012) that too frequently reduce practice to something instrumental and operational (Van Stolk et al., 2011). Often applied in overly linear, prescribed, and individually focused ways, ToC models may serve to conflate community arts with other “charity”-type approaches, missing the iterative sense-making of arts-based processes as deeply plural and relational.

Indigenous educator and theorist Eve Tuck problematizes and pluralizes ToC perspectives through decolonial critique. In her seminal work “Suspending Damage,” Tuck (2009a) names the “damage-centered” construct fundamental to colonial conceptualizations of social change as operating “even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 413). She discusses in depth how this underlying theory of change operates to pathologize communities as being singularly defined by oppression. In this way, Tuck articulates theorizations of change not as a tool or an operational model, but holistically as fundamental ways of reading the world.

It is clear that what we mean by theories of change is not the same as what those (non-profit) foundations mean, because we do not mean anything certain or linear. We’re not ready to cede the term to those other evocations—instead, we want to deepen the notion of theory and deepen the notion of change in our use of the term. Reflecting or imagining a theory of change is an ontological and epistemological activity, related to core questions of being and knowing. (Tuck & Yang, 2013, p. 125)

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

This article dialogues with tensions of change in community arts work, and advances a theories of change approach in keeping with Tuck’s plural and decolonial perspectives. We discuss findings from *Making With Place*, a community arts initiative based in Toronto (Canada), which engages young artist-researchers to explore desires and intentions for place, community, and culture. As graduate students who actively facilitated and convened this project as part of our scholarly endeavors, we draw on reflections of the project’s creative action cycles and artistic productions to explore images and metaphors expressed in the artworks as emergent and plural theories of change.

Making With Place Theories of Change

Making With Place is a research-creation project and series of public art exhibitions that take up complexities of place, working with young community artists to animate and amplify hidden or silenced social histories. The project is an initiative of SKETCH Working Arts, a Toronto-based community arts organization with over 25 years of experience partnering with young people from equity-seeking groups to

create and sustain arts opportunities, and to join their fights for social justice, fairness and inclusion. Making With Place engaged QT/BIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color)-identifying young people as artist-researchers in a participatory process from Spring 2020 to Fall 2022. Through artistic practice and production experiments, the artists explored the complexities of place from both individual and collective perspectives. In this article, we discuss key resulting public artworks and the theories of change arising from this work. We draw on data generated from open-ended group discussions and one-on-one interviews with the youth artist-researchers throughout the project's creative exploration and production cycles, as well as our own participant observations and field notes (for a more detailed discussion of methods, see Lombardo, 2023). Taking inspiration from Tuck (2009a), we intentionally play with narrative form and storytelling as key elements in our approach to theorizing change.

The Garden as an Indiqueer Place

It's a cool afternoon in early October. A growing group of colorfully dressed people assembles around an unusual plot of land in the middle of a downtown Toronto park space. The park is known as Garrison Commons, named after a creek that runs beneath the land, now hidden by development. The spot is walking distance from the shores of Great Lake Ontario, and yet it is surrounded by condominium buildings so that one cannot view the water. In the middle of the space is a garden plot that was not here last fall. It was lovingly developed over the preceding months by a team of 2SLGBTQIA+ young artists (2-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and Asexual). Their project *Queering Place* is an earth-art installation which explores queer community engagement with place, plants, and medicines. The artists have planted and stewarded a garden patterned around the four quadrants of the medicine wheel, alongside planters built out of used decorated tires with QR codes that link to stories, poetry, and songs (see Figure 1). With these cultivations, the project seeks to nurture gathering spaces that prompt deep "inQueery." To explore queer conceptualizations of nature and relationality, to destabilize heterosexual and settler colonial norms on what is "natural," as "imaginative work (that) is vital to the re-worlding before us" (Tallbear & Willey, 2019, p. 5).

On this autumn afternoon, as the garden prepares to move into rest, the artists are hosting a community gathering that will feature readings, performances, movement, dance, and Indigenous ceremony (see Figure 2). Activations will stretch to fill a weekend of connection, reflection, and retreat. The "inQueeries" explored reveal creative articulations of fluidity, connection, and interbeing—in the planter and tire sculpture designs and stories, and in the group reflections they inspire. They materialize an emergent "queer theorizing" that re-envisages spaces both internal and external for building relationships, knowledge, and identities as cultural actors. As artist-resident T. J. Banate describes (Banate & Lombardo, 2022):

Queer experiences or lenses vary, queer identities, two spirit, LGBTQ+ are constantly changing. We should never cling too closely or too tightly to pre-set ideas. Living organisms are constantly growing, shedding, changing—a tree sheds its bark, leaves, in order to strengthen. We need to make space for this within our communities, creating place to re-experience and re-imagine our

futures, embracing fluidity, expressing a broader, more inclusive understanding of the social system that we're trying to change.



Fig. 1: *Queering Place* earth-art installation. Left: medicine wheel garden.

Right: tire planter with QR code for accessing stories, songs, and poetry. All photos by Jahmal Nugent.

Queering Place artist-stewards advance a theory of change that expresses learning on, with, and within natural and social worlds in land-based placemaking. The medicine wheel garden is populated with plants from queer growers, queer homes, and queer kinships, with sunflowers in the middle “for dynamic sight lines signaling to 2S folks & wilds to come, gather here” (SKETCH, n.d.). The artists highlight the tensions of a queer placemaking in public spaces that are open, unprotected. Collaboration with the natural world adds its challenge, given identifications reported by the group with displacements or exclusions from connections with land, property, or growing. Queer identity knows well the navigation of liminal space, the call to public placemaking, and the necessary considerations of risk and exposure. These realities made this project both a challenge, and an opening. Public space has visibility that reaches across communities; passersby approach with their children, drawn by the sacred fire to experience Indigenous teachings offered to ground the dialogues. Local residents sow their own plants into the garden soil, alongside queer growers. Cycles of the natural world, exposed and explored, provide lessons of fluidity, accessibility, and exchange. The gardens grow native plant medicines to make soothing balms and teas for anxiety and all manner of unwellness. Relationship building, wisdom and knowledge transfer between diverse artists-researchers are cultivated through plants, medicines and soils rather than hyper focused on sexual identity. A cross-pollination of ideas, energies and activisms is manifested, which in turn sows relationships and leadership for re-centering the margins with city staff and officials and the

broader public. These seemingly small but powerful offerings go beyond well-known emblems of pride flags to offer medicines needed to enact agency, to queer place. They rejuvenate compacted soils to make space-healing invitations for queer youth experiencing displacement. T. J. Banate further identifies and theorizes (Banate & Lombardo, 2022):

We learned that by law you cannot disrupt Indigenous persons from holding sacred fire ceremony in public space. . . . And that impacts . . . even the city staff and people . . . who are witness to us navigating fluidity, red tape, weather, etc.

What we created is not necessarily very loud or very long lasting physical change, but it's the social change that shifted. . . . The artist residents have now created relationships, connected our communities. . . . Queer spaces were opened up, resisting structures that tell us how and what to know.

Prior to *Queering Place*, my ideas about community organizing were a lot more rigid . . . [but] it doesn't always have to be formally structured.

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



Fig. 2: *Queering Place* talking circle gathering—sharing thoughts and “inQueeries”

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

The Bridge as a Radical Place

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

On a breezy spring afternoon, a group is strolling through this space with purpose. Folks move between listening stations that have been placed amongst the bents (see Figure 4). The stations display QR codes which link to digital stories grounded in the experiences of young people who have lived homeless in Toronto. The exhibit, called *A Wandering*, invites audiences to hear and receive stories and wisdom from those with lived experience of homelessness. The exhibit is part of a larger initiative, *Reconstructions of Home*, which addresses stigmas and celebrates the creativity of homeless communities by making the unseen visible. As curator Sue Cohen (2022) describes:

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



Fig. 3: *A Wandering* installation. Left: phone booth to listen to stories or leave one's own
Right: QR code for accessing digital stories, augmented reality images and videos

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

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

I imagine alternate ways of inhabiting space in solidarity with those who live outside of conventions. If we can imagine possibilities, we can create them. I create an offering of safety, comfort, community, and home in a space where people’s efforts to do so for themselves have historically been criminalized. . . . The Gardiner Expressway has been home to hundreds of houseless people over many years. We live in a society where the most vulnerable are repeatedly displaced from spaces where they attempt to create a sense of home. Where they are all too often abruptly and sometimes violently awakened by police. Where eviction notices are taped to tents, and bulldozers flatten possessions. (Artist’s statement)



Fig. 4: *Safe Landing*, by Lisa Petrunia (2022). Three-dimensional mixed media diorama, 16'x16'

Like the string of lights above Lisa's *Safe Landing* nest, *Reconstructions of Home* illuminates possibilities for building relationships within and between communities. Because while bridges can conceal, they can also connect. Stretching across boundaries, the Reconstructions partnership with The Bentway has served as a bridge between cultural institutions and under-reached communities for more critical civic engagement. The two partners have co-hosted several community events, and members of the Reconstructions curatorial collective have been invited to sit on Bentway panels and inform planning recommendations for discussions that engage city officials, property developers, and academics. This is a theory of change that elucidates the role of storytelling, public art, and collaborating across differences for bridging radical placemaking and community equity. We use the term *radical* here to denote the use of critical, creative, and intangible placemaking methods, such as memories, stories and sensemaking, by local yet displaced communities, to voice equity issues and advocate for justice (Gonsalves et al., 2020). As the Bentway's executive director Ilana Altman indicates:

We recognize the importance of celebrating and learning from the many communities who have shaped and are shaping the lands under the Gardiner. We believe that public art can be powerful, helping us to see, hear, and better understand the stories of our neighbors. Together, we can continue to inform the evolution of our city's public spaces. (Personal communication, June 10, 2022)

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

The Margins as Embodied Culture-Making

On a fall afternoon with the sun emerging after a threat of rain, Ayrah Taerb is preparing to take center stage under The Bentway. A crowd is assembling as music plays from a sound system. They have come to hear and support the launch of Ayrah's newest hip-hop album, *Indica; Omega*. Today's performance will feature Ayrah's high-energy lyricism, dance, and theatrical movement, alongside musical collaborators. Before launching into his hip-hop pieces, Ayrah begins the performance at a colorfully painted piano. He plays a refrain from Claude Debussy's *Reverie*, which features prominently as a sample in the album's sound bed. In his performance and lyrics, Ayrah explores what he terms as "blackness as it presents itself in popular culture," touching on themes of black creativity, mental health, and harm reduction (Taerb, 2021). A core feature of his creative explorations revolve around the role of hip hop as an expression of voice and emancipation while problematizing the ways in which mainstream culture can serve to commodify and co-opt "blackness." As he articulates (Taerb & Lombardo, 2022):

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



Fig. 5: *Indica; Omega* performance at The Bentway, by Ayrah Taerb (2021).

Hip hop has been a key locus of action for community arts projects, precisely because of this history of coming from and tapping into experiences and processes of marginalization (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). In resonance to Tuck's (2009a) arguments on damage, starting from associations with marginalization can be both empowering and limiting. Ayrah himself resists labels that locate individuals as "marginalized," seeking to instead re-call a focus on systemic forces (Lombardo et al., 2023). His theory of change is rooted in contestation, reminding us that social change is fraught with challenge, protest, and struggle. In dialogue about his experiences with community arts work, Ayrah emphasizes the assertion that it is not the community arts projects themselves that drive change. Rather, "culture drives its own change" and community projects seek to leverage and amplify this. As he pointedly states (Taerb & Lombardo, 2022): "Culture drives its own change. Community is where the real work must get done, resourced or not. True arts for social change should sustainably recognize and resource community artists."

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



Fig. 6: *Indica; Omega* video shoot, Metropolitan United Church.

Community Arts as Sites of Resistance

The Making With Place projects *Queering Place*, *Reconstructions of Home* and *Indica; Omega* articulate rich, place-based theories of change which resist singular, instrumental interpretations. They capture aesthetic and embodied art-making by diverse young artists as intersections of making and critical thinking. They also highlight community arts collaborations and activations for re-storying under- and misrepresented peoples' experiences, wisdoms, and readings of the world. In these ways, they take up Eve Tuck's (2009a) invitation to move from a damage- to desire-focused lens. Desire is productive and plural; it resists a damage focus that pathologizes and limits. Instead, desire accounts for both loss and hope, for "the not yet and the not anymore" (Tuck, 2009a, p. 417). Foundational desire-based explorations (Anzaldúa, 2010; Didion, 2005; Gordon, 2008) evoke a ghostly, remnant quality; a longing and a haunting, emanating from the past but seeking towards the future. Expressing such haunting as a theory of change, Tuck (2018) posits that the opposite of dispossession is not possession/accumulation, it is unforgetting.

Unforgetting compels active resurfacing of knowledges that are repressed, or not yet legitimized. Unforgetting situates itself beyond and across time, connecting history, presence, and futurity. It reminds us of what has come before, to break silences and amplify ways of knowing that are necessary for more fully realized communities. It helps us understand social engagements and social movements as care-takers for the past and incubators for more liberated worlds to come (Shotwell, 2016). Young artists creating place and community are well positioned developmentally to digest, to interpret, to unforget the past, and to recognize and compel broader society forward with course corrections towards more inclusive futures.

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

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

limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (p. 23). The *Reconstruction of Home* artists embody an activism that resists state/colonial control to derive collective power from desire and aliveness. They highlight a making of community rooted in liberation and justice, which has much to teach us all about how to learn to live together, stay in relationship, and survive (Brown, 2017).

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

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

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

As theories of change, the garden, the bridge, and the margins all tap into metaphors of place. They harken to Lakoff and Johnson’s (2008) seminal understandings of human thought and agency as largely metaphorically structured and defined:

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

Queering Place, Reconstructions of Home and *Indica; Omega* surface metaphors of place ignited by resistance and desire, rooted in realities and histories of specific places and placings. They reveal universalizing themes arising from creative explorations of people in these places, rather than pre-determining impact pathways from outside perspectives. Through affective artworks, they engage sense-making that springs from subjective aesthetic layers of interpretation, from the personal to the communal. They draw on arts processes as playing with metaphor, and as messy, uncontainable, and unable/uninterested in having all of the answers. The very act of art installation is already a changed place. These placemakings from the margins enact hooks’ (1989) “new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (p. 23). They are an expression of radical spaces from the conceptual to the tangible, from the ephemeral alterations of music, performance, and storytelling, to the more physical change of a garden plot. They invite introspection, and even trust, into ripple effects that cannot easily be measured.

Each Making With Place project sought to make such radical creative space by and through young people not often positioned as change makers. Artists offered a direct response and resistance to displacement. In the public art that emerged from these conversations, place has agency, place reveals repressed stories of haunting desire, theories of change of individual embodiment, and collective body politic. Together, the projects resist predominant theories of pioneering, conquest, and power-over. Instead, they move towards decolonial framings of place and change as living processes. These are aesthetic and experiential expressions and enactments of change. As a collection, they allow for multiplicity and contradiction. As “alternatives to damage,” they highlight how “what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression” (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). The works illuminate complexities of human agency, complicity, and resistance, of desire and conscience (Sontag, 1977; Tuck, 2009b). By revealing and learning from subjugated knowledge, the works move past trauma towards “a something-to-be done” to claim the right to theorize (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi).

Making With Place as dynamic theorizing and placemaking, as both outcome and causal pathway, pokes at static concepts in ToC models (Malovics et al., 2021). Here we intentionally, playfully repurpose constructs as active verbs. Community arts as an embodied and participatory practice of inquiry expands causal pathways or flips them. The practice has the potential to cast light on a new way of looking beyond change to *individuals* to change that focuses on *place, groups, systems and culture*. The Making With Place explorations of change speak to a growing critique of positivist views of evaluation and theory-building (Daykin et al., 2016; Friedman & Rogers, 2009). They respond to calls for an epistemology of evaluation that honors the spirit of the intervention and matches the values and integrity of arts-based processes (Galloway, 2009; Raw et al., 2012). They affirm an important role and need for theoretical frames that actualize principles like participatory practice, anti-oppression, and Indigenous ways of knowing (Friedman & Rogers, 2009; Lombardo, 2021). Critically attending to equity in ToC and evaluation approaches calls for space to think, to reposition “key performance indicators,” to reimagine a “learning from here” as room or direction for change. Rather than sticking to a logic model for understanding change, Making With Place adopted a more emergent framework almost entirely premised on curiosity. This allowed participants to articulate how they understood the purpose, value, and success of their work at several points in time. This made space for a recognizing and theorizing of change in ways that may never have been imagined through preconceived notions and conversations, “plans or strategies.”

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

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

This reframing serves to re-situate young artists and leaders not as passive learners, but as interpreters of the world around them with powerful ability to offer aesthetic extrapolations towards the future. Arts-based explorations provide tactile engagement with knowledge, place and co-creation that can spark new insights and multi-sensory ways of knowing, particularly for youth visions that are actively developing. Making with place allows young people to tap into their desires, and exchange with others to explore the change and world-making they want to see and create. This is an active project drawing alive interactions that can take youth beyond participation towards more fulsome agency and activism. Such movement is of vital importance at a time when anxieties and uncertainties about our futures loom especially largely for young people. Broader research, informed in culture, needs young people engaged in futuring projects (Karabanow & Naylor, 2015). Young community artists theorizing change provide affirmation of diversities of personhood and experience that can inform and promote the building of new knowledges and caring ecologies.

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

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Notes

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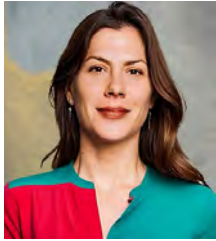
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