

Department of Art
Goldsmiths College, University of London

PhD (Thesis by Practice)

Title: *Awaken Dreams*

Subtitle: *Decolonising Participatory Art through Communal Friendship*

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Total word count: 57235 words

I, Romeo Gongora, declare that the work presented in this PhD (Thesis by Practice) is my own.

Where applicable, I have clearly indicated the names and roles and of those involved in my collaborative art projects.

Romeo Gongora,

Montreal, February 2022

A mis padres Mercedes Pinto Góngora y Manuel Alfonso Góngora Zetina

and my friend Suzy Helena Ross

without whom these awaken dreams no habrían sido posibles.

Acknowledgements

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I would like to acknowledge the support I received at Goldsmiths during my four years of research. The people I am most indebted to include: the ad hoc tutors Dr. Sophie Hope, Dr. Susan Kelly, and Olivier Marboeuf; the Annual Review Respondents Dr. Ross Gray (2018-2019) and Dr. Susan Kelly (2017-2018) from the Department of Art; the Upgrade Examiners Dr. Michael Guggenheim from the Department of Sociology and Dr. Akanksha Mehta (2018-2019) from the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies; the Final Examiners Dr. Roshini Kempadoo from the Westminster School of Arts at the University of Westminster and Dr. Yaiza Hernández Velázquez from the Department of Visual Cultures. Your careful engagement and your thought-provoking questions have been of great value to me.

My/our participatory art project at the Bromley by Bow Centre would not have been possible without the following people: Our core team that met weekly including Becky Seale, a tenacious researcher and the initiator of this participatory project with Catherine-Rose Stocks-Rankin; Maisha Chowdhury, a community researcher and hardworking student; Rev. James Olanipekun, a community researcher who wore many hats in Tower Hamlets; Nina Begum, a community researcher who always made sure things were in order; and Axel Feldmann, an incredibly generous designer who visually brought this participatory art commission to life. Our core participants (and friends?) from the Bow neighbourhood who came every week, rain, or shine: Azezzun and her kind interventions; Jess Segree and her playful cat; Desmond McLaren and his incredible art skills; Donna and her inspiring political viewpoints; Alison Neville with all her little gifts; Jabba who was never late; Henry, Tony, and many others... Finally, I thank the staff of the Bromley by Bow Centre who helped to make this project possible: Sue Agyakwa, Mandy Harrilal, Dan Hopewell, and Rob Trimble. Thank you so much for taking this journey with me and believing in small and big changes.

My/our art project the *Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* would not have been possible without the following people: The communal friends that opened their lives with so much generosity: Ismael Recinos, René Lara, Doris Lara, José de Oliva, Santiago Franco, Ricardo Ulloa, Carlos Pineda, Alfa Pineda, Diego Cortinas, and many others – I am grateful for all the knowledge that you have entrusted in me about the realities of the Latinx diaspora in Quebec. My assistants: Caroline Foray, Jean-François Gauthier, André Girard, Julie-Soleil Giroux-Deschamps, Joly Ly, and Florence Turmel. Finally, I thank the ones who helped publicise this project: Mario Coté, Maria Ezcurra, Dominique Fontaine, Julie Hétu, Miwa Kojima and Thi-My Truong. Thank you very much for your efforts to make Montreal even more accepting of difference.

The support of my friends and colleagues at Goldsmiths and the Université du Québec à Montréal has been invaluable. At Goldsmiths: Josefina Camus, Francisco Carballo, Mitxy Mabel Meneses Gutierrez, Charlie Hill, Wing Kit Hung, Faiza Ahmad Khan, Sue Mayo, Florian Seubert, thank you for all the inspiring discussions that allowed us to rethink the world. At the Université du Québec à Montréal: Victor Armony, Maria Nengeh Mensah, Lilyane Rachedi, and the Arts Research Laboratory in Decoloniality at UQAM, your efforts for an antiracist environment have provided me with a fertile ground for the critical exploration of participation and race on an institutional level.

A special thank you to my editors Nadine Blumer (2017-2019) and Stephanie Schwartz (2019-2022) for your meticulous reading and endless flexibility.

To Kaisa Vuoristo, I am truly grateful for the generosity you brought to our conversations, for your patience, understanding, and support.

Finally, I express my indebtedness to the intellectuals, artists, cultural producers, and activists whose ideas I have been able to build upon.

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Abstract

My doctoral research is a thesis by practice. It consists of a body of artistic projects, visual documentation, and a written component in the form of a **reflexive diary** offering a critical account of the research. My work examines how to decolonise the concept of participant in participatory art (PA). I argue for an alternative approach to participation, a reflexive practice of *communal friendship* that allows people with various positions of power to relate to others in a constructive way. The research builds on a theoretical framework of decoloniality and draws on radical pedagogical approaches from Latin American and other anticolonial writers. It is also inspired by my family's experience of immigration from Guatemala to Canada, and its inflection on my identity as a second-generation Guatemalan growing up in French Canada/Montreal. My methodological approach combines participatory art practices with ethnographic and archival research. The outcome of my research consists of the artworks themselves and the reflexive diary, which draws on my previous art practice and a new body of participatory artworks from London (UK) to Montreal (CA).

This doctoral research adds to the field of participatory art by analysing the terms and conditions of participation in art from a decolonial perspective. By showing that participation is intertwined with a colonial matrix of power, my research puts emphasis on the artist's willingness to go back and forth between reflection and action, and to (un)learn. I do not claim to offer a magical solution to combat the neoliberalisation of participation in art or to erase its coloniality. On the contrary, the results show that moving away from coloniality requires reflexivity, the redistribution of power and agency through self-criticality, as well as a continuous examination of one's various positions of power as an artist. This is a valuable lesson for participatory artists in general, and particularly for those who come from a culturally diverse background or work with culturally diverse populations. More generally, my work shows that a critical examination of the discourses surrounding participation is necessary, as these discourses actively shape and regulate our work and identity.

KEYWORDS: participation, friendship, participatory art, radical pedagogy, cultural diversity, racial representation, decoloniality.

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Timeline - Events Related to my Doctoral Research

2016

July 2016 – November 2017

Community in the Making

Bromley by Bow Centre (BbBC)

Tower Hamlets, London, United Kingdom

Research period in preparation of my art commission *Community in the Making*.

2017

September 2017 – Ongoing

Start of my practice-led doctoral research at the Department of Art, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

November 2017 – March 2018

Community in the Making

Bromley by Bow Centre (BbBC)

Tower Hamlets, London, United Kingdom

A participatory art commission at the BbBC that brought the local community to imagine their neighbourhood in the future. Local people conducted six months of research under the supervision of the BbBC Lead Researcher Becky Seale. The art workshops and exhibition involved the same and more local people and was led by Romeo Gongora.

2018

6 February 2018

Communities and Commonalities

Discussion and Workshop

MARs Research Hub, Goldsmiths

London, United Kingdom

Inclusion, risk, and authorship are some of the words that arise when collective engagement enters into the space of community, academia and/or art. This participatory discussion offered an opportunity to blend those different realities and learn from this exchange. Initiated by Romeo Gongora in collaboration of Sue Mayo (Lecturer, MA in *Applied Theatre* course, Goldsmiths, University of London). With special guests Catherine-Rose Stocks-Rankin (community researcher, Bromley by Bow Centre) and Rev. James Olanipekun (Poplar Board Vice Chair, community researcher, Bromley by Bow Centre).

15 May – 19 June 2018

An Island of Disparity

Film screening series

MARs Research Hub, Goldsmiths
London, United Kingdom

An Island of Disparity brought different perspectives and points of view together, in a quest to survey a space of heterogeneity. The platform became a weekly informal movie & snack night during the summer term led by/for Goldsmiths postgraduate students from different departments. The programme asked and intended to reflect on the role and position of Goldsmiths through research students, on institutional and social issues affecting minorities. Imagined and organised by Romeo Gongora and Mitxy Mabel Meneses Gutierrez (Department of Politics, Goldsmiths).

08 August – 26 October 2018

Period to resolve the matter of my Off-Campus study request with the Immigration and Advice team of Goldsmiths.

September – December 2018

Part-time lecturer

École des arts visuels et médiatiques, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)
Montreal, Canada

17-20 September 2018

The Dancer Behind the Masquerade

Workshop

University of Bergen KMD

Bergen, Norway

A workshop that explored radical pedagogy, participation and decoloniality in the work of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire with a group of MA and Undergraduate students in Bergen, Norway. This event is organised by Anawana Haloba (University of Bergen) and Romeo Gongora.

2019

20-23 May 2019

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

Workshop

University of Bergen KMD

Bergen, Norway

A workshop that explored radical pedagogy, participation and decoloniality in the work of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire with a group of MA and Undergraduate students in Bergen, Norway. This event is organised by Anawana Haloba and Romeo Gongora.

July 2019 - ongoing

Professor of Critical Approaches to Cultural Diversities

École des arts visuels et médiatiques, UQAM

Montreal, Canada

July 29 to August 10, 2019

Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing

Residency

Livingstone Office for Contemporary Art (LoCA)

Livingstone, Zambia

A ten-day workshop organised by Anawana Haloba and Romeo Gongora, as part of an alternative school of thought centred upon participatory and exchange modes of learning/teaching.

September 2019 - ongoing

Co-founding of the Arts Research Centre in Cultural **Diversities**

A temporary and traveling research center based in Montreal (Canada) with a program of artist-initiated workshops, talks, films, and a library. It is a collective platform promoting intercultural dialogue, exploring stories (colonial histories, social and political histories and their legacies) and their relationship to contemporary art in a local and international context.

11 September 2019

Art and Decolonization in Guatemala: A conversation with Lucia Ixchiu

Arts Research Centre in Cultural **Diversities**

Montreal, Canada

A discussion on art and decolonialization in Guatemala with activist artist Maya K'iche Lucia Ixchiu.

11 - 12 November 2019

The Dead Are Restless, They Speak!

Workshop

MARs Research Hub, Goldsmiths

London, United Kingdom

This two-day workshop consisted of group discussions of key texts, reading sessions, a limited number of research presentations by participants and film screening involving the invited guest and participants. Organised by Anawana Haloba (University of Bergen) and Romeo Gongora. The list of selected guests for the workshop included Susanne Winterling (Professor, Trondheim Academy of Fine Art) and Elvira Dyangani Ose (Director, The Showroom).

14 November 2019

The Dead Are Restless, They Speak!

Conference

MARs Research Hub, Goldsmiths

London, United Kingdom

A public discussion that brought together leading scholars, their public and practitioners to critically engage with the writings of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire. Organised by Anawana Haloba (University of Bergen) and Romeo Gongora. The list of selected guests for the public discussion included Susanne Winterling (Professor,

Trondheim Academy of Fine Art), Ros Gray (Senior Lecturer, Goldsmiths) and Francisco Carballo (Lecturer, Goldsmiths).

2020

January 2020 – ongoing

La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal (2020-)

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

A participatory long-term art project that investigates *El Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala*, a social club that Guatemalan immigrants ran in Montreal between 1972 and 1982.

March 2020 – ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

July 2020

PhD supervisors Kristen Kreider and Alison Rooke leave/retired from Goldsmiths from September 2020.

July 2020

Initiated a petition requesting the creation of an anti-racist committee at different levels at the École des arts visuels et médiatiques, the faculty union (Syndicat des professeurs et professeures de l'Université du Québec à Montréal) and, the Université du Québec à Montréal administration.

December 2020 – ongoing

Michael Newman and Nirmal Puwar become new PhD supervisors.

December 2020

Creation of the anti-racist committee at the faculty union (Syndicat des professeurs et professeures de l'Université du Québec à Montréal).

2021

January 2021

Creation of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion committee at the École des arts visuels et médiatiques, UQAM.

May 2021

Creation and Director of the Arts Research Laboratory in Decoloniality at UQAM.

22 July 2021

Viva Voce. Examiners accept thesis subject to minor amendments.

2022

12 February 2022

Submission of the revised version of the thesis for evaluation.

February 2022 – ongoing

La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal (2020-)

Montreal, Québec, Canada

Continued collaboration and development of the virtual reality experience of El Club Tikal Guatemala.

February 2022 – ongoing

Re-involvement in anti-racist advocacy at the faculty union (Syndicat des professeurs et professeures de l'Université du Québec à Montréal) and the Université du Québec à Montréal.

INTRODUCTION (2022)

My practice-led doctoral research seeks to unsettle the assumptions behind participation in art. My reflections flow from artworks I have made that create spaces for social exchange, where the politics of participation are crucial. In an interview with the critic Tom Finkelpearl, the artist Pedro Lasch and the architect Teddy Cruz argue for the need to ‘encroach’ on the top-down art system and to expand practices “where the artist can be the facilitator of new socioeconomic relations” (Lasch, Cruz, and Finkelpearl 2013, 258). Following this idea, my PhD aims to decolonise the notion of participant in participatory art (PA) by asking: “Are we friends?” My research argues for a shift from *neoliberal participation* in art to principles of *communal friendship*, an approach that allows people in unequal positions of power to better relate to each other. This concept draws inspiration from Latin American communities, *immigrant consciousness*, and from my family’s experience of immigration from Guatemala to Canada and its inflection on my identity as a second-generation Guatemalan growing up in French Canada/Montreal.

Communal friendship as a concept is opposed to the experience of neoliberal participation and its key concepts of distance, formality, service, lack of power distribution, and fragmentation (Brown 2015; Gilbert 2014; Polletta 2002; Sholette and Lippard 2017). As I will explain further, the core of this thesis aims to unveil the *coloniality of power* (Quijano and Ennis 2000), forms of hierarchy, inequality, and the dominance of neoliberal rationality (Brown 2015) involved in the current participatory (art) field; as well as to define the characteristics of its relationships from a decolonial perspective. By doing so, I embark on a life-long learning process. In retracing these dynamics during my doctoral research, I discovered different axes of oppression and trauma from my childhood as a second-generation immigrant. Revisiting my own biography and narrative empowered me to accept my difference, and telling my story is part of a decolonial attempt that I delved into from the start of my research.

To be clear, my PhD does not suggest that friendship is a clear-cut solution to the instrumentalisation of participation. However, in spite of the well-documented criticisms of friendship as a research method (Oakley 2015; Tillmann-Healy 2003), I argue that friendship offers an opportunity to explore other types of relationships that can be alternatives to neoliberal

participation. My PhD is not a dissertation on friendship; it is rather a proposal for ways of decolonising participation in art and the questions that it raises: What is left of the participant in our neoliberal context? How would it be possible to redefine the concept and to reveal its complexities? Surprisingly, there have been relatively few attempts to look closely at the colonial relationship between artist and participant. The same is true for efforts to critically theorise and to draw attention from a decolonial perspective to the affective and political potential of relational terms like artist, participant, and friend regarding visual/participatory art; or to explore exercises of reflexivity and intersubjectivity by the participatory artist.

My research is not a criticism of the people with whom I have collaborated during my research; it aims to disentangle the neoliberal context in which we are embedded in the West. My study calls for the need to establish solidarity and reciprocity even if there is an unequal balance of power. But – as you will discover – the journey requires an approach of *praxis* (Freire 2017), involving constant learning through action, reflection, and change – something that can only be accomplished through dialogue.

Toward the end of my PhD research, Seppälä, Sarantou and Miettinen (2021a) published a book titled *Art-Based Methods for Decolonising Participatory Research*. Although it does not offer a decolonial perspective towards the politics of participation in art, it highlights the increasing interest in decolonising participatory approaches in other fields. Given its reflexive and academically rigorous approach, the introduction of Seppälä, Sarantou and Miettinen's book served as a reference for structuring my introduction. This book is valuable to me as it demonstrates some of the potential benefits for creating more reciprocal practices in participatory research through decolonial methodologies, such as emphasising collective doing by challenging the individualism of conventional research practices.

After four years of this doctoral journey, I realise that using the idea of participant as friend in the academic context has placed me in a complicated position. Although the concept of friendship is the instrument to decolonise participation in PA, I have found myself compelled to contextualise its Eurocentric philosophic background. As evidenced through my doctorate, I do not claim to offer any kind of magical concept that can erase the coloniality of participation in art. My reflections on communal friendship can potentially, but not automatically, contribute

towards ways of decolonising PA. My aim is to present alternative ways of engaging in PA that are rooted in a decolonial attitude. As Seppälä, Sarantou and Miettinen argue “[d]ecolonising should not be about ‘making feel good’, but transforming and changing something radically; hence, it takes time and requires collective action and consistent work” (2021a, 12). Thus, I envision decoloniality as a demanding process (of going back and forth between reflection and action, and (un)learning) rather than as an end in itself.

In the following subsections, I will offer a brief introduction to neoliberal PA and how it relates to coloniality before exploring the concepts of friendship and communal friendship. Drawing on theoretical sources, I aim to contextualise the concepts that I will develop upon in later sections.

Neoliberal Participatory Art and Coloniality

The first year (2017-2018) of my doctoral research allowed me to analyse the grammar of PA in the West. The gradual emergence of socially oriented artistic tendencies (such as PA) in Europe is linked primarily to the political and social overhaul brought about by neoliberalism in the 1990s (Bishop 2012; Kester 2011; Kwon 2002; Miessen 2011). The period of neoliberalisation gave rise, among others, to the increasing erosion of social space (Cornelissen 2020; Gilbert 2014; Sholette and Lippard 2017), the gradual decline of the welfare state (Brown 2015; Gilbert 2014), and the increasing institutionalisation of the artist (Bishop 2012, 188, 202; Kester 2011, 123, 135; Sholette and Lippard 2017). The neoliberalisation of the art world (Charnley 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017) has made art practices and artist organisations dependent on the neoliberal market and its logic of the “project”, where performance, fluidity, and mobility are valued (Kester 2011, Bishop 2012). As [Section 01](#) will reveal, the aftermath of neoliberalism has led the field of PA to its instrumentalisation and subversive dilapidation (Bishop 2012; Jackson 2011; Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017), the (mercantile) increase of its literature and its practice, the polarisation of its discourse and its practice (Bell 2017; Bishop 2012; Charnley 2011; Finkelppearl 2014; Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017), and to trigger a mixture of ambiguous emotions (Bishop 2006b; Kwon 2002).

I refer to the afore-mentioned phenomena as *neoliberal participatory art*. Of course, not all PA practices have neoliberal characteristics and some of these actually which challenge the *neoliberal participatory art* paradigm as I will explain in [Section 01](#). However, as you will see in this work, despite our best intentions, PA projects can easily be taken hostage by the service paradigm (Lent and Studdert 2019; Stocks-Rankin, Seale, and Mead 2018). In [Section 03](#), I will show that the service economy dynamic roots PA practice in distance, formality, independence, service, tasks, transactions, temporality, linearity, dispossession, and fragmentation. Under this logic, “participant” is a polarising label, rigid and potentially alienating for the persons involved.

During my doctoral journey, I came to understand that the logics of service paradigm and neoliberalism are closely intertwined with coloniality and racism. Black Marxist authors, such as Cedric J. Robinson, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Robin D.G. Kelley, claim that ‘capitalism’ has always been ‘racial capitalism’. As Cedric J. Robinson argues, “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions” (Robinson 2000, 2). If capital accumulation used to be constitutive of race, enslavement and colonialism, these dynamics persist until today. Nowadays, racial capitalism takes form in phenomena suchs settler colonial dispossession, racialised indentured servitude, and the exploitation of immigrant labour (Danewid 2020). Indeed, critiques of neoliberalism have examined the enduring impact of the racial logics that once underpinned slavery and the colonial expansion of European sovereignty (Bhattacharyya 2013; Kapoor 2013). Today, racial neoliberalism legitimises forms of neocolonialism through the practices of extraction, exploitation, dispossession, and appropriation (Cornelissen 2020).

Decolonial thinkers view such forms of racial capitalism, racial neoliberalism, and neocolonialism as a perpetuation of coloniality (Dussel 1993; Escobar 2004; Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2007a; Walsh 2005). In other words, they show how coloniality continues to exist beyond the end of formal colonialism. Coloniality is a matrix of power and racism is one of its constitutive features. Thus, coloniality allows for and sustains systems of violence as well as racialised hierarchies, including Eurocentric systems of knowledge and culture (Bhambra 2021;

Lugones 2016; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2007; Quijano and Ennis 2000; Wynter 2003).

My doctoral research will demonstrate that neoliberal PA is intertwined with a service economy dynamic and that it reinforces coloniality. It follows that I argue throughout my reflexive diary that the practice of PA perpetuates forms of coloniality at the level of conceptualising, producing, evaluating, and representing. For example, in [Sections 01](#) and [07](#), you will see the intimate connection between systems of coloniality and racialised participation in the art context, such as linking the desire for diversity in participation with commodification.

With the aim of decolonising our understanding of the term participant in PA practice in a Western context, I ask whether it would be possible to transform the participant into a friend. How would such an alternative approach differ from *neoliberal participatory art*? To reflect on this, I will start by contextualising the concept of friendship.

Friendship and Its Alternatives

Most of the theorists known for conceptualising friendship and developing “friendship as method” have emerged from a Eurocentric context (Agamben 2009; 2004; Beer and Gardner 2015; Blanchot 1997; Derrida 2005; Foucault 1994; Levinas 1969; Nancy 2000; Plato 2001; Tillmann-Healy 2003; Van der Geest 2015). These authors trace the theories of friendship back to Aristotle, positioning him at the root of the issue of friendship within the fields of the social sciences and humanities. In this subsection, I will discuss some Eurocentric conceptualisations of friendship as well as a few feminist and antiracist critiques, which will form the basis of the introduction to the concept of communal friendship below.

Friendship as a concept implies ethico-politically rich notions (such as reciprocity, love, trust, loyalty, sincerity, power, and equality) that are important in organising socio-economic relations within and between communities (Derrida 2005; Beer and Gardner 2015). Drawing on the eighth and ninth books of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2004) suggests that friendship offers a way of approaching human relations as a purely existential sharing or con-division. According to him, “[f]riendship is the instance

of this concurrent perception of the friend's existence in the awareness of one's own existence" (Agamben 2004, 5). In other words, in emphasising the relationship to others, friendship implies *being-in-common*. Moreover, Agamben argues that to "recognize someone as a friend means not to be able to recognize him as 'something' [...] friendship is not a property or quality of a subject" (Agamben 2004, 3). My initial attempt to imagine participant as friend is inspired by the idea that you cannot own another person or any part of them, whereas the etymology of the word 'participant' implies the opposite, one of its meanings entails to *take a part* "of" something (for more details, see [Section 05](#)). This "existential" attribute of the friend, as Agamben calls it, "is nonetheless intersected by an intensity that charges it with something like a political potency" (Agamben 2004, 5).

French philosopher Jacques Derrida explores the ethico-political potential of friendship in his book *The Politics of Friendship* (2005). Derrida argues that *philia* or friendship plays an organising role in the definition of the political experience. Indeed, he specifies that the foundational texts of political theory, in particular those of Aristotle, give a central role to friendship in the definition of democracy. Derrida further argues that the "dominant, prevailing and hegemonic" canonical model of friendship in the West (based on Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian and Islamic cultures) is phallogocentric (Derrida and Bennington 1997, 3). This implies that the development of democracy and fundamental political notions such as state, territory, nation-state, filiation, representation, and sovereignty, "share this phallogocentric concept of the social bond as friendship" (Derrida and Bennington 1997, 4) i.e., the privilege granted to man and to *brotherhood*. For example, Derrida points to the ways in which the French Republic is founded on the ideals of liberty, equality, and *fraternity* (Derrida and Bennington 1997, 4). Derrida invites us to imagine a new type of democracy – beyond the limits of the classical political model of the nation-state and its borders – that could be built on a non-canonical conception of friendship (Derrida 2005). Here it is worth adding that feminist political theorists have a longstanding history of thought on the patriarchal state and fraternal relations, constituting particular masculinities (Pateman 1997). Theorists of race have also highlighted racial inequalities underlying this fraternity (Mills 2011).

Feminists of colour have criticised these masculine and Eurocentric interpretations of friendship by pointing to the oppression as well as the hierarchical and normative power relations reproduced by Whiteness and patriarchy. In so doing, they have also theorised alternative notions, such as affective communities (Gandhi 2006), *manita* (Garcia 2020), *nepantlera* (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015), and pluralist friend (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995). These alternative perspectives shed light on new types of relations that move beyond “a voluntary, affective bond between similarly situated persons” (Garcia 2020, 719). For instance, the feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa describes *nepantleras* as threshold people who “are detached (separated) and attached (connected) to each of [their] several cultures” (Anzaldúa 2015, 56) and who inhabit a space that can accept contradiction and paradox (Anzaldúa 1987). According to the anthropologist Angela Garcia, these alternative forms of relationship would also be a “practical mode of change, survival and transformation” (Garcia 2020, 719). As you will see below, I include these aspects in my own understanding of a reflexive communal friendship.

We can further explore these alternative forms of friendships by employing the concepts of oppression, ambivalence, border crossing, dislocation, contestation, difference, and loss. For example, according to Garcia, Leela Gandhi’s *Affective Communities* grapples with the unsettling affective and political potential of friendship: “The conception of friendship Gandhi develops is premised on a dislocation through which bonds nevertheless grow. It is a theory of friendship that places separation at the heart of relationality, and it helps me to comprehend the shifting relations and struggles of kinship [...]” (Garcia 2020, 719). In Gandhi’s own words, friendship is “one name for the co-belonging of nonidentical singularities” (Gandhi 2006, 26) and it implies “affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging” (Gandhi 2006, 10). In the following, I draw on these alternative forms that conceptualise the relational bonds and realities of colonised subjects and cultures.

Communal Friendship

In 2019, when I was in the second year of my PhD, I started wondering what would happen if I imagined the participants in my artistic projects as friends ([Section 05](#) below). Today, I realise that my interest in friendship was sparked by an immigrant ethos: recognising otherness and

connecting with others irrespectively of our differences. Yet, I could not find this decolonial perspective in the theories of PA that I studied. Hence, I became more critical of the canonical concept of friendship outlined above and was motivated to construct a decolonial alternative. I have decided to name this alternative communal friendship, although the name remains provisional, since this process of conceptualisation is open-ended. Therefore, I wish to stress that it is not the concept/term in itself that matters, but the relational and reflexive processes that it fosters.

For me, communal friendship is an alternative approach to participation in PA that allows people with various positions of power to better relate each other in a dynamic involving notions such as dialogue, *vivir bien*, sharing, giving, displacement, oppression, and loss. Communal friendship signifies an ongoing ethico-political and epistemic project that is in line with a decolonial praxis (more on decoloniality in [Section 01](#)). Within a reflexive practice of communal friendship, I imagine relationships that break away from the colonial structures that have persisted throughout modernity, breeding Eurocentrism and discrimination. This type of relation is closely related to the Argentine decolonial philosopher Maria Lugones' idealist vision of a feminist community that would "carry us through the destruction of the capitalist, patriarchal, racist, ethnocentric state" (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995, 143). Lugones refers to this community as *pluralist friendship*. Since my approach is relational and dialogical, I will take Lugones's concept as a starting point in presenting the main characteristics of communal friendship.

For Lugones, our bonding must honour the complexity and plurality of reality. Relational approaches "must carry with [them] a commitment to an understanding of the realities of the friend" (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995, 142–43), thereby also enhancing our self-knowledge. I also include this idea of connecting with the other and their potentially differential situation in my definition of communal friendship. Indeed, in the practice of PA, one must always remain vigilant towards and curious about these differences. Such experiences of communal friendship encourage us to learn and to unlearn through our actions and reflections. Moreover, according to Lugones, pluralist friendship implies "a kind of practical love that includes a multivocal communication, a dialogue among multiple selves" (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995, 143). From

a reflexive communal friendship viewpoint, this means not only recognising the multiple situations of the people involved, but also resisting oppressive power dynamics involved in PA through the practice of conviviality and dialogue. However, this is far from easy. As Lugones notes, friendship:

[...] across positions of inequality has to be worked for rather than discovered or found. One needs to shift the focus of one's attention in ways that are epistemically very demanding. The shift in focus requires a dislodging of the centrality of one's position in the racist, ethnocentric, capitalist, patriarchal state in one's own self-concept. This entails a profound transformation of one's self. (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995, 143)

Here, Lugones points to the complex task of fully grasping one's own position within various axes of power and the effort that it takes to move towards self-reflexivity and intersubjectivity. As you will see below, I have also grappled with these issues during my PhD. Participation in art is always subject to creating exclusion. Therefore, one needs to ask *who* one's communal friends are in order to embark upon a decolonial quest and a transformative journey. In this context, our own identities come strongly into play in deconstructing coloniality:

One of [the] difficulties [of the ideal of pluralist friendship] lies in its depending on understanding the subtleties of racism in ways that many white/Anglo women may not. In this regard, women of color have an epistemic advantage, they have access to knowledge that white/Anglo women lack. (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995, 143)

My understanding of a reflexive practice of communal friendship builds on and extends Lugones's concept of pluralist friendship. To begin with, pluralist friendship can be located within a feminist emancipatory framework. Building on this conception, I suggest that communal friendship can be understood as the recognition and empowerment of the decolonial subject, insofar as it aims to include immigrant and decolonial ways of thinking, doing, and feeling within the practice of PA. In other words, a reflexive communal friendship extends Lugones's emancipatory project further. I build on Lugones's emphasis on plurality, combining it with Mignolo's understanding of 'the communal' (see [Section 05](#) for a more thorough discussion). Communitarity refers to a shared goal that includes notions of plurality, reciprocity, circularity, and cumulateness. In this vein, *communal friendship can be defined as a relationship between two or more people (involved in a PA project) who seek to overcome, despite their differences, the colonial logic and its exploitative practices through reflexivity and power sharing*. Communal friendship is hence defined in opposition to the exploitative

practices that often take place in PA under the neoliberal logic. Lugones's pluralist friendship and my communal friendship are two conceptual propositions – put forward by racialised authors – that offer alternatives to the dominant Eurocentric understanding of the practices of friendship and relationality.

Applying the grammar of a reflexive communal friendship in practice to the context of PA implies a set of attitudes and ideals. Throughout this document, you will see examples of this. For instance, in discussing the various projects, I will stress the importance of an action-oriented approach and of addressing local histories and alternative ways of knowing, acting, and sensing. Furthermore, from a methodological standpoint, this involves attempting to deconstruct dominant paradigms and letting participants speak for themselves, instead of representing them or talking about them. You will hopefully see the influence of decolonial thought in the ways in which I will seek to develop mutual trust over time; to share and distribute power in a quest for more social justice; to commit to giving voice to silenced histories and healing colonial wounds; and to develop reciprocal friendships between artist and participants.

Communal friendship is an ideal that implies a radical shift in the understanding and practice of participation in art in the West. Communal friends are people who work together towards a decolonial aim. It is an alternative approach to PA that allows *convivir*/coexistence (a relational bond) in, with and within an oppressive society. It offers an alternative to our present ways of thinking and doing neoliberal PA.

Recognition, (Co) Authorship, and Power

My art practice involves a relational process of listening to voices and viewing material other than mine. The recognition of each of these voices is crucial to the notion of communal friendship. I have used footnotes and extracts to amplify these voices throughout the written component whenever possible. As you will discover, despite my amendments, the first part of my PhD journey includes little explicit acknowledgement of participant input, although my project at Bromley by Bow Centre was collaborative. In fact, decolonising my participatory practice towards a communal approach was something that evolved throughout my research. It became a priority as I gradually came to understand my responsibility (and recognise my

agency) in regards to the neoliberalisation of participation. My experience highlights the difficulty of unlearning methods of creating PA that so often invisibilise marginal voices and accord all credits to the artist.

The question of recognition is linked to the issue of authorship that represents a challenge within the field of PA. Crediting roles in my projects has been a difficult task. The collaborative nature of my PA has led to the blurring of roles, especially in communal process-based projects such as *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* (Sections [15](#), [16](#), and [17](#) below). I have clarified the roles of the people involved through extended credits in the various sections that describe the projects. As argued by one of my final examiners, the use of credits is “an ethical question of being accountable for the knowledge, creativity and experience you brought to bear to the projects and what others also contributed to these (part of the practice of communal friendship)”. In other words, overcoming the pernicious tendencies of neoliberal participation in art requires recognising the work of others and making the power and privilege of authorship transparent, as the participatory artist/researcher can never escape from these dynamics. My doctoral project critically examines the impact of these tensions in the field of PA, more specifically in the section [Participant as Friend?](#) Scrutinising the notion of the participatory artist, along with the concepts of author and copyright, would require a more extensive examination. My PhD project, however, aims to decolonise the figure of the participant in PA.

Situating Myself

At a time when the decolonial approach is very much in vogue, I consider it essential to situate my own social, economic, cultural, racial, and gender position (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Dey 2000; Maldonado-Torres 2008; Seppälä, Sarantou, and Miettinen 2021b; Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). To begin with, I identify as a Latin-American immigrant man, and in so doing, I claim a set of genealogical, cultural, and political experiences. As you will see in my work, and specifically in [Section 14](#), I have personal experiences with the history of Latin-American immigration to Quebec. This family background makes me acutely aware of the invisibilisation experienced by Latinx immigrants as well as the struggles that they faced regarding language and displacement. The history of colonialism is thus linked to the concrete and symbolic experiences of my ancestors, my parents, and myself.

When I was a child, my parents would work several blue-collar jobs to make ends meet. My childhood memories are coloured by the experience of a working-class family with economic precarity, having often accompanied my parents to their places of work or suffered from their physical absence. And to have spent my teenage years in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhood with a dysfunctional highschool system where going to university was considered snobbish. In my family, I am part of the first generation that has had access to higher education. Today, I am a university professor, but my family background still shapes my identity. I grew up in a context where knowledge was passed down not primarily through words and texts but rather emphasising the voice of the body and the emotions. Therefore, the Western academic context in which I find myself today— and specifically that of an elite university such as Goldsmiths — still feels foreign to me. These experiences have prompted me to turn towards alternative ways of knowing and relating to others. I should note, though, that I am conscious that my academic position now is affecting my memories as well as my relationships to people.

Growing up, I felt like my physical features singled me out. In primary school, fellow students would make fun of my skin-tone, the size of my lips and nose, my dark hair, and the strange accent I had. The feeling of not being “normal” has stayed with me my whole life. In my professional life, I have often been identified — by myself and by others — as an ‘*artiste de la diversité*’ [culturally diverse artist]. This label brings with it a set of privileges and biases, as I will show in [Section 07](#). Today, my identity as a racialised member of the academia has prompted me to take an active part in anti-racist initiatives and to seek to give voice to marginalised groups. I am also actively involved in decolonising the practices within my institution, through my participation in antiracist committees, piloting the Arts Research Centre in Cultural Diversities (ARCCD) and the Art Research Laboratory in Decoloniality, renewing the course curriculum, and teaching the course *Decoloniality as an Artistic Practice*.

I am also a heterosexual cis-gender male who grew up in a bi-cultural context permeated by patriarchy. I carry with me the stereotypes passed down by my Guatemalan parents that I am constantly deconstructing. For me, being a man has brought about a set of privileges (being exempt from doing housework as a boy), as well as some limitations (“boys don’t cry”). My male identity is important insofar as I have worked with many women artists, researchers, and

participants in my projects. I have valued these relationships in which I felt free to express emotions; yet the gender difference also set me apart from the women and set certain limits to our interactions. Furthermore, in *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* ([Project 09](#)), my gender identity in effect blocked my access to women informants who otherwise might have shared their stories. Consequently, the project revolved primarily around a male-specific viewpoint.

In the last four years, my relationship to “being in the margin” has been in constant evolution, since the “centre” has shifted several times. At the start of my PhD in 2017, I was an immigrant with a student visa. In 2022, my status has substantially changed, as I am now a full-time professor working in my native country. The process of editing this written component also reminded me of the limits of the “academic I” in exploring the decolonisation of participation. For example, the discussions I had with my supervisors and examiners illustrated the extent to which the academic conventions of writing and evaluation are embedded in a context shaped by the heritage of coloniality.

Structure of the PhD

My doctoral research is a *thesis by practice* that comprises a body of artistic work accompanied by a visual documentation with written material reflecting on the research process and a written component offering a critical account of the research. **The document you are about to read includes the written component in the form of a reflexive diary and the visual documentation in the form of short critical essays and images, as well as links to websites where you find more information about the artistic projects.** My research uses a Freirean approach of action learning, a praxis where I (we) *reflect* and I (we) change through *practice*. The format of my PhD develops a similar approach, intertwining practices and reflections. In what follows, you will find essays and theoretical discussions as well as descriptions and documentation of my artworks/events. In other words, this document combines different styles and places my *practices* and *reflections* in dialogue. This back and forth employs a subjective conception of time, thereby unsettling the linear goal-oriented approach. The pursuit of knowledge being nonlinear, this text shows my reflections at different stages of my research, revealing contradictions that mirror my dilemmas as an insider-outsider. I wrote each section of my document separately, marking four years of research/events that follow the chronological

narrative of my academic journey between 2017 and 2022. Written in the form of a reflexive diary, divided by academic years, the text captures specific moments in time. Thus, it includes information that has changed over time (eg, my immigration or job status, the names of my supervisors or editors, etc.). These changes highlight one of the key lessons of my doctoral research: the constant need for self-scrutiny and learning to unlearn. Each section also includes a *note to the reader* in italic, with elements of what lies between the lines of these personal and academic experiences, revealing the realms of sensation that are contained in the written component. My doctoral research explores the issue of participation through several distinct yet interrelated PA projects across four academic years.

The journey begins during the first year of my PhD (2017-2018) when I started examining the issue of PA and engaged in the long-term art commission *Community in the Making* at the Bromley by Bow Centre in London. I have documented the experiences of my first year of research in several sections. [Section 01](#), *Disentangling Participatory Art in the West*, focuses on theoretical and conceptual issues, thereby putting into context the *Community in the Making* project that I describe in [Section 02](#). [Section 03](#) allows me to revisit the project through a critical lens by focusing on excerpts (documents, photos, etc.) and events that took place during the process of creating this PA project. To give clarity to my diary format, [Section 04](#) – written in 2021 during the last stages of my research – summarises, in hindsight, how my practice and research evolved during that first year.

It was during the second year of my PhD (2018-2019) that I started pondering the concept of friendship. Hence, the essay presented in [Section 05](#) is titled *Participant as Friend?* The section offers an overview of friendship and ponders the complexities of friendship as method. It was through these reflections that I became more aware of my own position as a second-generation Guatemalan immigrant and inspired by concepts and phenomena that I can trace back to my father's native village. It was also during my second year that I started exploring the concept of communal friendship as an alternative to the pitfalls of participation that I had experienced in the context of *Community in the Making*. In retrospect, I have summarised how my practice and research advanced during the second year in [Section 06](#).

During my third year (2019-2020), I expanded on my examination of issues of decoloniality and racialisation in a new context, having been hired as professor at the Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM) in Canada. [Section 07](#) offers an essay that develops the idea of communal friendship further. It does so by discussing several projects and events I organised through the Arts Research Centre in Cultural Diversities (ARCCD), such as a discussion with activist artist Maya K'iche Lucia Ixchú in 2019, as well as workshops that I coorganised in Livingstone, Zambia. I take these practices and experiences as a starting point to deepen my understanding of communal friendship with issues of decoloniality, resistance, and dialogue. Following my critical discussion, [Sections 08-12](#) provide detailed descriptions of the projects that I conducted, including public discussions, podcasts, as well as the writing of a publication concerning racialised participation. [Section 13](#) condenses in retrospective how my practice and research progressed during the third year.

Finally, my fourth year (2020-2021) revolved around several projects related to the Guatemalan diaspora in Montreal. [Section 14](#), *Excavating the Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*, completes my theoretical and methodological discussions on participation and decoloniality by drawing on the traditions of auto-ethnography, oral history, and self-reflexivity. This essay presents the origins of my fourth-year projects and discusses in detail the friends/participants and my relationship with them. I describe the art projects themselves in [Sections 15, 16, 17](#), followed by a critical examination of my long-term collaborative process *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* (2020-ongoing) in [Section 18](#). By introducing these practical examples and complementary essays, I seek to understand how communal friendship can contribute to decolonising PA while also analysing the successes, failures, and challenges this involves and how they can be addressed. [Section 19](#) identifies in retrospective how my practice and research progressed during 2020-2021.

1st YEAR (2017-2018)

Section 01 – Disentangling Participatory Art in the West

Note to the reader: This section aims to give an account of participatory art (PA) practice in a Western context. It historicises and locates the current debate around PA by drawing on Claire Bishop's and Grant Kester's works. This review also seeks to question nominal terms such as PA or collaborative art, and to offer a more productive and nuanced understanding of a process-based practice that is hybrid in nature and that overlaps with concepts in the humanities and social sciences. My text reflects on the possibilities of finding a strategy that neither instrumentalises artistic forms, nor employs fixed categories or polarised discursive frameworks to which Shannon Jackson (2011, 47) refers to as "feel good" or "do bad" models.

In 2016, while I was about to start an art commission for Public Health England and the charity organisation Bromley by Bow Centre on the outskirts of London, I heard about how some members of socially deprived and culturally diverse areas of the United Kingdom were fed up with being solicited by participatory research. I was even warned by one of my art colleagues about the risks of doing PA in the UK and of being too naïve with my utopian projects. I heard about how, in response to a build-up of tokenism and misleading and disappointing experiences, some participants had reacted aggressively to artists and researchers. I did not really believe these warnings at the time. Yet while I produced my art commission, I was the witness, the victim, and the accomplice of a detrimental socioeconomic system, which provoked at the time (and still does) a mix of ambiguous emotions such as trust, gratitude, love, shame, guilt, sadness, and anger. I do think many of us (participants, artists, researchers, and organisations) involved in such participatory projects have experienced the dilemmas of what I call *neoliberal participation*, which I will define below. It is in this context that I examine the complexities of PA in the West, and more specifically in the UK and Canada, while exploring the ways in which art, participation, and health/wellbeing come together in a neoliberal context.

The Rise of Participatory Art and Neoliberalism

PA is a generic and ambiguous term. Broadly, PA defines a practice in which artists engage people as their main artistic medium and “material”. It is often referred to by a wide range of different terms: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, conversational art, littoral art, interventionist art, collaborative art, contextual art, and social practice. The art critic Claire Bishop (2012) has identified the slow emergence of this socially-oriented artistic tendency in Europe, linking it primarily to a series of major socio-political-economic events in the 1990s: the fall of socialism, the dismantling of the welfare state, the strengthening of the free market, and the neoliberal reform of education. This social turn saw the emergence of some of the pioneering artists and projects that formed PA in the West, such as Clegg & Guttmann (*The Open Public Library*, 1991), Suzanne Lacy (*The Oakland Projects*, 1991-2001), the artist collective Superflex (1993), or the projects *Project Unité* (1993) and *Park Fiction* (1995, since 2013 renamed as *Gezi Park Fiction St. Pauli*). These projects link public participation with site-specific practice, theatre, and performance. I will develop further on the emergence and modalities of PA and the notion of participant in the next paragraphs and sections. Many artists and art agents reacted to the political and social overhaul brought about by neoliberalism – which some perceived as a crisis – by focusing more on participation and collaboration in their art practices and work (Bishop 2012; Kester 2011; Kwon 2002; Miessen 2011). Particularly significant here has been the rise of neoliberalism, the primary goal of which has been, as art historian Grant Kester amongst others argues, to dismantle the “autonomy of public institutions, which are seen to represent a space of collective articulation that is potentially resistant to the privatising drive of the market system” (Kester 2011, 110). As Kester observes, we can thus see the rise of PA as a key critique of the privatisation of the state.

The end of the Cold War saw the rise of neoliberalism in the West (Brown 2015; Gilbert 2014; Polletta 2002; Sholette and Lippard 2017), a “normative order of reason developed over three decades” (Brown 2015, 29). If neoliberalism was rudely enforced to reorient the volatile Chilean economy during Augusto Pinochet’s presidency in the mid-seventies and described as the “Miracle of Chile” (Milton Friedman), it “unfolded more subtly in Euro-Atlantic nations through techniques of governance usurping a democratic with an economic vocabulary and

social consciousness” (Brown 2015, 20–21). The definition and usage of the term neoliberalism has changed over time, but, according to the political theorist Wendy Brown, it is commonly understood “as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets” (Brown 2015, 28). Under a neoliberal rationality, “democratic state commitments to equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism are now subordinate to the project of economic growth, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement” (Brown 2015, 26). Neoliberal policy, therefore, typically leads to intensified inequality, crass or unethical commercialisation, an ever-growing intimacy of corporate and finance capital with the state, and economic havoc, while promoting a fragmented and commodified culture as well as normalising market relations in every conceivable social sphere (Brown 2015; Gilbert 2014). In other words, democracy is now saturated with market value, while human beings are converted into human capital. Under such premises, neoliberal rationality eliminates, argues Brown, “the cultivation and expression of distinctly human capacities for ethical and political freedom, creativity, unbounded reflection, or invention” (Brown 2015, 43). There is consensus among the critics of neoliberalism that it is subtly dismantling the basic aspects of democracy in the West (Brown 2015; Gilbert 2014; Polletta 2002). The assumption of neoliberalism is that “democracy cannot work, because all collectivities are inherently impotent” (Gilbert 2014, 9). A so-called crisis in the effectiveness of representative democratic institutions in much of the Western world since the 1970s has led to increasing demands for more radical forms of participatory government, such as extending part of legislative decision-making to citizens (Gilbert 2014).

Participatory Art and Its Neoliberalisation

My art commission at the Bromley by Bow Centre took place in this socio-political and economic context. As part of the “crisis” of political democracy mentioned above, resistance to neoliberalism has led to organised collective actions and people rethinking the social role of art and the artist in Western society. Professor of performance art Shannon Jackson, and others, have pointed out that as part of a “return to the social”, artists began experimenting with novel reconfigurations of their relationship to audiences in the 1980s and 1990s with a particular focus on public space and activist intervention (Jackson 2011; Kester 2011; Kwon 2002; Sholette and

Lippard 2017). Bishop (2012) has suggested that, by the 2000s, these trends increasingly led to the format of artist workshops informed by critical pedagogy that sought to empower participants to make social changes through collective and horizontal collaboration. However, as theorist Kim Charnley argues, it was also in the 1980s that the “expansion of the art world gathered pace, which is why changes in art since this time, driven by speculative capital investment, are often cited as having been symptomatic of neoliberal capitalism” (cited in Sholette and Lippard 2017, 3). Under the influence of neoliberalism, the generation of artists that has emerged in the last three decades tends (deliberately or not) to replicate in its projects the capitalist logic it is criticising. In Western countries, subsidies for art education, the proliferations of biennials, the state support for exhibitions, and the international network of grants and residencies have produced a generation that Kester refers to as “itinerant” artists committed to the project of making “EU art”. It is difficult to give clear examples of this trend, as each case is unique, but some relevant cases include the Worldwide Network of Artist Residencies Res Artis, Les Pépinières Européennes de Création, and the many European, Latinx or even Canadian artists, such as Paul Maheke, Amalia Pica, or myself. At first glance, this appears to be art without the commercial pressure of the art market. However, these art practices and cultural organisations are dependent on and reinforcing the neoliberal market and its logic of the “project”, where performance, fluidity, and mobility are valued (Bishop 2012; Kester 2011). Nowadays, this phenomenon has been relabelled “cultural diplomacy”¹ by many countries in the West that typically send their artists to participate as ambassadors in art residencies around the world, with the expectation that they represent the cultural production of their home countries.

Moreover, this neoliberalisation of the art world has led to the transformation of the social role of the artist. The reconfiguration of the relationship between artist and public under neoliberalism has produced a polarised discourse concerned with the politics and ethics of participation. Yet, this trend has also led many contemporary artists, such as Thomas Hirschhorn,

¹ In 2016, the director of the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) Simon Brault argued for a “return to the true definition of cultural diplomacy” in the Quebec newspaper *Le Devoir*. I subsequently criticised the reform of the CCA, which replaced long-term art residency agreements with an “artist-contractor” formula. For the full article, see: <https://www.ledevoir.com/culture/465326/conseil-des-arts-du-canada-le-retour-a-la-diplomatie-culturelle>

Superflex, or Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, to address the situation by emphasising a categorical distinction between participation and collaboration. The theories of participatory democracy underline that high levels of participation allow citizens to control the decision-making process, whereas lower levels of participation can lead to more manipulation from the powerholder (Arnstein 1969; Gilbert 2014; Polletta 2002). In the same vein, in the field of art, Bishop notes that “collaboration involves co-authorship and decisions over key structural features of the work” (Bishop 2012, 758). To solve this structural dilemma faced by artists that genuinely seek community engagement, I argue that it is not enough to challenge the terminology or to replace ‘participation’ by ‘collaboration’. The terms commonly used alongside “co-authorship”, such as collaboration, cooperation and collectivity, are themselves embedded with historical connotations of hierarchy. In the field of art, participation often means being subject to the visions of the artist. Kester, for example, notes how the terms collaboration, collectivity and cooperation entail a contradictory ethical aim and a “semantic slippage to negative connotations” like “collaboration as betrayal”, “collectivity evokes [...] forced labour camps” and “cooperation leads to ‘cooperative’ witnesses and a complicitous” (Kester 2011, 2).

The architect Eyal Weizman also refers to the dangers of collaboration in the context of power differentials:

[A]s the tendency for forcefully or willingly aligning one’s actions with the aim of power, be it political, military, economic, or a combination thereof [...] justified as a commonsensical, if tragic, solution to a problem of limits. The dilemma of participation/collaboration implies a closed system in which the options available for choice, and those who present them, cannot be challenged. (Weizman cited in Miessen 2011, 9)

What Weizman emphasises here are the ways in which neither participation nor collaboration can escape the dynamics of power. This relationship of power leads to a typology of participation with a hierarchy of citizen participation, as analysed by Sherry Arnstein (1969), which measures the degree of power redistribution between citizens and powerholders. Non-participation by citizens is thus a way of maintaining the status quo. In PA, the wish to disrupt this status quo has led artists to redistribute their power of authorship to the participants, which is then used as “a gauge for measuring the efficacy of artistic practice” (Bishop 2012, 279). If

Bishop clearly stands against this criterion of evaluation for PA, for the community art movement, it has been a fundamental objective.

Neoliberal Participation

Citizen participation and participatory democracy have been at the core of the community art movement since its emergence in the UK in the 1960s (Braden 1978; Kelly 1984). The aim of the community art movement has always been cultural democracy (Pritchard 2018), that is, providing everyone with equal access to culture. PA has much of its roots in the discourse on creativity, participation, and community engagement. Yet, as artist and theorist Gregory Sholette and others have mentioned, by the 2000s, neoliberalism and New Labour in the UK had led to instrumentalising and extracting most of the subversive power from community art. The same subsequently happened to PA, which was transformed into a tool for social provision in the context of the dismantling of the welfare estate (Bishop 2012; Jackson 2011; Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017). In North America, and more specifically in the US, the term *Social Practice* is increasingly accepted as the status quo, and it is a term more commonly used than PA (Sholette and Lippard 2017).

Interest in the impact of creativity and community in PA has been increasing in the last decade, as shown in the surge of literature published on the topic in relation to health and wellbeing (Graham and Serpentine Gallery 2013; Matarasso 1998), public art and citizenship (Finkelpaerl 2013; Thompson 2015), and curating and education (O'Neill and Wilson 2010; Rogoff 2008). It is worth pointing out that this is a largely Western phenomenon, led by writers ranging from French curator Nicolas Bourriaud to the US-based performance theorist Shannon Jackson. This strategic interest in PA may stem from pervasive state (and charity) support that commissions PA projects and academic research theorising the challenges and impacts of collaborative practices and warning of the risks of instrumentalising art for its social benefits. This marked interest in PA has also led to vigorous debates that have, as early as the 1980s, consisted in finding a common ground to theorise, evaluate, and criticise a social art practice that questions the politics of ethics, aesthetics, and authorship. These polarised debates reveal the fundamental division of PA that results from its drive for aesthetic autonomy and the ethics of its practice. As Jackson suggests, autonomy “in both aesthetic and ethical discourses, is defined as ‘self-

governing’, opposing itself to objects and subjects which are heteronomously ‘governed by external rules’” (Jackson 2011, 15). Each of the above phenomena are part of the new grammar of participation and PA in the West. I argue that we should start referring to this instrumentalisation and its subversive dilapidation, the (mercantile) increase of its literature and its practice, the polarisation of its discourse and its practice, as neoliberal participation.

Participatory Art versus Collaborative Art

These fundamental divisions within PA point to the need for a more productive terminology: one that acknowledges the contradictory characteristics and instrumentalising potential of the practice in the context of neoliberal participation. Bishop and Kwon were among the first critics, in the early 2000s, to challenge the formulations of social practices – at the heart of PA – by, for example, questioning the criteria for political, moral, and ethical judgments (Bishop 2004) or arguing against the concept of community at the heart of community-based art (Kwon 2002). If “an open-ness to the social can encumber the work of art as often as it activates it” (Jackson 2011, 15), the ethics of collaboration nevertheless entail real risks of censorship. Its detractors have objected to the “ethical turn” prevalent in contemporary art criticism and to the social mission of PA, and have argued for the necessity of detachment, distance, and autonomy for artists so that they can produce critical works (Bishop 2006b; Kwon 2002). Bishop has moreover argued against “feel-good positions” and the “unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness” of relational aesthetic artists (Bishop 2004, 79). She has called for an “antagonistic aesthetic”, wherein the production of PA works are to be “marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging”. Her understanding of antagonism is grounded in the theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), which consider social antagonism/agonism an essential component of a fully operative democratic society (Bishop 2004). Contemporary artists who refer to the “antagonistic aesthetic” and the ethics of the collectivity include, for example, Francis Alys (e.g., *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002), Tania Bruguera (e.g., *10,148,451*, 2018-19), or Santiago Sierra (e.g., *Group of persons facing a wall*, 2002). Bishop has more recently nuanced her argumentation. In her seminal book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), she argues that the “most striking projects that constitute PA unseat all the polarities on which [social and artistic

discourses are] founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art) but not with the goal of collapsing them” (Bishop 2012, 277-78). Bishop’s 2012 book, which appears to be guided by an affirmative-utopian impulse, marks a sharp difference from her earlier more radical positions.

On the other side of this debate are the tenets of collaborative art. In the book *Social Works* (2011), Shannon Jackson makes a comparison between artists Shannon Flattery and Santiago Sierra in order to highlight the complex division at stake around the ethics and aesthetics of the practice. Where Sierra keeps his authorial name, “receives artistic commissions, fees, and royalties from an artworld network of biennial, public art commissioning, museum, and gallery-collector systems” (Jackson 2011, 43), Flattery’s work is created under the umbrella of a non-profit organisation “that relies on donor contributions, foundation grants, and under-funded civic commissioning bodies” (Jackson 2011, 43). Flattery’s PA approach is one that embraces the ethics of collaboration and involves an ethical reflection, suggesting that artists must overcome their privileged status in order to create a dialogue of equality with participants (Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017; Thompson 2015). The avant-garde disenchants this social practice. It is a “dialogical art” practice that is defined by a specific mode of perception of the public realm that, in turn, triggers “a more complex model of social change and identity, one in which the binary opposition [is challenged and where] distance is not an absolute and constant characteristic of artistic subjectivity” (Kester 2011, 89). This type of socially engaged art seeks to “be filling an unfulfilled social need by enacting community participation and horizontal collaboration, and by seeking to create micro-collectives and intentional communities” (Sholette and Lippard 2017, 220).

Kester’s book, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011), gives insight into collaborative practices concerned with collective action and civic engagement. Some of the theorists/curators who have also endorsed this socially engaged type of PA include Nato Thompson, Gregory Sholette, and artists/collectives such as the Alternative School of Economics (e.g., Rabbit Road Institute, 2016), inSite/CasaGallina, Suzanne Lacy, or the Art Hives Network. The aforementioned practitioners defend forms of collaborative

practice that argue for a “dialogical aesthetic”² grounded in an ethics of empathy, respect, empowerment, and collective authorship.

The Unresolved Nature of Participatory Art

The “rivalry” between participation and collaboration has led to a polarised discourse that is linked to Bishop and Kester’s disagreement over the question of aesthetic autonomy (Bishop 2012) versus the logic of ethics (Kester 2011). For Bishop, Kester represents the logic of ethics, the typical discourse around PA, which insists on “consensual dialogue”, “renunciation to authorship”, and “compassionate identification to the other” to the extreme, whereby PA acts as a repressive norm which “allows for simplistic oppositions” (Bishop 2012, 25). For Kester, Bishop is among a group of art critics that defends artists who “retain complete control over the form and structure” of projects (Kester 2011, 32) and who, in turn, encourage “relational antagonism”, a “disruptive approach”, and an “agonistic conflict” that relies “on a reductive opposition” (Kester 2011, 61-63).

However, a closer reading of their last two books can lead to a more nuanced interpretation of their dispute that, at first glance, appeared irreconcilable. In fact, for Bishop, PA does not only assert a conflictive approach. When she suggests that PA activates audiences to empower, “restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement” (Bishop 2012, 275), Bishop implicitly embraces dialogue. Indeed, pedagogical art, one of the dominant trends in PA, is highly indebted to the dialogical theorist Paulo Freire (2017). I would also argue for a more nuanced analysis of Kester who in fact claims a denial of “antagonism” or “dissensus” in his dialogical theory of Collaborative Art (CA) (Charnley 2011, 48). As Kester notes, CA “cultivates not an 'agonistic' notion of democracy, but rather the conditions of mutual trust and civility necessary to sustain agonism and disagreement in the first place” (Kester 2011, 152). Thus, Kester recognises that there exists a conflictual side to collaboration, but, in

² Kester’s suggestion of a dialogical aesthetic is influenced by Jürgen Habermas’s “attempt to construct a model of subjectivity based on communicative interaction” (Kester 2005, 5) and by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin “who argued that the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation; a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view” (Kester 2005, 2).

opposition to Bishop, he argues that conflicts need to be avoided, not generated. These debates show that antagonism is a useful concept for thinking not only about the foundation of society at large, but also about social practices that take place amongst and between individuals, as is the case for PA and CA. They also allow us to move beyond antagonism and to imagine alternatives based on the ideas of dialogue and mutual trust.

The fierce debate around PA acknowledges the emergence of a socially engaged art practice in response to the period of neoliberal uncertainty and the increasing erosion of social space (Bishop 2012; Gilbert 2014; Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017). Bishop and Kester also argue for a socially engaged collaborative practice opposed to instrumentalising participation and PA in the name of social inclusion. As mentioned in the introduction, this instrumentalisation has been heavily favoured in the UK. This is manifest in a report on the positive impact of social participation by François Matarasso (1998), the gradual decline of the welfare state (Bell 2017, 74; Bishop 2012, 14; Kester 2011, 225), and the increasing institutionalisation of the artist (Bishop 2012, 188, 202; Kester 2011, 123, 135; Sholette and Lippard 2017).

However, as I have explained, Bishop's and Kester's arguments differ in the way that PA should be put into practice. Unfortunately, both theorists' "unhelpful binary between affirmation and negation" (Bell 2017, 81) risks a flattening of meanings, neutralising their arguments, and further instrumentalising collaborative practice. I argue that Bishop's and Kester's tendency to polarise their respective arguments is, in fact, an attempt to "overcome the grounding contradictions" intrinsic to process-based art practices that blend art and life (Charnley 2011, 50). As Charnley notes, "Bishop attempts to expel the ethical from consideration of the aesthetic in works where any politics is intimately tied to questions of morality; Kester tries to use ethical reflection and consensual dialogue to erase the disjuncture between the autonomous aesthetic field and the social" (Charnley 2011, 50-51). Surprisingly, both of them acknowledge the contradictory nature of collaborative practices and the need to challenge their polarities. While Kester promotes a "back and forth [...] effectively producing a diagonal movement" (Kester 2011, 90), Bishop argues in favour of sustaining the tension in PA's contradictions with psychoanalyst Felix Guattari's concept of transversality, the quality of crossing disciplines, and

philosopher Jacques Rancière's effectiveness of aesthetic experience in the "and" (Bishop 2012, 278).

The Organic and Relational Nature of Participatory Art

To show what is missing in this field, I have thus far outlined some of the key questions in the current debate around PA that are most relevant to my own artistic practice. This review seeks to demonstrate that it is not only the concepts of PA and CA, but also the practice and the participating stakeholders (participant, artist, etc.) that are drawn into a logic of polarities, categorisation, and control that potentially lead to the instrumentalisation and manipulation of the artist/participant. Rather than leaning in the direction of any one of these concepts, I find myself attracted to *diagonal movements*, which draws on Guattari's *transversality* (Guattari 2000) and Rancière's *and* (Rancière 2002). More specifically, as I will elaborate in the next section, I am drawn to the relativising approaches of Freire's dialogue or the concepts of carnivalisation and syncretism, both of which embrace contradictory terms/conditions/logics, as shown by the work of anthropologist Roberto DaMatta (1983b).

My arguments above highlight some of the problems related to nominal terms such as *participatory art* and *collaborative art*. As defined earlier, at their core, PA and collaborative art are problematic terms insofar as the impulse for collectivity and power sharing often implies control and power relationships (Arnstein 1969; Kester 2011; Miessen 2011), thereby opening a space for manipulating participants. This fundamental contradiction results from the overlap between art and social claims. However, I argue that this binary of oppositions should remain unresolved and sustained in a continual tension, for this tension is an integral part of PA; therein lies its subversive potential (Bell 2017, 81; Charnley 2011, 51). What is missing is a more productive terminology that acknowledges the contradictory characteristics and potential instrumentalisation of participation and collaboration in the sphere of art. In contrast to categories that install hierarchical and binary oppositions and thus deny the contradictory nature of PA, which have led to polarised debates in contemporary art theory, I propose a system that considers the core characteristics of process-based art practices and overlaps with concepts in the humanities and the social sciences. Specifically, I am interested in the organicity and relationality of PA.

As seen with Bishop and Kester, contemporary art theory has been unable to combine seemingly contradictory elements (Bell 2017; Bishop 2012; Charnley 2011; Finkelppearl 2014; Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017), which has led to a difficulty in prioritising aesthetics *and* ethics in process-based art practice. In a similar vein, Western philosophers and social scientific researchers have a strong tendency towards totalising categories, such as “community”. This line of thought goes back to Theodor Adorno’s (1973) “logic of identity”, which consists of a desire to think of things as a totality and to exclude difference. As the political theorist Iris Marion Young (1986) argues, the theory of identity installs hierarchical oppositions and binary categories such as female/male or mind/body. Any categorisation, Young argues, “creates an inside/outside distinction, and the logic of identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn” (Young 1986, 2–3). This is the case for Western conceptions of community that are unable to combine elements of difference or “otherness”. Hence, these conceptualisations of community are useful for contemporary discussions of emancipation from a socio-political perspective (Olivier 2017, 2–3; Young 1986, 23), and they can be combined with the critical theory of radical pedagogy and decoloniality. This identitarian logic has important implications for conceptualising art practices that are process-based and relational in nature, producing meaning and form through changes, contradictions, and relationships. By not describing art practice in normative categories, we are more likely to foster flexibility and interdisciplinarity, thereby allowing us to avoid the instrumentalisation of social aims in PA.

Radical Pedagogy

In this subsection, I provide a brief context of the radical pedagogy approach that informs my artistic practice. PA’s turn to radical pedagogy took place in the wake of resistance to the fall of democracy in some Latin American countries in the 1960s, which produced institutional critique and collective organisation for social justice. In other words, radical pedagogy emerged in Latin America as a tool of revolution and education against oppression. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2017 [1970]), develops the concept of critical consciousness or *conscientização* in Portuguese, which “strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire 2017, 54). Freire’s ideas are central to radical pedagogy: his book “proposes the teacher as a co-producer of knowledge,

facilitating the student’s empowerment through collective and non-authoritarian collaboration” (Bishop 2012, 254). As opposed to institutional rigidity and normative literacy, radical “education is in constant change, in the praxis, due to the transformational state of human and reality” (Freire 2017, 65).

The theorist Janna Graham argues that “Freire’s work and that of subsequent approaches to popular education in Latin America, can be read against the presence of military dictatorships, the work of a metropolitan Communist Left and alongside movements in the Latin American Church toward the ‘preferential option for the poor’” (Graham 2018, 122). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is also part of a larger anticolonial struggle, such as the *non-aligned movement*³ and the writings of Frantz Fanon (2008). Under such social and political contexts, the Freirian “oppressed” enact strategies against oppression and the colonial matrix of power. Freire and other theorists of radical pedagogy (Giroux 1997; McLaren 2016; Shor 1992) formulate ideas and theories within a delinking philosophy, a decoloniality “committed to unravel[ing] the power and the secrets of modernity/colonialism, being the latter understood as the power contrivances rooted in the culture and mentality of colonized people” (Carola 2017, 23).

As will become clear in the forthcoming sections, I have inserted myself into this project of radical pedagogy by using an auto-ethnographic methodology. This autobiographical approach gives an account of my immigrant roots and helps to demonstrate the extent of the influence of decoloniality that informs my artistic practice and my call for “communal” friendship (specifically, in [Section 05](#)). This auto-ethnographic methodology also offers a framework for understanding my epistemological stance and how I situate myself in the practice-led aspects of my research.

Colonialism/Coloniality

In 2017, when I began my doctoral journey, I was not fully aware of how much my artistic practice and research would be indebted to decolonial thinking and doing. Over the course of

³ Established in 1961, the *non-aligned movement* is a coalition of states from the Global South that struggle against hegemony and colonialism (Castro Speech to the UN, 12 October 1979).

my four-year PhD project, I experimented with and refined decolonial methods that I will discuss here.

My theoretical framework on decoloniality is primarily inspired by the work of Proyecto M/C (Proyecto Modernidad/Colonialidad, or Modernity/Coloniality group or project in English translation), a collective of/in South America. My interest in the work produced by Proyecto M/C lies in the fact that their decolonial vision takes into account the realities of Latin American migration. The group is mainly composed of scholars from South America and based in the United States⁴. I feel a connection to their vision with my roots as an immigrant originating from Guatemala.

Proyecto M/C concentrated its early discussions on issues of epistemology, political economy, and political theory in relation to coloniality, a concept that differs from colonialism. If *colonialism* implies political and economic subjugation or control of one people (or nation) by another, *coloniality* consists of the power matrix resulting from surviving modern colonialism which began with the so-called discovery of America in 1492 (Dussel 1993; Grosfoguel 2011; Lugones 2016; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2007b; Walsh 2005). Coloniality or coloniality of power thereby refers to *patrón colonial de poder* – a key concept introduced by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano in 1990 that Mignolo translated as the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 114). Coloniality as a concept “uncovers the underlying logic of Western civilization and colonialisms, its formation and planetary expansion since the sixteenth century” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 227). As the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains, Quijano's concept of coloniality “deals with a matrix of power that produces racial and gender hierarchies on the global and local levels, functioning alongside capital to maintain a modern regime of exploitation and domination” (Maldonado-Torres 2011, 7). The colonial matrix of power refers to the subordination of work,

⁴ Its initial composition included Edgardo Lander (Venezuela), Fernando Coronil (Venezuela-United States), Santiago Castro-Gómez and Oscar Guardiola-Rivera (Colombia), Arturo Escobar (Colombia-United States), Javier Sanjinés (Bolivia-United States), Zulma Palermo (Argentina), Maria Lugones and Walter Mignolo (Argentina-United States), Freya Schiwy (Germany-United States), Enrique Dussel (Argentina-Mexico), Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Agustín Lao-Montes (Puerto Rico-United States), Anibal Quijano (Peru-United States), and Catherine Walsh (United States-Ecuador) (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 8).

knowledge, authority, and intersubjective relations through the control of neoliberalism and categorisation criterias such as race, gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, but also more subtle factors like space, time, sensibilities, and taste.

More concretely, according to Proyecto M/C, coloniality articulates along four axes: the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, the coloniality of being, and the coloniality of gender (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000; Walsh 2005). First, the *coloniality of power* refers to the links between Eurocentric domination, the capitalist division of labor, and the idea of race. In other words, it sheds light on the relations of exploitation that stem from modernity, such as racial classifications (Quijano 2000a). Second, the *coloniality of knowledge* that emerged at the dawn of modernity purports that Eurocentric knowledge-production is more advanced than its counterparts. In so doing, it delegitimises, invisibilises, and silences non-European knowledge (Mignolo 2013). Third, the *coloniality of being* aims to negate the existence of the “Other” as a human being (Maldonado 2007). In other words, the colonial system of thought and capitalist exploitation is based on the idea that colonised and racialised people are less than human and inferior (Maldonado 2007). Fourth, the *coloniality of gender* completes the three aforementioned dimensions by adding to these injustices those related to gender. It consists of gender inequalities, the exclusion of women from places of power and the negation of racialised women (Lugones 2016). By intertwining the production of *race* and *gender*, the decolonial philosopher Maria Lugones gives the ground to understand how coloniality disrupts bonds of solidarity. She urges to “recommit to communal integrity in a liberatory direction” (Lugones 2016, 16) by taking in account “the extent and importance of the gender system in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making, collective authority, and economies” (Lugones 2016, 12). In short, coloniality constitutes new forms of colonialism not at the economic or political level but at the level of organisation of the social (Lugones 2016) and in our ways of knowing, learning and feeling (Ferreira Zacarias, Gómez, and González Vásquez 2016, 125).

Decoloniality

Coloniality is a crucial concept for understanding the complexities of the neoliberal context in which I produced my practice-based artistic research. In contrast, my work proposes to navigate

through decoloniality. As the American scholar Catherine E. Walsh argues, “decoloniality necessarily follows, derives from, and responds to coloniality and the ongoing colonial process and condition” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 17). Decoloniality⁵, as defined by Mignolo and Walsh:

denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion. It implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity. (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 17)

As mentioned above, the increasing use of decolonisation as a metaphor has been contested in Western academia (Dey 2000; Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). I consider this critique fundamentally justified, hence my need to clearly define what I am decolonising from (Seppälä, Sarantou, and Miettinen 2021b) and my willingness to distinguish decolonisation from decoloniality. Although the term decoloniality is increasingly substituted with decolonisation, the meanings and historical implications of decoloniality require it to be distinguished from decolonisation (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Sandoval 2000; Walsh 2005) and postcolonialism (Bhabra 2014). I will respond to these issues and characterise the similarities and differences in [Sections 05](#) and [07](#), but I want to emphasise that these divergent understandings have led to much debate about who and for what end decolonisation should be used, particularly in academia (Bhabra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu 2018; Cusicanqui 2012; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Seppälä, Sarantou, and Miettinen 2021b).

My understanding and use of decoloniality is defined by what Maldonado-Torres (2008) refers as the *actitud des-colonial* (a decolonial attitude), which is a critical, ethico-political and theoretical approach to coloniality and a striving for alternative ways of affirming the lives of those who are most affected by it. Thus, decoloniality involves a relationality which “looks, thinks, and acts with the present-future-past, including with the peoples, subjects, and situated and embodied knowledges, territories, and struggles that push toward, advance, and open

⁵ The grounds of decolonial theories are found in thinkers and activists such as W. E. B. Dubois, Anna Julia Cooper, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Mahatma Gandhi, Sun Yatsen, Dolores Cacuango, Amilcar Lopes da Costa Cabral, Sojourner Truth, Steve Biko, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sylvia Wynter (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 9)

possibilities of an otherwise” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 100). The transformation of colonial subjects and subjectivities into decolonial subjects and subjectivities, by delinking from the hegemonic narratives of modernity/coloniality, is conceived as a process rather than an end.

It needs to be noted that decoloniality is not a new paradigm but rather a reinvigorated proposal of an alternative option to the hegemonic assumptions of thinking, feeling, doing and believing of the colonial matrix of the West. It therefore appears important to clarify that decoloniality does not seek to dismantle the colonial matrix of power but rather to transcend it. As Maldonado-Torres argues, decoloniality addresses concepts that “need to be conceived as invitations to dialogue and not as impositions” (2007, 261). Decoloniality is an option, not a replacement or a denial, of the colonial matrix. The sociologist Rolando Vazquez invites us to understand decoloniality as a tool: “we need to locate it and we need to see its historicity, because then it has a right to exist in a humble situation - in uncovering its positionality, always allowing for other forms of legibility” (Vazquez 2017).

The call of my practice-based doctoral research for a shift in our ways of thinking and doing PA is significant in the context of a decolonial attitude. As much I am interested in offering a critique of neoliberal participation in art, I am aiming as well to transform my (its) practice, i.e. decolonising my (our) way of doing PA by seeking to develop new alternatives that will foster decoloniality and social transformation. My research seeks to propose an alternative option to neoliberal participation in art – which I will define as communal friendship – for thinking and doing PA. It is in this way that my PhD research connects to decoloniality.

Decolonial Aesthetics

My practice of decoloniality over the last four years aimed to disentangle the colonial legacy in (neoliberal participatory) art and Western aesthetics. Aesthetics is a constitutive part of the colonial matrix of power that involves all fields of human experience (Attia 2018; Benfield et al. 2012; Camelo 2017; Ferreira Zacarias, Gómez, and González Vásquez 2016; Gómez and Mignolo 2012; Mignolo 2010a; Mignolo and Vazquez 2013; Vazquez 2017). Mignolo and

Vazquez have untangled aesthetics with the concept of decolonial aesthesis⁶. For them, aesthetics is a part of coloniality and “began to be put in place in the sixteenth century with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit and the colonisation of the New World, and that was transformed and expanded through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and up to this day” (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, 4). In this regard, they argue that aesthetics emerges as a philosophical concept in the eighteenth-century in response to the obsession for the rational in Europe. The rise of modern aesthetics prevails as a hegemonic theory of sensibility, sensations, and emotions which still today is experienced as a regulator of our global capability to “sense” the beautiful and the sublime (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, 3). “Modern aestheTics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving” (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, 5). While aesthetics expands the modern/colonial project of hegemony over economics, politics, and knowledge through senses and perceptions, the decolonial aesthesis seeks to offer an option to challenge and subvert it.

As an example, aesthetics and coloniality as westernisation operate by erasing native memories and instead projecting the history, worldview, and culture of the coloniser. Putting into practice a decolonial aesthetics (or decolonial aesthesis, following Mignolo and Vazquez’s argument) entails both the critique and the visioning of alternatives. Firstly, the task means understanding how coloniality operates in PA, how the aesthetics regime of distinction between art and non-art hides the dehumanisation of other human beings, and how such practices have functioned to erase, silence, denigrate other ways of relating to the world. Secondly, the task means articulating a decolonial option that recognises senses, local histories, and memories which challenge the hegemonic normativity within the world of contemporary art. This process can allow a form of healing of the colonial wound, in the struggle against the politics of oblivion. But a decolonial aesthetic praxis is not exclusively about reclaiming excluded (artistic) manifestations. In this sense, as I will analyse in [Section 07](#), it is essential to be critical of

⁶ Proyecto M/C started to explore issues related with aesthetics from 2003 when the Colombian artist Adolfo Albán Achinte introduced the expression “decolonial aesthetics”, which later would be revised by decolonial aesthesis (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, 3).

inclusion discourses within the field of art that do not end, but rather reinforce coloniality. My aim as an artist engaging with decolonial aesthetics is to understand art and aesthetics as constitutive of the hierarchies of coloniality that, through its discursive regime and institutions, classify Western art as superior to other art forms. This implies that to decolonise aesthetics is to seek to broaden its field, to postulate plural aesthetics, where Western aesthetics has its place but not in a hegemonic way (Ferreira Zacarias, Gómez, and González Vásquez 2016, 126).

Hence after writing this portrait of decoloniality, I critically reflect on the initial assumptions of my PhD. As I mentioned in the introduction, my PhD is an attempt to decolonise the concept of participant in PA practice. I acknowledge that my historicisation and location of the current debate around PA has so far essentially derived from a Eurocentric perspective. I understand that this may be paradoxical given the radical pedagogy approach and decolonial perspective that I embrace. In retrospect, I realise that a broader theoretical corpus, more diversified in its geographical sources, should have been taken into account for this section of my diary initially written in 2018. I have left in this deficiency as evidence of how this decolonial framework has evolved during my academic journey. You will notice that I confront these shortcomings as my PhD advances. It was important to give a Eurocentric account of PA and its neoliberal context to grasp what needs to be decolonised in the politics of participation in PA, more concretely in the project than I did during the first year.

Decolonial Curatorial Practices

The reflexive diary of my dissertation seeks to contribute to the field of PA by discussing the nature of decolonial PA practice and its relation to the participant. As mentioned in the introduction, my research does not aim to research the decolonisation of the notion of the (participatory) artist or the art world, as this would require a more extensive examination. However, I will give a brief overview of the current debate on the decolonial turn in the global art world and present some of the different methodologies employed in decolonial curatorial practices. This will help to show how I have engaged with decolonial thought and decolonial curatorial practices through my research process.

Decolonial theory has gained much traction in the fields of art theory and curatorship (Afterall, Central Saint Martins, and Museu de Arte de São Paulo 2020; Cukierman et al. 2018; Richter and Kolb 2017; The Graduate Center, CUNY 2020; Wajid and Kasmani 2020). It has been analysed from Latin-American contexts (Pitman 2021a) to Asian perspectives (SOAS University of London 2021) and from museums (Bélidor and Igloliorte 2021; Penn Museum and Center for Experimental Ethnography 2021) to art universities (University of the Arts London 2021). The existing studies explore the roles that curators and cultural institutions play in the realisation of the complex processes of decolonisation. The curator Ivan Muñiz-Reed (2017) argues that coloniality pervades the realm of culture through oppressive hierarchies and structural forms of privilege and bias. Specifically, he rethinks decoloniality in art institutions by considering “[h]ow curators and art institutions [are] positioned within the colonial matrix” and asks whether “it possible for them to restructure knowledge and power—to return agency to those who have lost it?” (Muñiz-Reed 2017, 100). Along the lines of Mignolo and Vazquez, Muñiz-Reed argues that curators and art institutions are crucial players in disseminating art, and that they have power to decide which histories are told and how (Muñiz-Reed 2017, 100).

Following this line of thought, a set of ‘decolonising methodologies’ (Smith 2012) have been proposed for decolonising art institutions. The curator of Indigenous and Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Canada), Wanda Nanibush, uses these methodologies in making exhibitions, for example, upholding the values of mutual respect, reciprocity, honesty, and integrity by sharing power and resources (Nanibush 2019). Whereas the director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (Argentina), Victoria Noorthoorn, proposes strategies to implement a revisionist practice of decolonialism in exhibitions such as insisting on the importance of local art in all its historical and contemporary expressions and questioning dichotomies such as centre-periphery, north-south, capital-province, White-Indigenous (Noorthoorn 2021). While the propensity for attitudes of ‘claiming’ and ‘celebrating survival’, as well as those of ‘connecting’, ‘networking’, and ‘sharing’ is an essential part in decolonising exhibitions of Indigenous art in a Brazilian context for the professor Thea Pitman (2021b, 9). For Muñiz-Reed, decolonising methodologies seek to include silenced histories as well as Indigenous cosmologies and challenge the so-called artistic categories of primitivism and ethnography as cultural production from non-Western culture (Muñiz-Reed 2017, 103). As for

the independent curator, Chandra Frank, a decolonial curatorial practice includes the comprehension of aesthetics not as universal principle, but rather as a pluriversality of aesthesis. It also establishes curatorial policies that dismantle normative paradigms that privilege certain ways of knowing, seeing and curating (Frank 2015).

Dissident voices, however, have highlighted the risk of the discourse of decolonisation in the art world. We should question some of these decolonial proposals, which include shifting power from the institution and/or the curator towards the artists, moving towards gender equality, and a more diverse geographical representation in the selection of artists. As the curator Sumaya Kassim argues:

Decolonising is deeper than just being represented. When projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ or ‘decoloniality’ we need to attend to these claims with a critical eye. Decoloniality is a complex set of ideas – it requires complex processes, space, money, and time, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming another buzzword, like ‘diversity’. (Kassim 2017)

Kassim highlights the containment strategy of these policies that reinforce the coloniality that I will be expanding upon in [Section 07](#). Along the same lines, the curator Olivier Marboeuf associates the desire for diversity with commodification:

Cette stratégie de valorisation et de visibilité soudaine ne saurait être confondue avec une quelconque forme de décolonisation tant elle constitue d'évidence avant tout une énième mutation du capitalisme vers une forme cognitive. Opéré par des artistes, des professionnels et des institutions de l'art, ce nouvel épisode n'est pas moins extractif que ses prédécesseurs, il n'est pas moins une forme d'appropriation de toutes les ressources et savoirs disponibles. Il n'est pas moins compétitif et toxique. Il épuise la force transformatrice du geste décolonial minoritaire en faisant de sa saisie critique non plus une opération à même d'affecter l'ordre politique et social, mais une simple catégorie dans l'économie des savoirs.⁷ (Marboeuf 2018, 75)

⁷ “This strategy of valorisation and sudden visibility cannot be confused with any form of decolonisation, as it is obviously above all an umpteenth mutation of capitalism towards a cognitive form. Operated by artists, professionals and art institutions, this new episode is no less extractive than its predecessors, it is no less a form of appropriation of all available resources and knowledge. It is no less competitive and toxic. It exhausts the transformative force of the minority decolonial gesture by making its critical seizure no longer an operation capable of affecting the political and social order, but a mere category in the economy of knowledge.” All translations by author unless otherwise indicated.

Marboeuf emphasises the superficiality of the radical practice of decolonisation in the (French) art world. He points to the lack of intersectionality, especially regarding class issues, and to the colonial subject that is constantly relegated to the task of healing the guilt of the White body. His discussion brings out the intimate connection between the system of coloniality and the system of neoliberalism that prevail in the sphere of (racialised) participation in the arts. These are issues that I will develop further in [Section 07](#). In the following sections, you will also notice that as my doctoral journey unfolds, I will start to apply these decolonial methodologies in my participatory practice with increasing reflexivity and self-criticality.

The following subsection will introduce my practice-led research *Community in the Making* which took place in the socio-political and economic context of neoliberal participation. It will consider how participation in art can intertwine with market value and coloniality, and how art and health commissions can be instrumentalised to serve neoliberalism despite the best intentions.

Unpacking an Art and Health Commission

The first part of my practice-led research consisted of developing *Community in the Making* (2016-2018). It is a long-term PA commission at the Bromley by Bow Centre (BbBC) in Bromley-by-Bow (BbB) which is part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets is the seventh most deprived local area in England, and the Bromley by Bow area is amongst the poorest in the borough with over 70% of the community within the 20% most deprived quintile and 50% of its children residents growing up in poverty.⁸ The Bromley by Bow Centre has been described as a pioneering charity in Tower Hamlets. The centre combines a Community Hub with a full range of general practitioner (GP) services of 27,000 patients and includes an extensive range of integrated community services, alongside a research centre called the School of Integrated Solutions.⁹

⁸ <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/19-July-2017-Bromley-by-Bow-Centre-.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/19-July-2017-Bromley-by-Bow-Centre-.pdf>

The Bromley by Bow project began in 2017 when I was invited to develop a collaborative work as part of the the *Unleashing Healthy Communities Project*, a two-year qualitative research initiative led by a team of BbBC researchers, Catherine-Rose Stocks-Rankin, Becky Seale, and others, in partnership with Public Health England. This research project was about understanding the effectiveness of the programmes offered by the Bromley by Bow Centre (e.g., GP practice, Community Centre, “Money management”) in improving the health and wellbeing of its community members. For six months, I worked both independently and in collaboration with Becky Seale, the core teams of community researchers (Maisha Chowdhury, Rev. James Olanipekun, and Nina Begum, all people living in the BbB neighbourhood), and the designer Axel Feldmann to develop the workshops, which then resulted in an exhibition led by community members guided by the question: “What makes a good life for you?” Each weekly workshop explored four themes related to the notion of the “good life” that had emerged from the previous two-year research study: (1) wellbeing and confidence; (2) connection; (3) work and volunteering; and (4) home and environment. I facilitated each workshop in collaboration with the team, by using a participatory approach inspired by Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which also involved a process of discussion and art making. The local community was involved in most steps of this process, from creating the artworks for the *Connected Dreams* exhibition to designing the exhibition itself and the poster for its promotion. A more detailed description of the project can be found in [Section 02](#) below.

Initially, the art commission had ambitious aims, such as devising workshops and the resulting exhibition by following a grassroots model. I wanted to distribute power so that Bromley by Bow residents could themselves bring about changes in their community. And the project did achieve some success, such as the one-day exhibition which attracted over 200 local people and included a programme of free activities, including a heated discussion that turned into a debate with John Biggs, Tower Hamlets’ mayor, entitled *How do we make our dreams for Bromley by Bow real?*. We published a booklet edited by Becky Seale, Axel Felmann, and myself online¹⁰

¹⁰ <http://romeogongora.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CommunityInTheMaking.pdf>

and in print to share the findings of the workshops and the exhibition with policy makers and the local communities.

Despite our intention of fostering changes in the community through art, the project encountered typical challenges for PA in the neoliberal context of participation. I will critically discuss these in [Section 03](#) below. For now, suffice it to note that the link between participation, art, and health has come under scrutiny in recent years, especially by state organisations such as the *National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing* in the UK. On the one hand, there is a considerable body of research and evidence concerned with health and the benefits of PA (Howarth 2017; Matarasso 1998; Rooke, Slater, and Cuch 2012). A review of the core research in this field finds that “[p]articipatory arts in particular have become popular with healthcare professionals seeking imaginative, but cost effective, interventions to improve the population’s health and ‘well-being’, the culture of the National Health Service and its institutions” (Rooke 2012, 6). On the other hand, as the critical analysis of my practice will show in [Section 03](#), many challenges affecting the feeling of wellbeing are evolving because of a neoliberal logic, such as the increasing inequalities in the UK, poverty, welfare reform and austerity, rising unemployment, fiscal austerity, and insecure immigration status (Rooke 2012, 6). This critical revision of *Community in the Making* (2016-2018) will provide a further understanding of the implications of neoliberal PA and provide an insight as well into elements of my PA practice that needs to be decolonised. In response, this first year of practice and research will give me tools to develop my final artwork, in a process of learning and unlearning.

Section 02 – Project 01: *Community in the Making*¹¹

Title

Community in the Making

Dates

Research
October 2016 – November 2017

Production
November 2017 – February 2018

Workshops
February 2018

Exhibition
2nd March 2018

Location

Bromley by Bow Centre
St Leonard's St, Bromley By Bow
London E3 3BT, UK

Extended Credits

Community in the Making Lead Researcher: Becky Seale
Community Researchers: Nina Begum, Maisha Chowdhury, Mandy Harrilal, Reverend James Olanipekun
Participatory Artist: Romeo Gongora
Designer: Axel Feldmann
Lead Organisation: Bromley by Bow Centre
Documentation (Audio and Photo): Axel Feldmann, Romeo Gongora, and Jess Segree

Workshop Participants: Eddie Colaxis, Desmond McLaren, Alison Neville, Jess Segree, Azzy, Donna, Martha, and other members of the local communities of Bromley by Bow (London, UK)

Workshop Coordinators (Concept and Research): Romeo Gongora and Becky Seale

¹¹ As mentioned in my introduction, this section is descriptive. The following section will critically analyse this project to reflect on the learnings I have made through practice and thus develop my research process to decolonise my/our approach to participatory art. The learnings so far have allowed me to see the need to engage in my own work the different stakeholders of my research. The following projects have evolved to address this shortcoming.

Workshop Coordinators Assistants (Concept and Research): Nina Begum, Maisha Chowdhury, Mandy Harrilal, Reverend James Olanipekun

Workshop Coordinators (Organisation): Nina Begum, Maisha Chowdhury, Romeo Gongora, Mandy Harrilal, Reverend James Olanipekun, Becky Seale

Workshop Facilitators: Nina Begum, Maisha Chowdhury, Romeo Gongora, Mandy Harrilal, Reverend James Olanipekun, Becky Seale

Exhibition Designer: Axel Feldmann and Romeo Gongora

Exhibition Coordinators (Concept and Organisation): Nina Begum, Maisha Chowdhury, Eddie Colaxis, Romeo Gongora, Mandy Harrilal, Desmond McLaren, Alison Neville, Reverend James Olanipekun, Becky Seale, Jess Segree, Azzy, Donna, Martha

Artworks displayed in the Exhibition from: Eddie Colaxis, Desmond McLaren, Alison Neville, Jess Segree, Azzy, Donna, Martha, and other members of the local communities of Bromley by Bow (London, UK)

Social Media Organiser (Exhibition): Sergio Del Prado

Risk Assessment Officer (Exhibition): Simeon Tubi

Funding: Office for Civil Society (OCS), The Health Foundation, Public Health England, the Wellcome Trust, and Bromley by Bow Centre

Acknowledgement: *Community in the Making* was part of *Unleashing Healthy Communities*, a two-year research project lead by the researchers Becky Seale and Catherine-Rose Stocks-Rankin

Exhibition Public

Primarily the local communities of Bromley by Bow (London, UK)

Website

<http://romeogongora.com/works/community-in-the-making/>

Booklet

<http://romeogongora.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CommunityInTheMaking.pdf>

Overview

Community in the Making was a participatory art (PA) commission at the Bromley by Bow Centre (BbBC) in Tower Hamlets (London, UK) bringing the local community to imagine their neighbourhood in the future. The art commission brought to life six months of community research about what matters to people in Bromley by Bow. Themes from the research were explored in four workshops led by Romeo Gongora and Becky Seale. They culminated in an art exhibition called *Connected Dreams*, which invited people to dream of a good life for themselves and their community. Local people conducted six months of research under the supervision of Becky Seale. The

art workshops and exhibition involved the same and more local people and was led by Romeo Gongora.

Key Ideas

Dialogue, art and wellbeing, critical pedagogy, utopia as method

Contributing voices

In this project, participant contributions involved engaging in the workshop, creating artworks as part of it, and co-organising the exhibition and its poster. The input of participants is showcased through the booklet and the series of five podcasts¹² *Communities in the Making* which I analysed in [Section 03](#). My input consisted of conceptualising and facilitating the workshops together with the community researchers. The event was documented in photos with the permission of the people involved in the project.

Documentation



Figure 1. Documentation of workshop #2: *How Do I Connect and Engage?*, *Community in the Making*, 2018

¹² The series of five podcast can be listen at this link: <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/communities-in-the-making/id1555629042>



Figure 2. Documentation of workshop #3: How Can I Contribute to the World?, Community in the Making, 2018



Figure 3. Group discussion for the exhibition Connected Dreams, 2018



Figure 4. Object made from the workshops *Community in the Making*, installation, 2018



Figure 5. View of the exhibition *Connected Dreams*, *Community in the Making*, 2018



Figure 6. Core team and participants from the workshop Community in the Making, 2018

Section 03 – Revisiting Community in the Making

Note to the reader: The following documentation of my research-based art practice explores the aesthetic and ethics related to Community in the Making. Some parts of my discussion might seem to accept the institutional status quo. Indeed, instead of attacking it head on, the traces of resistance exist rather in between the lines of my writing. These choices reflect various external factors, mainly that I have considered how the different people in my reading audience – and the participants themselves – will receive it.

When I say ‘I’, I situate myself as the student who needs to comply with specific requirements to be evaluated by examiners situated in an academic structure that has the power to award (or not) a doctorate. Nonetheless, it is also referring to the ‘I’ who is a friend and in a situation of self-awareness and concern for the ethics of care. I am aware that although my desire to share my research and conduct a dialogue with the participants is ethically important, it might also jeopardise my friendship with them. I also understand that engaging in a project that has a beginning and an end creates a limited/situational/contextual kind of friendship. I have chosen to make these compromises, even though they have led to a set of conflicting questions that I have had to navigate throughout my research. How do I reconcile criticality and caring in an institutional framework? What kind of freedom is still available when you are simultaneously the friend, the artist, the researcher, and the student?

The critical examination of my artistic practice will be using the key learnings of my account of participatory art (PA) in the West as presented in [Section 01](#). The outcome will provide me with tools to develop my artwork in a process of learning and unlearning. In reviewing this section, you will discover few explicit voices from participants, even though my art commission at Bromley by Bow Centre was collaborative. As I mentioned in the introduction, decolonising my participatory practice and moving towards a communal approach was something that evolved throughout my research. Thus, during the first year of my PhD, I did not pay special attention to collecting the voices of the participants. I focused much more of my attention on the artefacts made during the workshops. Having received critical input on this topic from my

supervisors and examiners (in 2021), I realised that the recognition of each person's singular voice is a fundamental aspect to the notion of communal friendship.

held the Match Girl Riots led by the suffragist and theosophist Annie Besant. The residency provided me with plenty of time to conduct research, but it also led to a feeling of isolation. In reaction, I started doing volunteer work at the charity Bromley by Bow Centre (BbBC), which was next door to my apartment and to the Kingsley Hall community centre, a former radical therapeutic clinic run by psychiatrist R.D. Laing and famous for having once hosted a visit from Mahatma Gandhi. While volunteering at the centre, I met Roger Newton, a community participation consultant who was giving a “participatory appraisal workshop” for the researchers of the BbBC. The training involved teaching methods that were very similar to my collaborative art projects but translated for the context of social care. Among the participants was Becky Seale, with whom I would share my ideas about *Awaken Dreams* during lunch break. The project would later take the name *Community in the Making* through her research project, *Unleashing Healthy Communities*. From there, I started a daydream adventure that would lead me from Bromley by Bow to New Cross Gate. I would navigate between academic, art, and community spaces, and across visa issues so that I could legally live, study, and work in the UK as an artist, PhD student, lecturer, and immigrant involved in an art and wellbeing practice-led PhD project.

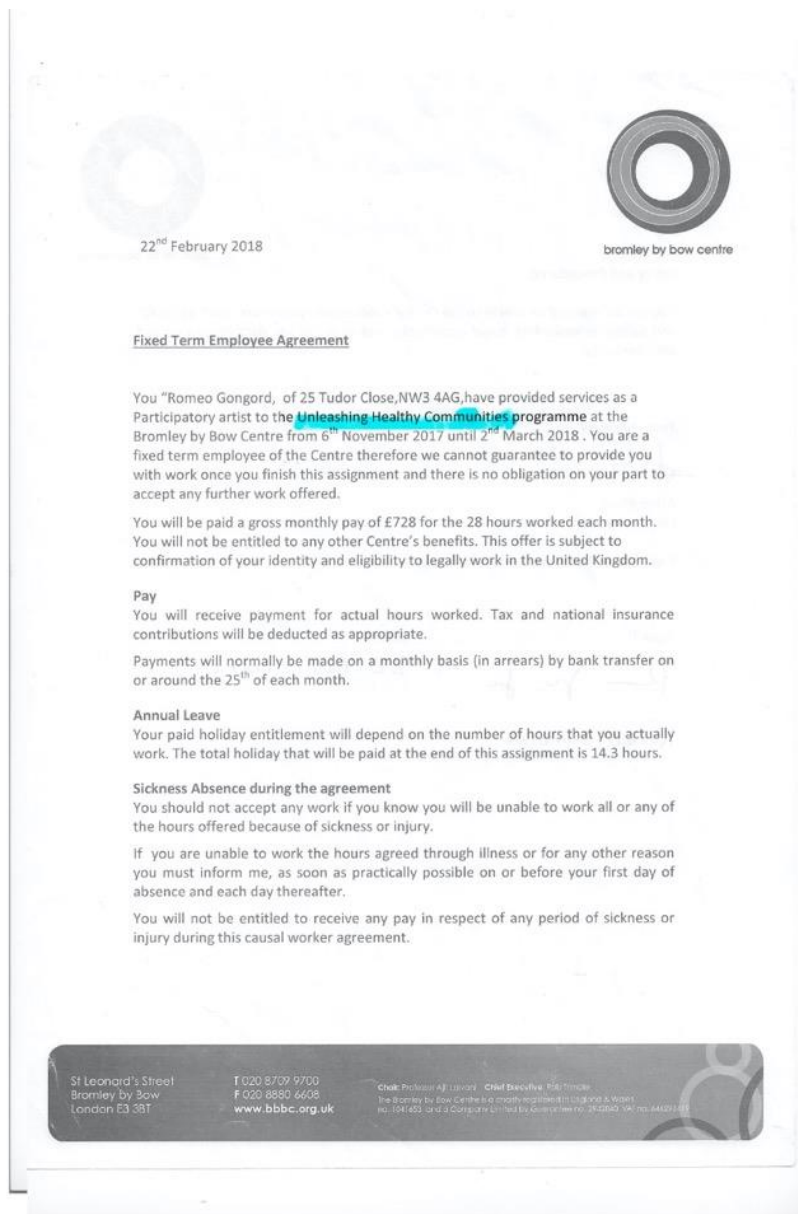


Figure 8. Employee agreement from Bromley by Bow Centre, 2018

Unleashing Healthy Communities and Awaken Dreams

In the summer of 2016, when I first met Becky Seale and Catherine-Rose Stocks-Rankin, they were just starting the research project, *Unleashing Healthy Communities*. Both were looking for a way of doing “research without a clipboard”, that is, research without having to tick boxes. The research project would run between June 2016 and June 2018 and would involve Naomi Mead and a team of community researchers, Nina Begum, Maisha Chowdhury and Reverend

James Olanipekun. The project carried out exploratory research “used to continually improve how the Bromley by Bow Centre and GP practice work together with the community” (*Community in the Making*, Booklet). The project was funded by Public Health England, the Wellcome Trust, The Health Foundation and OCS.

I joined the project in early 2016 but at that time, I was not yet fully aware that my initial dream would involve entering dangerous waters by joining a participation & wellbeing initiative and that I would become complicit in its tumultuous development. Eventually, however, my experiences at Bromley by Bow would make me aware that the controversies taking place at the interface of art, participation, and health stem from the slow withdrawal of the state from the domain of welfare. This has resulted in an increased dependence on support from charities to fund research (and PA projects), the rising status of service-providers for artists, and the risk of turning participants into symbols of tokenism. In my fieldnotes from a community network meeting, I once noted a sentence that a community researcher said to me: “*people, not pills to solve society ills*”.

In 2016, I was not yet a PhD researcher, a role that would come to add an extra layer of complexity to the research. Later I would become an international student in a system of education guided by neoliberal rationality. These layers of complexity would emerge when we began evaluating the outcomes of the BbBC project. The BbBC researchers and workshop participants expressed either satisfaction or confusion about the art; the academic researchers expressed either an embarrassed disinterest in the whole thing or sharp criticism regarding the lack of criticality and ownership in the project, worrying about turning participants into subjects of tokenism. It would be interesting to somehow connect these spaces (art, community, and academia) by bringing together the BbBC researchers and participants, the activists, academics, and myself (the artist) in order to learn from the agreements and disagreements and, ideally, to then find new ways of generating a true space of encounter and exchange.

I personally appreciated the different points of views that were expressed throughout the duration of the development of the project. The artist saw the clear need for ownership and the lack of risk taking in the project especially in regard to modern aesthetic standards. The community researcher was aware of the findings and contributions of the workshops but

frustrated by the lack of real changes in civic space. The PhD researcher recognised the necessity of self-reflexivity and understanding the complexities involved in socially based art. Finally, the immigrant felt connected to the histories of the other participants with whom he had shared similar experiences.

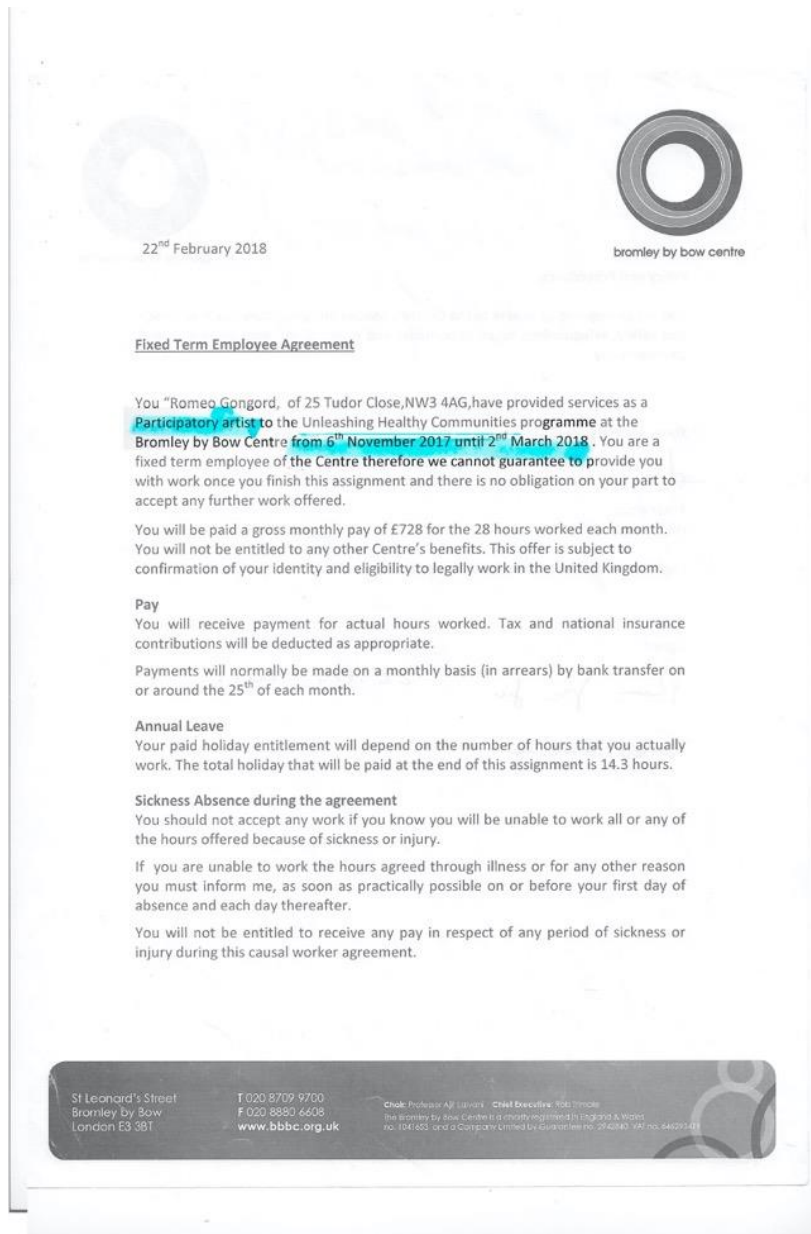


Figure 9. Employee agreement from Bromley by Bow Centre, 2018b

“Participatory Artist”

During the time I worked in the Bromley by Bow project, the team rarely labelled me as “participatory artist” unless they were introducing me to new people. In such cases, they used the title to give purpose to my presence and to situate me in relation to the others. The Bromley by Bow neighbourhood is culturally diverse, with large numbers of immigrants specifically from the formerly colonised Caribbean and South-East Asian countries. At first, I thought that

as a racialised immigrant, I was blending in with the local habitants. However, little by little, I realised that my social location was a complex one: as a Canadian citizen, I had a privileged status, even though English is not my mother tongue. This is one of the ways in which the colonial matrix of power can set people apart *within* visible minorities. These dynamics can change from one situation to another, as intersecting lines of oppression are always relational. In retrospect (now, in 2022), I realise that I should have been more critical of my own positionality from the start, since during the first year of research, I was in some ways reproducing colonising effects through my positionality and the Eurocentric knowledge-production in which I was engaging.

Besides my language and origins, the label “participatory artist” ultimately set me apart from them. It was not the first time I was labelled “artist” in a community setting. I usually use the label as a kind of shelter or protection, but one that also carries some shame for me, as I think about the prejudices related to the elitist connotations and “social uselessness” of the artist. When the time came to prepare the Bromley by Bow Centre Recruitment Pack, Becky Seale, a researcher at the BbBC, gave me a phone call to ask if the term “participatory artist” would be fine, and I said yes. This was the first time that an organisation unrelated to the artworld hired me, though I had worked on numerous occasions in local communities via the intermediary of cultural organisations. I was excited to become a “participatory artist” employee. The recruitment pack defined the term “participatory artist” – although I do not know where Becky found the definition – as someone who creates art “in which the audience is engaged directly in the creative process, allowing them to become co-authors, editors, and observers of the work.” The artist is expected to “be responsible for facilitating the creation of two phases of participatory workshops with the aim of engaging research participants and others in the findings of [the] community research and taking them further.”

When I accepted this label, I was not completely aware of its historic meaning, for there is no equivalent in Latin America, and in the USA and Canada, the term “participatory art” has not yet gained momentum and is typically used interchangeably with terms like social practice, socially engaged art, or site-specific art. In the UK, “participatory artist” is a highly controversial designation, which has come to trigger debates on questions about ethics,

aesthetics, and authorship (Bell 2017; Bishop 2012; Charnley 2011; Finkelpearl 2014; Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017). I would soon find out from my fellow colleagues, artists, and researchers that some used the term and others hated it. PA typically produces polarised discourses in contemporary art theory (Bell 2017; Bishop 2012; Charnley 2011; Finkelpearl 2014; Kester 2011; Sholette and Lippard 2017), resulting from the overlap between art and social claims, such as collective versus individual authorship, collaboration versus participation, inclusion versus exclusion, active versus passive, equality versus quality, process-versus object-based practice, and community versus privileged “expert” (Bishop 2012, 25).

From November 6th, 2017 to March 2nd, 2018

By hearing critiques from both the participants of the workshops and the BbBC researchers, I quickly became aware of the challenging working conditions that healthcare research projects place on artists, participants, researchers, and organisers: financial restrictions, a limited timeframe, and pressure to produce quantitative results. Chief among the critiques was the length of research grants, which are usually budgeted for a six- or three-month period. Alison, one of the workshop participants, complained to me that she felt abandoned at the end of the workshop and that she was participating in other “community research projects” to make up for the lack of community. As our grant period was ending, Alison and others from the workshop set up a WhatsApp group to keep giving each other news and organising meetings. While it was not a definitive solution, we all had to accept that it was impossible to maintain the same level of commitment as when we were being paid. The service-based logic behind research grants leaves a sense of “ongoing struggle” for the staff at the Bromley by Bow Centre who perceive a “dichotomy between ‘delivering’ to targets and having ‘meaningful conversation’” (Stocks-Rankin, Seale, and Mead 2018).

It is clear to me now (2022) that the challenging working conditions that we experienced were part of the coloniality of power that stems from modernity. During formal colonialism, Western colonial powers exploited people in the Global South; in the contemporary context, powerholders are still dictating the rules of the game, drawing profit and immaterial gain from the groups and individuals involved in research projects. This is even more concerning given that the most precarious groups tend to be visible minorities. Although our project had noble

goals, from a decolonial viewpoint, we cannot totally separate its contents from the general context in which it took place. I am thus critical of my own participation and responsibility in a project that put pressure on the people involved and benefited from the local habitants and their insights as artistic material. I learned from this to ensure that the project involves actually working with participants to negotiate our shared needs, rather than claiming to work on their behalf.

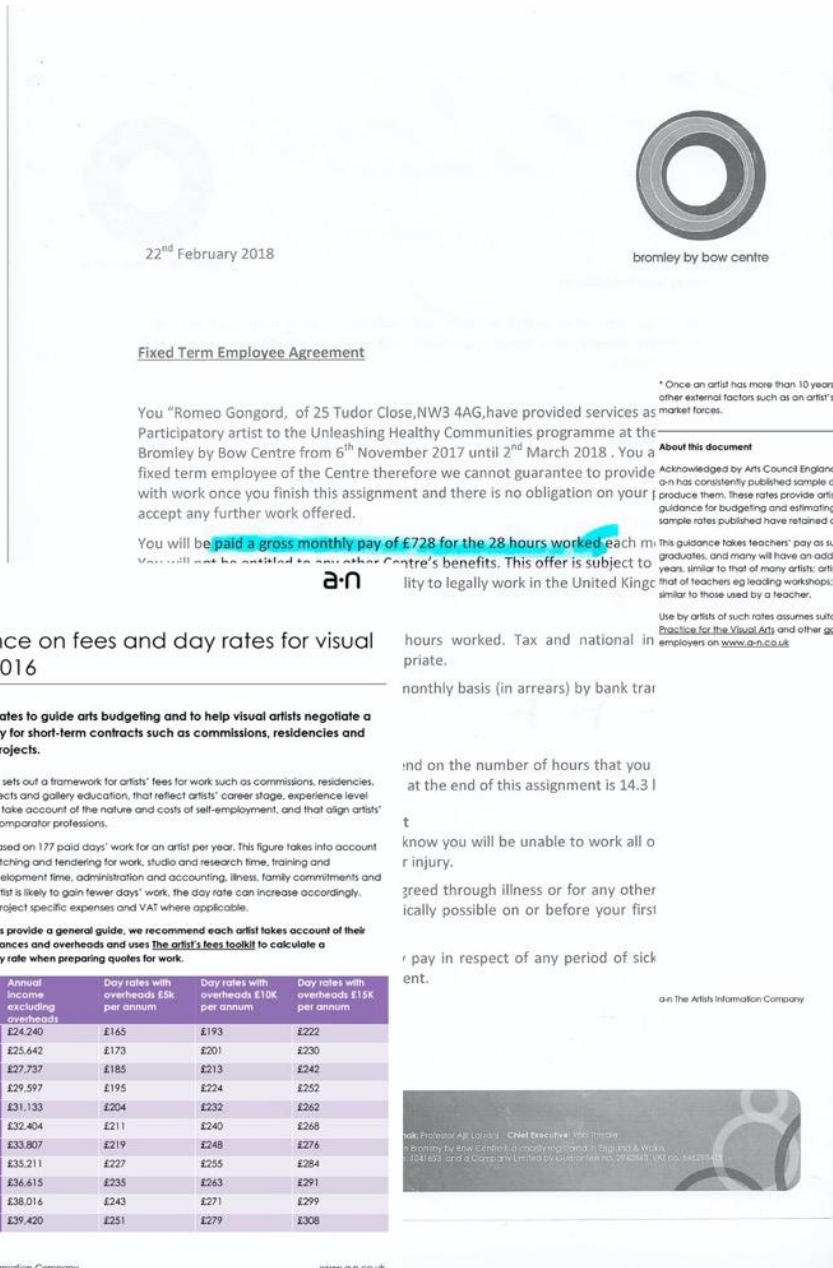


Figure 10. Employee agreement from Bromley by Bow Centre, 2018d

Monthly Pay of £728 for 28 Hours

Is this a big end-of-month check? I negotiated my salary by using the Arts Council England (ACE) “guidance on fees and day rates for visual artists 2016”, which gives a framework “to help visual artists negotiate a fair rate of pay for short-term contracts such as [...] community projects.” Receiving a payment based on hours worked (rather than a one-time payment as is

usual in the art world or for art residencies) put me in control of my engagement in the project. The financial aspect of my practice involving people has always put me in an uncomfortable position, making me feel a sense of exploitation, especially when the participants themselves are not getting paid for the time they put in, despite their precarious financial situations. I have previously tried to challenge this by sharing the salary/payment I received or by establishing an agreement (contract) for dividing any profits for artwork sales with everyone involved in the project. This has generally been unproductive, as it has installed a service economy dynamic (with expectations of performance and efficiency) among the people involved. In the case of the Bromley by Bow project, I disclosed the amount of the production budget to the core team in the desire for transparency. It fostered a sense of mutual trust and a dynamic of counting all the expenses.

Looking back in 2022, my claim about mutual trust and transparency seems a bit naïve, since I failed to present the budget to the participants. As this is the case, I set the organisers and participants clearly apart, whereas a more decolonial approach to participation would have led me to include everyone in the discussion. Moreover, I accepted my monthly pay without quibbles while knowing that the participants who provided the contents for the project were not paid, thereby invisibilising their input, exploiting and reinforcing the coloniality of being that permeated our relationship. This form of dynamic is fostered by the logic of neoliberal PA.



Figure 11. Employee agreement from Bromley by Bow Centre and passport, 2018

Confirmation of Your Identity

To be eligible for the work contract, I had to adhere to the Bromley by Bow Centre's policies and procedures, such as a satisfactory Enhanced Level Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) check. The DBS is the procedure in the UK for checking whether a person has a criminal record,

and it is usually a legal requirement in activities involving children or vulnerable adults. This procedure could easily be used as a means of control; luckily, the BbBC is a centre defined by its incredible, friendly staff. The holistic philosophy of the BbBC, the presence of art studios, the organic architecture of the building, its surroundings, the café, and the staff living in the neighbourhood help to dismantle the “politics of subjection, identification, normalisation, social control, [and] semiotic management of the people” (Malo de Molina 2006) that are all too common in (healthcare) institutions.

The DBS, like the visa and the status of participatory artist, situated me in the context of the Bromley by Bow Centre. My position was dynamic: my status as an employee, an artist, a participant-observer, and sometimes as an English speaker, provided me power among the vulnerable “participants” of the workshop, or volunteers and clients as the BbBC staff calls them. From another perspective, my contractual employment, my subjection to the Home Office and the university as an international student, and my status as a non-native English speaker left me with a sense of vulnerability. I disclosed this to the people of the workshop who understood and related with me. On the last day of the workshop, Azezzun urged me to speak with HR and gave me selling points in order for me to keep the job. I was there to do a job, and I had a friendly position. My identity was plural and kept shifting, creating commonalities and differences.

programme at Goldsmiths College, University of London in the UK, and would thus be able to develop *Awaken Dreams*, I shared the news with Becky. I applied for a Tier-4 Student Visa that would allow me to work in the UK at the BbBC for a maximum of 20 hours per week during the academic term. Unfortunately, this type of visa did not allow me to be self-employed or to engage in work as a contractor. These stipulations are in complete contradiction with the work of visual artists who are usually self-employed or work on a contractual basis. The BbBC thus had to create a new fixed-term position of “Participatory Artist” with 28 hours of work each month to allow me to develop my research there. I had to produce evidence of my Home Office immigration status at the BbBC and at the university.

At the end of the academic year, I had to leave the UK again, this time, due to my inability to pay the full international tuitions fees while also managing the living costs in London. An “off-campus study request” left my doctoral studies in limbo for three months as I waited for visa issues to be resolved. In other words, my status as an off-campus student placed me at the mercy of the university *and* the Home Office regarding my doctoral research and ability to reside in the UK. Behind these institutional bodies (university, the UK Home Office) are other human beings enforcing the law, and I was at the mercy of their (good/bad) will. A politics of subjection and the accompanying sense of insecurity have been part of each step of my research during the last two years. This injustice is experienced by countless immigrants in our context ruled by the colonial matrix of power. My status as a non-UK citizen, part-time employee, PhD researcher, and artist has led to a series of regulatory processes and experiences of subjection. They are part of my documentation of practice because my doctoral studies have been systemically shaped by the plurality of status. For example, you can find details of the institutional resistance I experienced at Goldsmiths in relation to my international student status in a file that contains all my emails on this subject¹³. Namely, my doctoral studies have been defined in relation to the coloniality of power (Quijano and Ennis 2000), forms of hierarchy,

¹³ https://goldsmithscollege-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/rgong001_campus_goldsmiths_ac_uk/Edpd4aEhFTZLm5HrmlbtqSMBWO1oVv4SeQxuUR3JhVxycg?e=38WBfK

inequality and the dominance of neoliberalism (Brown 2015), and the resistance necessary from an immigrant standpoint (hooks 1994).

This kind of reasoning can have extreme consequences. I am reminded of the story of John, one of the workshop's participants who is an undocumented immigrant from Jamaica. He often said, "It's good, I will try to come, but I can't promise", when I asked if he would be attending the next workshop. His words would leave us (the core team of the project) in a state of uncertainty. Yet every time, he would in fact show up. We made a joke of it. One day, he told me that he had arrived in the UK as an infant but was now probably facing deportation due to his undocumented status. John was living in the UK without legal status and his case was the latest in a scandal over the Home Office's inhumane treatment of numerous long-settled Jamaicans in the country (Gentleman 2019).

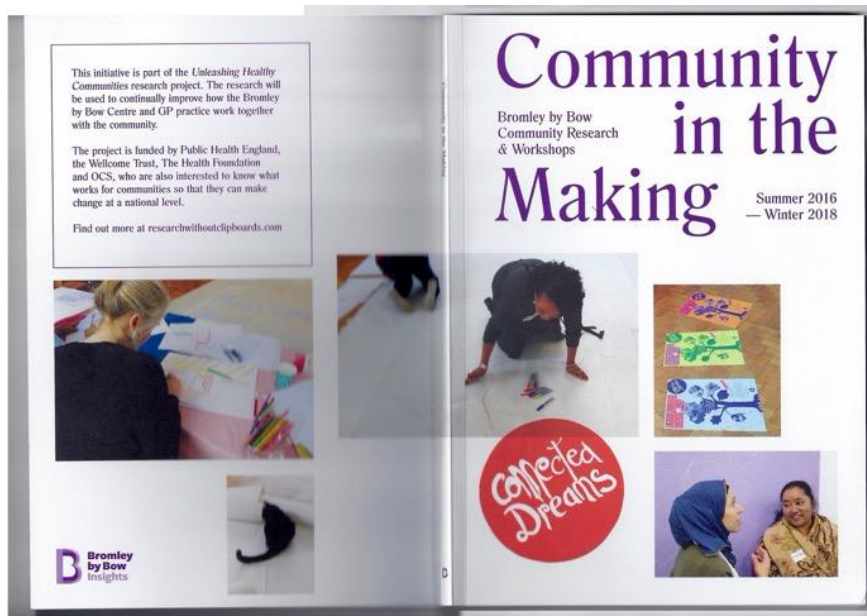


Figure 13. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, back cover and front cover), 2018

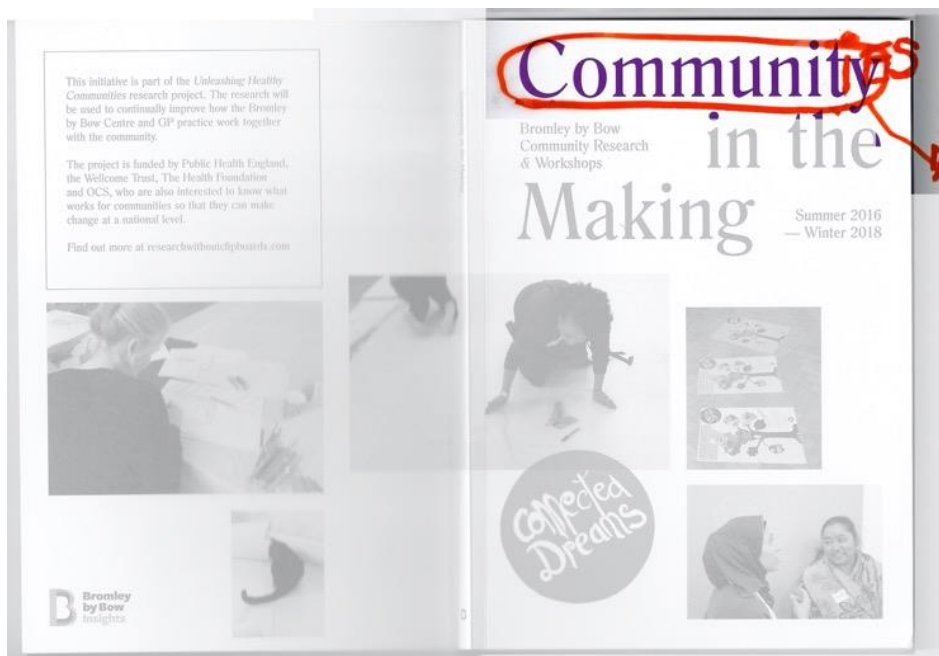


Figure 14. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, back cover and front cover), 2018b

Community/ies

Community? What if we thought of it as “communities” instead?

If “community,” in the field of art in the UK, refers mainly to the wave of “community art movements” from the 1970s and its “attempt to liberate ‘the idea of culture’ from the grasp of fine art” (Pritchard 2018), in much of the social sciences, the term has an altogether different meaning. It can, for example, be defined as “a collection of people who share a common territory and meet their basic physical and social needs through daily interaction with one another” (Johnson and Merton 1986, 692). The concept of community has had a revival in the art world since the late 1990s with the rise of participatory and socially engaged art projects concerned with “social usefulness”. Nevertheless, the ideas and practices related to PA are still stigmatised by the art establishment (Pritchard 2018) which generally reduces it to educational programmes or workshops for children in art galleries and museums.

I do not wish to criticise art that involves community. Community art initiatives can be either incredible or problematic both inside and outside of the artworld. The negative attitude towards PA may be the product of a paradigm shift in contemporary art theory (Bishop 2012; Finkerpearl 2014; Kester 2011). The hybrid nature of art within the social sciences and humanities challenges the notion of modern aesthetic autonomy and opens a debate about social versus artistic criteria, that is, criteria based on an ethics of collaboration rather than artistic aspects (conceptual, visual, and experiential) (Bishop 2012, 276). Indeed, working with communities challenges the conditions of authorship or the autonomy of the artist, and brings various dichotomies to the surface, such as collective versus individual authorship, equality versus quality, process- versus object-based practice, amateur versus privileged, expert versus elite (Bishop 2012, 25; Kester 2011). In short, these debates contribute to further stigmatising art practice in the social realm of community life rather than supporting its inclusion therein.

The meaning and implications of community in the social sciences also need to be critically examined. For example, political theorist Iris Marion Young (1986) challenges the meaning of community that some radical theorists and activists defend as a normative model of ideal social organisation, that is, a conception of community replete with strong affective ties and face-to-face contact. Young argues that such an “ideal of community” creates polarities such as individual versus collective, authentic versus inauthentic, inclusion versus exclusion and, as a result, denies differences between subjects. The “ideal of community” thus “relies on the same

desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism, on the one hand, and political sectarianism on the other” (Young 1986, 2). Unless it is understood in the context of a politics of difference – what Young defines as an openness to unassimilated otherness – the concept of the “ideal community” fails to address the main challenges that communities face: alienation and violence (Young 1986).

To follow Young’s train of thought, re-thinking community as communities also implies the need to open oneself up to thinking about effective plurality. This requires us to acknowledge the diversity of “otherness” – which is at the very core of contemporary civil life – and to take a step towards the politics of difference, which, in turn, reflects the original impulse of community art movements. Other traditions of thought have proposed new notions of communities of difference. We can think of Ash Amin’s relations that are not limited to social or local connections (2012), Benedict Anderson’s communities as collective acts of the imagination (2006), Donna Haraway’s collective ethics based on affinity, coexistence and cohabitation (2007), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s antagonistic articulations (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) or the Andean concept of the communal based on plurality (Yampara Huarachi 2011), to name but a few. All of these theorisations offer alternatives to the ideal community based on identity.



Figure 15. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, back cover and front cover), 2018c

Visibility

What kind of *visibility* do the participants have, or do they have visibility at all?

All the photos I selected for the cover of the booklet that documented the workshops were taken by myself. The very act of me as artist selecting the photos rather than the participants being allowed to choose reinforces the neoliberal and colonial aesthetic regime I discussed in [Section 01](#). This regime is widely accepted in the graphic design of participatory projects – an aesthetic with documentary-type images that tries to avoid any triggers for antagonism but that ends up objectifying the people it represents (e.g., see the public art projects curated by KM³ and held in Montreal, Canada¹⁴).

¹⁴ <https://km3.quartierdesspectacles.com/en/>

By holding the camera and selecting the pictures, I also reaffirmed the authoritarian aspect of the very institutions that hired me, meaning that I ended up with the power to potentially objectify the very people with whom I collaborated. This decision to use a camera to document the workshop and to record what would become the official story of the project, placed me in a higher position of power than the participants – a major problem for a project whose aim was the creation of non-hierarchical relationships using an art practice. This objectified documentation of the workshop is evident in how we (Axel Feldman, Becky Seale, and I) selected and represented the participants in the photographs for the cover of the booklet. One photo shows a participant on the floor, in a (physical) position of subjection; and another one showed a blind-folded participant in another helpless position (I ended up omitting this photo after some reflection and discussion with Becky and Axel). While I was taking the photos, I remember having some ethical doubts and feeling as if I were intruding. Yet, I chose to take and then to include those photos anyway – perhaps because, at the time, these seemed to be the quickest and easiest methods of documenting the workshops, as they did not disturb the status quo. These modalities – typical of neoliberal PA – and the status quo surrounding the representation of participants makes me realise in retrospect how I was trapped in the colonial matrix by reinforcing the representation of people coming from disadvantaged communities as “object” of an artistic project rather than as human beings (Maldonado-Torres 2011).

Voice

I also want to analyse the notion of *having voice*. The booklet was intended to give a voice to the project participants, but in the end, we (the Bromley by Bow Centre) were the ones who authored the booklet’s content, based on input from the participants. This is obvious when we take a closer look at the names printed on the booklet’s cover: the Bromley by Bow Centre, the research project’s *Unleashing Healthy Communities* and the funders of the project. An artist booklet would surely have put the name of the artist on the cover, but there is no mention of the names of the (community) researchers or the workshop participants. The choices that we made ended up situating the booklet in an institutional framework, which was contrary to the initial community-oriented goals that we had for the project.



Figure 16. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, back cover and front cover), 2018d

The Participatory Aspect of the Design

Claire Bishop claims that time-based documentation, like a video or a lecture, is generally more successful than exhibitions to assess process-based art works (Bishop 2012, 259) for a secondary audience, i.e., a public that could not directly experience the work. I would suggest that catalogues and websites that provide intertextual and visual (or, in the case of the website, audio-visual) content are also efficient tools for sharing the polysemy at play in process-based work.

In this project, the booklet was designed by Axel Feldman from Objectif, a graphic design studio in London, in collaboration with Becky Seale, the community researchers, the local community of Bromley by Bow who had taken part in the workshops and me. Axel Feldman has a reputation for producing graphic design projects in public spaces and an interest in Paulo

Freire's ideas of dialogue and participation. As the community team and I aimed to create a grassroots project, especially in terms of its visual aspects, we included Axel Feldman in our efforts on the condition that he would engage the local community in the different levels of the graphic design of the project and would act, whenever possible, more as a facilitator than a designer. In turn, this required flexibility, compromise in terms of aesthetics, and more time from him, restricting the designer's ability to experiment and take risks.

The participatory aspect of the design created several challenges, especially in terms of moving away from automatic behaviours and aesthetics that are typical of the visual design of PA projects. Axel Feldman responded to our objectives by participating in the workshops and by involving the participants in the process of designing the booklet (see image above). For example, the font of the title *Connected Dreams* comes from the handwriting designed by members of the local community. This handwriting style is frequently found in designs created for community initiatives. It aims to *produce* an organic and spontaneous style, rather than to *reproduce* a disruptive aesthetic based on professionalised criteria of quality, skill, or virtuosity (Bishop 2012, 177). Time and budget constraints, however, restricted the participatory process of sharing other decision-making components within the production of the booklet. This experience was an (insufficient) attempt to decolonising visual design of PA projects. In retrospect, I realise that this failed because I had not clearly articulated a decolonial methodology of PA (a reflexive communal friendship approach) that would help me address the undermining influences of neoliberal PA.

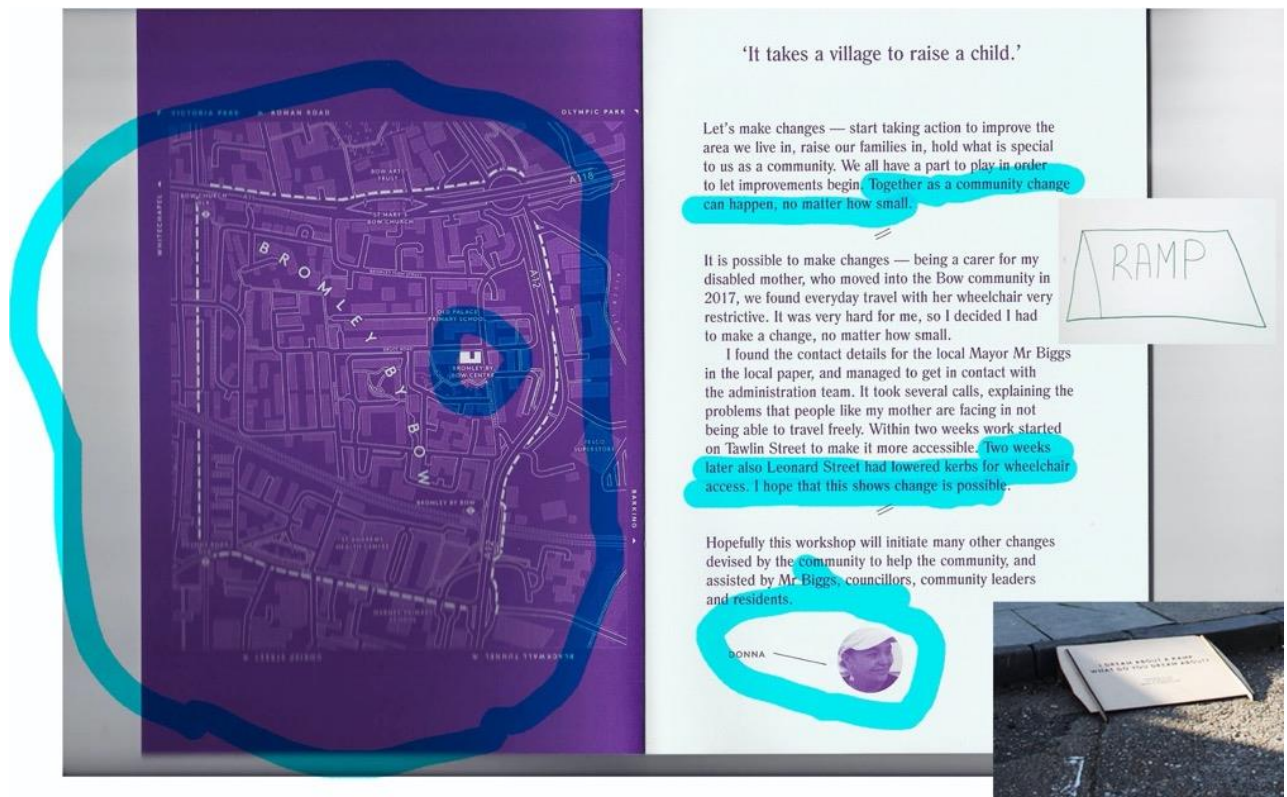


Figure 17. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, 3), 2018

Donna

Among the people coming to the workshop were Bengali, Jamaican, South Asian, middle-aged, and older adults, most of them unemployed. They related to each other regardless of their religion or social background. For instance, Donna, a participant/member/client/friend of the Bromley by Bow Centre, would become one of the vocal critics of the neighbourhood and its politics. She came to the workshops to help her wheelchair-bound mother gain more accessibility across the Bow community. She found tools and solidarity in the workshop, which led to the city council installing dropped pavements throughout the Bow area. Even if not all the ideas from the workshop could be realised, Donna never stopped saying, as you can read in her text above, “*together as a community change can happen, no matter how small*”.

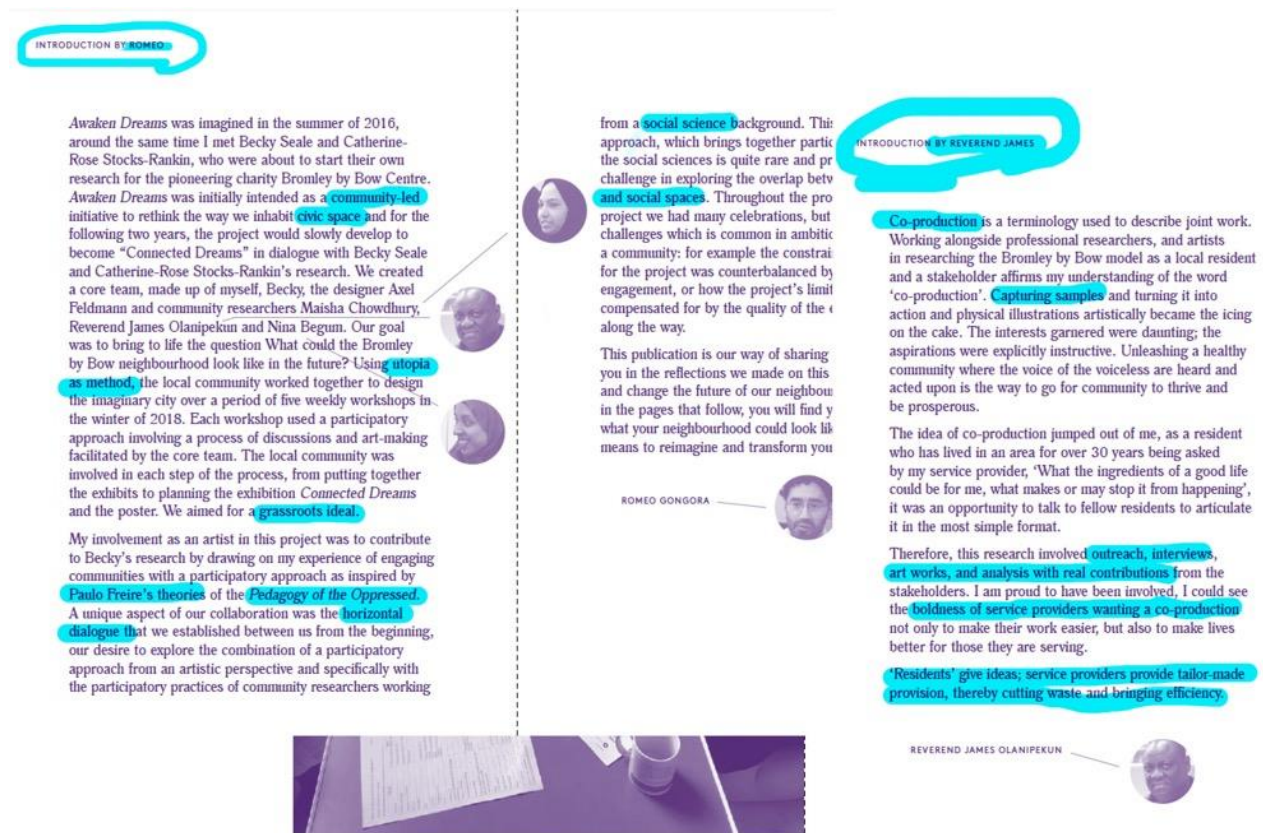


Figure 18. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, 7), 2018

Co-production

During the process of compiling the booklet, for reasons having to do with the short time frame of printing, we (Becky, Axel, and myself) did not include an introductory text by the community researchers Maisha Chowdhury and Rev. James Olanipekun. I spoke with them at the launch of the printed booklet, at which point I realised that we had made a mistake by not sufficiently encouraging them to write a text for the booklet. Despite the reasons which precluded the inclusion of their texts, the coloniality of being was reinforced once again by excluding two racialised individuals and I was in part responsible. This failure seems paradoxical given my concerns about the representation of racialised people, which I will be discussing further in [Section 07](#). Would I have done this to my communal friend? I doubt if I would have done so. This example presents how neoliberal PA entangles me/us with coloniality. Although neither of

them complained about this, we decided to include their texts in the online version of the booklet.

I sent both texts to the editor for correction and asked not to alter the writing style, but rather to focus on spelling and to respect the style and voice of the authors. While I was writing my own introduction, I wondered how the local community of Bow would interpret my text. I am more used to academic and artworld audiences; what would the locals think, for example, when I mentioned *community-led*, *Paulo Freire*, *horizontal dialogue*, *utopia as method*, etc.? So, I was surprised to read Rev. James' introduction and to see his use of terms of which I had been critical and weary of during my research, such as *co-production*, *service provider*, *outreach*, or, as he wrote in his last sentence: “*Residents' give ideas; service providers provide tailor-made provision, thereby cutting waste and bringing efficiency.*” I had thought that local communities (residents) were fed up with the paradigm of the service provider and the mentality of efficiency and were instead in search of human exchange. Had I misunderstood something? Or was I a leftist artist-researcher who wielded critiques from the elite realm of academia?

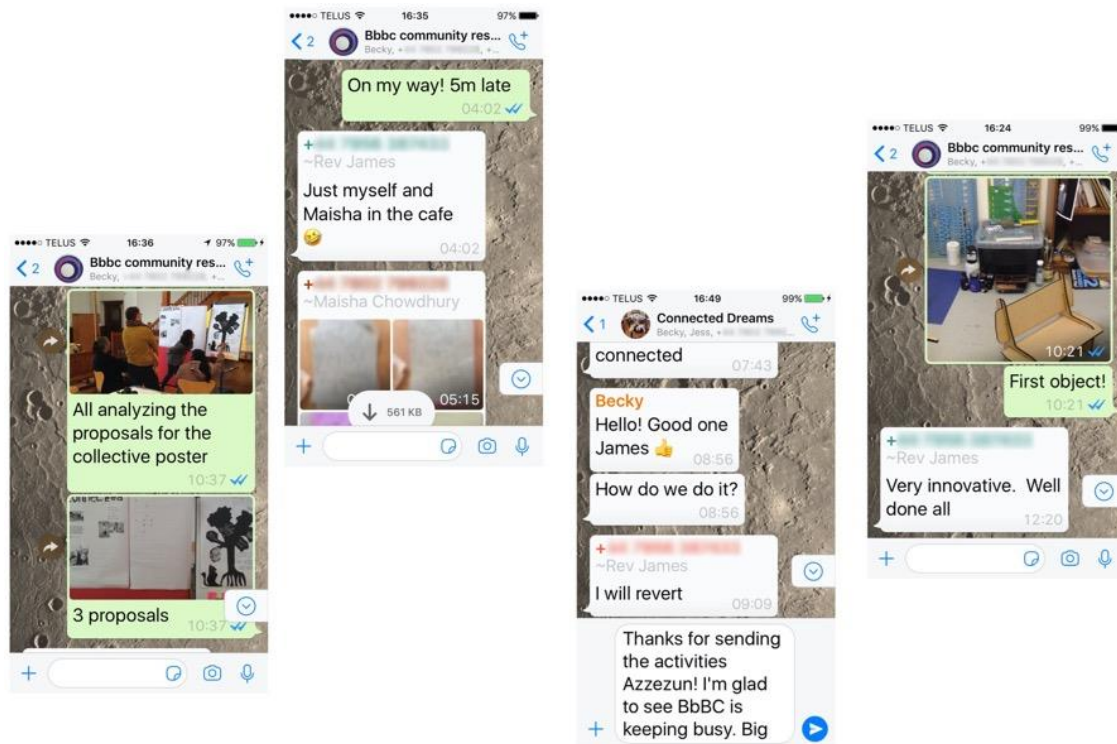


Figure 19. Messages from the Connected Dreams WhatsApp group, 2018

WhatsApp Group

The best means for the Bromley by Bow staff to contact and invite members/volunteers/participants was WhatsApp. It was more efficient than email or Facebook. The core team and I started using it by setting up a BbBC community research group, where we then exchanged photos and updates of tasks that were required for the workshops. The WhatsApp group helped to establish a strong bond between us, as it blurred the gap between professional and private space and became a quasi-full-time extension of the research. I would contact my colleagues on weekends and evenings to request help. It was difficult to establish boundaries, to the point where one of the core team members once told me not to write to him on Saturday evenings. At the end of the Bromley by Bow project, the participants launched a new WhatsApp group that is still active today and where we occasionally keep in touch. In retrospect, I realise that I should have been more critical of the social media we used. These are “colonising” options that impose a certain mode of communication (Western, Capitalist, free content available for governments and corporations to exploit).

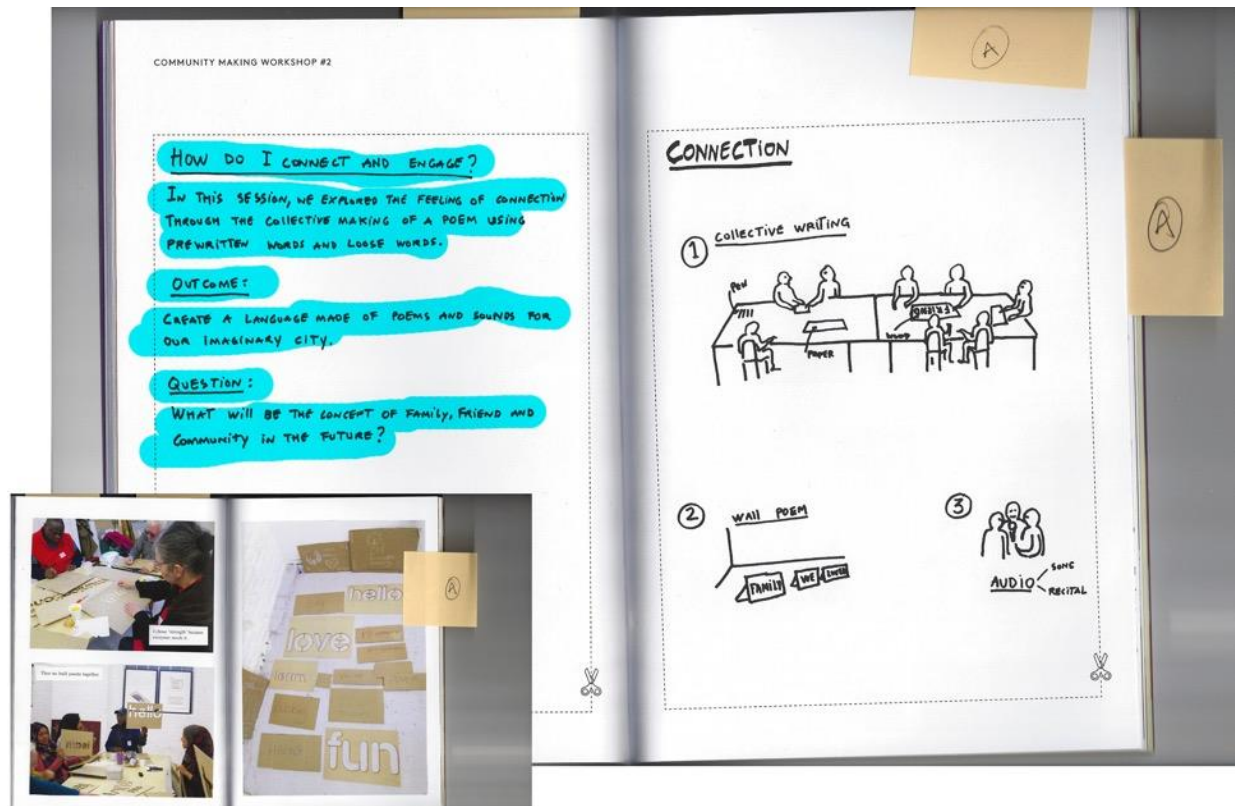


Figure 20. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, 42), 2018

Workshop #2: How Do I Connect and Engage?

In each workshop, I used the following method: I arrived with drawings that explained the workshop I would be giving. Each sheet had a title related to the weekly theme, the expected outcome(s) of the workshop, a question to lead the session, and drawings illustrating the workshop outcomes. The drawings were there to translate my ideas more clearly for the participants. I quickly understood that it comforted the participants to receive some of the instructions in the form of colourful drawings. The drawings also helped me to explain to the participants what I was expecting from them. It was difficult for me, the artist, as well as for the participants, to give in to the unknown. How do you allow free participation while trying to eliminate expectations?



Figure 21. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, 44), 2018

Workshop #3: How Can I Contribute to the World?

The core team usually had a pre-workshop meeting to discuss the contents of the workshop. Our weekly discussions usually addressed the creative layout and the crucial (and difficult) task of recruiting participants. The community researchers, Rev. James and Maisha, oversaw recruitment. Yet we made the final decisions as collectively as possible, co-sharing responsibilities in the organisation of the workshop.

We had received some exciting news: For our third workshop, taking place on February 1st, 2018, a group of twenty people would be joining our usual five participants. On the day of the workshop, we were informed that one person in the group, of Muslim background, refused to participate in the workshop because it was held in a church. What is more, we also learned that the rest of the group would not come out of solidarity unless we switched spaces. We were surprised to receive the news as we had held workshops in the same place with participants of Muslim background on previous occasions. I remember Becky looking at us wondering what to do as our exciting opportunity was about to fall through. At first, it was obvious to all of us

that we had to switch spaces, but then Rev. James started to question our stance. The more we insisted on finding a compromise, the firmer he held in his refusal. The rest of us did not mind changing locations, but for Rev. James, it was a value conflict. His refusal was in contradiction with one of the collective aims of our project: to gather data from a maximum of people. Being in charge of the research project, Becky had in the last word. In the end, she gave into Rev. James and decided for us to stay in the church.

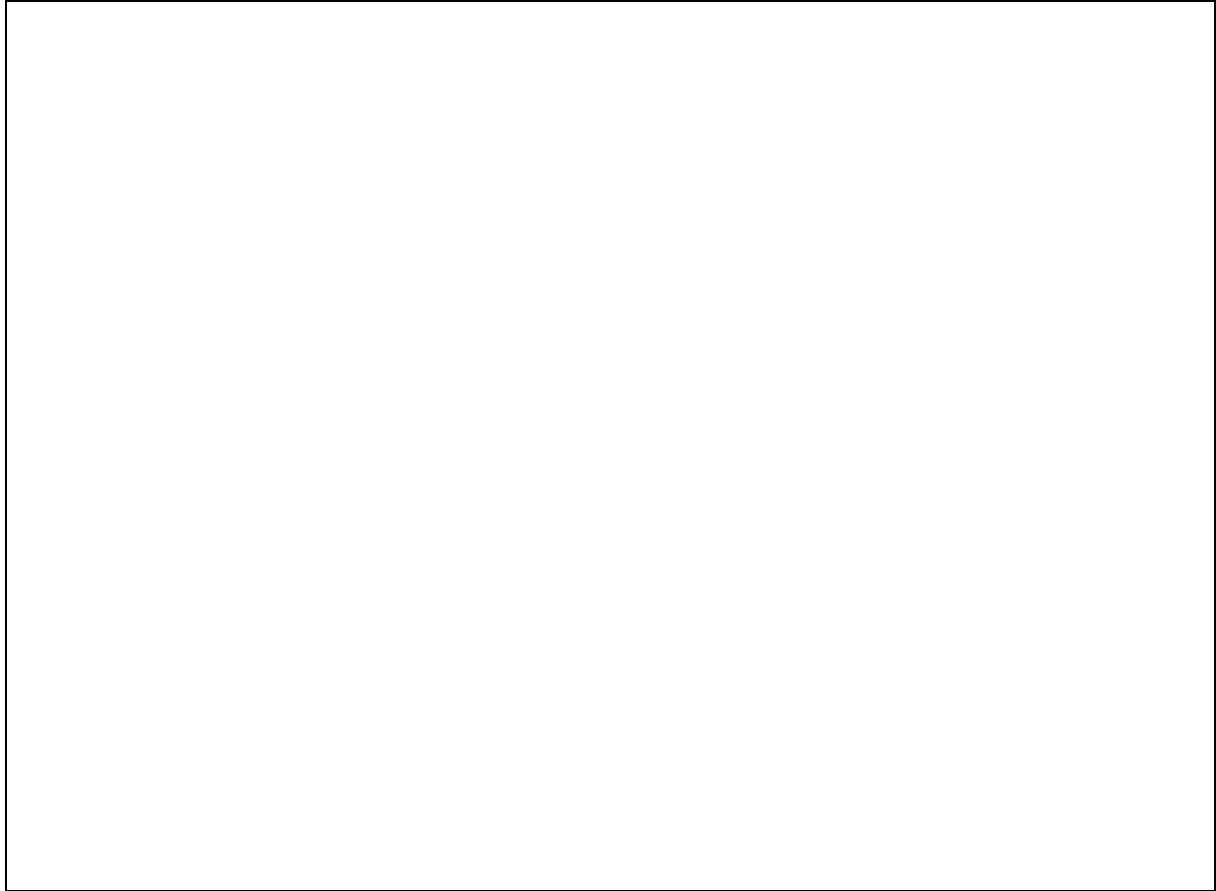
Hence, we held the workshop with our usual 5 participants. During the session, it was noticeable how Rev James, and all of us, felt bonded by our earlier dilemma. Sharing the power of decision increased commitment among us. This case makes me recall the ways in which, for 1960s activists in American social movements, friendships allowed for an informal quality of decision-making, thereby sustaining decentralised, non-hierarchical, and consensus-based approaches, while also leading to tendencies of exclusion and aversion to difference (Polletta 2002).



Figure 22. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, 46), 2018

Workshop #3: How Can I Contribute to the World?

The third workshop was about work and volunteering. We invited the participants to create items from soil and to invent different methods of exchange for the future Bromley by Bow. We asked Desmond McLaren to sculpt an object he would want in the future. He did not make a luxurious car, a laptop, or nice shoes, but Jamaican grapefruits.



Stress of Participation in Art

The workshop was going rather smoothly. The excitement was palpable among the members of the workshop one week before the grand opening of the exhibition. Many decisions still had to be made. One group was to decide how the day would unfold, and another one how to set up the space. I was in the logistics team.

I was in the middle of facilitating a discussion when I heard a loud sound. I turned and saw one of the participants collapsed on the floor, her body shaking uncontrollably. A minute ago, she had been laughing; now, without warning, she was having some sort of a seizure. Becky and I were in shock. Luckily, Lili, a staff member from the centre, had been passing by the room. She was able to take care of the collapsed participant while we continued facilitating the workshop. Eventually an ambulance arrived. A doctor from the GP told us later that the stress from the preparation of the exhibition had triggered an epileptic shock. Becky sent her flowers.

When thinking about this event, I wondered how I would have felt (and what my responsibility would have been) if she had died because of my art project. I felt guilty for putting too much stress and too many responsibilities on the shoulders of the participants. This was not the first time that a participant had a brush with death during one of my projects, which meant that I was fully aware that PA can be life-threateningly dangerous. I had tried to address the risks by understanding each specific context and integrating staff from the host organisations who are aware of the possible risks. While I was clearly responsible for not having foreseen all the risks, it is not possible to control in advance all the possible factors involved in participation with people, especially as each project is different and thus involves a different set of risks.



Figure 23. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, X), 2018

Professional Documentation

For the exhibition day, the participants and I were looking for a professional photographer and I sent an advertisement to our core group of community researchers in case someone knew of a good contact. In the end, Rev. James gave us the contact of a photographer he highly recommended. I called the candidate to make sure he was suitable for the job, for it was important to appropriately document the one-day event that we had been preparing for several weeks. I hired him, and on the day of the exhibition, I instructed him to take close-up shots and large portraits. At the end of the day, I was shocked to realise that the photos mostly captured emotional moments; they in no way had the aesthetic of participatory photography to which I was accustomed. The same was true for the photos taken by the participants during the workshops as opposed to those I had taken myself (or those taken by the designer Axel).



Figure 24. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, Xa), 2018

Community Aesthetic

In the morning of the one-day exhibition, I almost got into an argument with one of the community researchers. We were setting up the artworks from the workshops, and I wanted to make sure they were installed in the way that I had planned with Axel, the designer. One of the community researchers came up with the idea of also putting up a banner made in another project, and soon another member agreed with this idea. The new addition visibly clashed with the global design, the clean black-and-white prints I had previously agreed upon with Axel. The suggested banner was made of a collage of heteroclitic styles, which is of course appropriate for community events where the ethics of the process override the aesthetic. I had to accept that I would not be able to impose my aesthetic preferences on the members. This raises the question of what role aesthetics has in a community art project. The experience made me understand that it was more important to maintain a friendly relationship than to fight for what I thought was

more “appropriate”. In the end, the banner added another colourful touch to this carnivalesque day and opened up many unexpected ideas.



Figure 25. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, 69), 2018

The Connected Dreams Exhibition

The one-day exhibition contained a programme of free activities and we conceived it as a big carnival-style fair. One of the criticisms that can be directed at the event is that “the danger of self-defined ‘carnavalesque’ spaces, of cultural ‘temporary autonomous zones’, is that they become spaces of enclosure within which any challenge to hegemonic social norms is safely contained, posing no threat to wider power relations” (Gilbert 2014, 180).

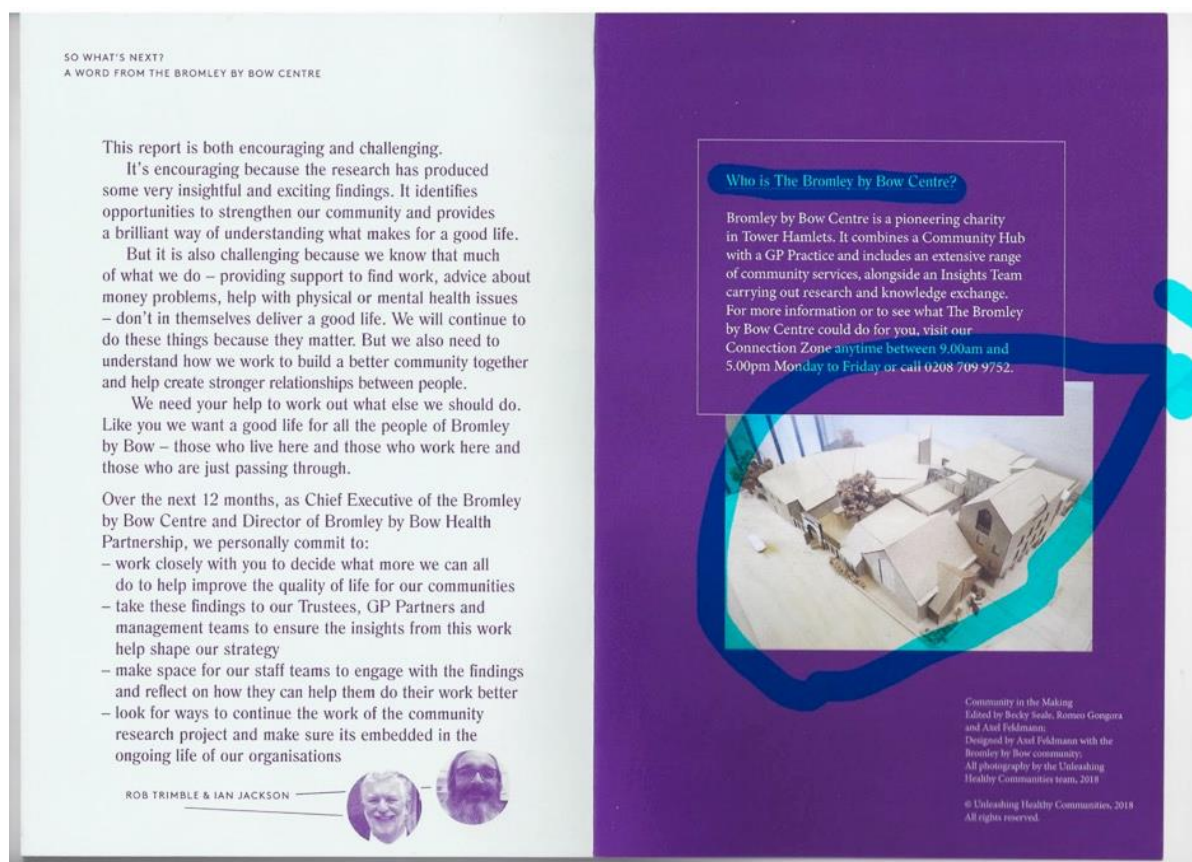
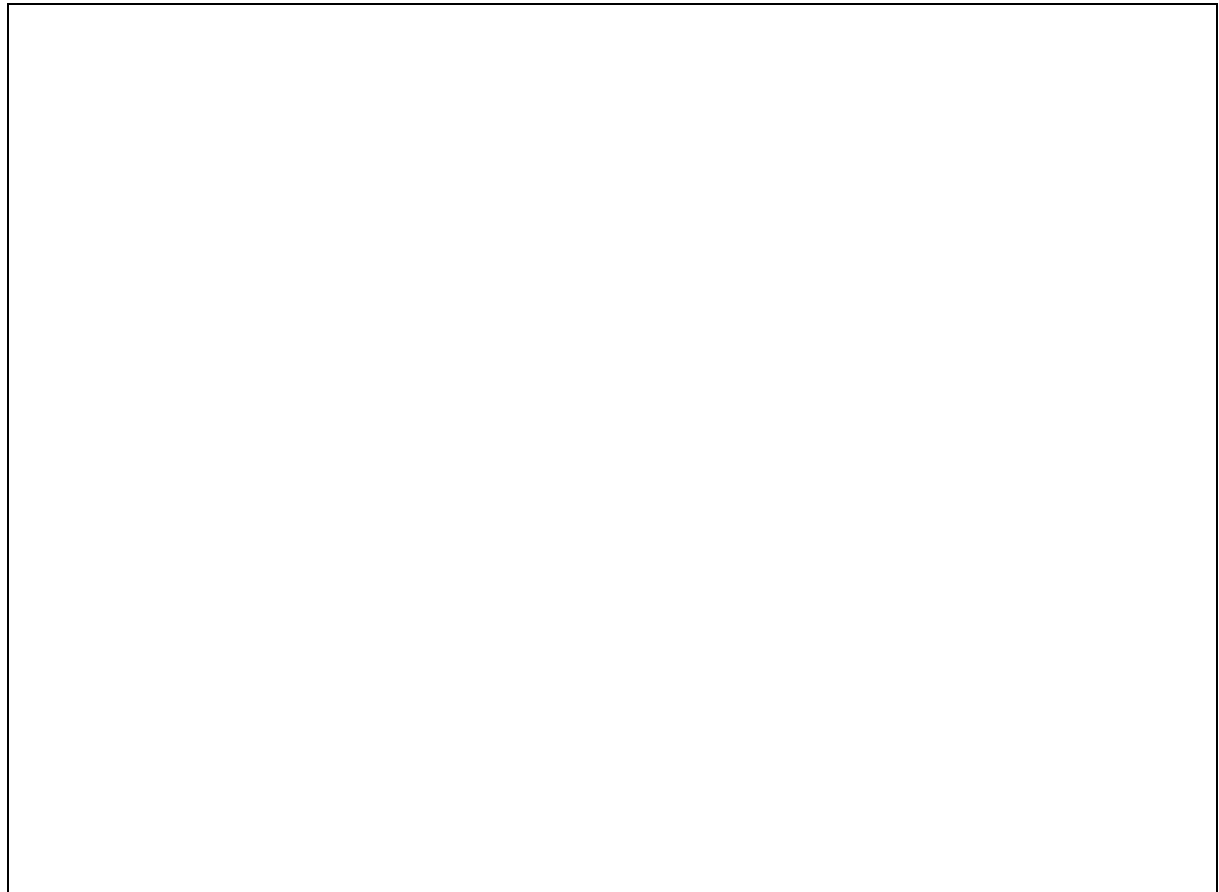


Figure 26. Revising the booklet *Community in the Making* (2018, 71), 2018

The Story of the Bromley by Bow Centre

I had not properly noticed the Bromley by Bow Centre even though I passed it every time on my way to the Tesco supermarket. One day in the summer of 2016, a big church at the corner caught the eye of a friend of mine, and I stopped to talk to one of the staff members who eventually suggested I come by to do some volunteer work. Dan, a staff member and artist, once told me that the BbBC started as an invitation from the priest to local artists to inhabit the space, as the number of parishioners was decreasing. Among the group was a Chilean immigrant sculptor, Santiago Bell, who had studied with the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and would bring some of his ideas about critical consciousness to the space. The artists built up studios around the church, and to respond to the needs of the local communities, new spaces were built. To this day, some of the founder artists use the studios. I have heard other variants of the centre's history, but I like to believe that this is the real story of the BbBC.



Participation and Exhaustion

I would say that each of the projects I have completed throughout my career share a point of commonality, that is, they have all led me to a moment of despair where I tell myself that this is the last time I am going to work with other people as part of my art practice. Like other participatory artists, I have discovered how exhausting it is to engage in and manage participation. For me, this exhaustion comes from a feeling of helplessness. It takes shape in various forms, such as a series of small frustrations as I witness the pain and injustice that participants face in their everyday life while being unable to help them. But my feeling usually does not last long before I once again experience a surge of optimism (or is this due to my weak memory?) that makes me want to start again.

Section 04 – How My Practice and Research Evolved

The previous section critically examined the elements of my practice-led research *Community in the Making* by using the key learnings of my account of participatory art (PA) in the West. My examination revealed how my art commission at the Bromley by Bow Centre took place in a neoliberal socio-political and economic context. In [Section 01](#), I labelled this participatory context as neoliberal participation (in art). Through my examination, I learned that the components of my neoliberal PA project had implications for the participants (Alisson, Martha, Eddie, and others), the organisers (Becky, Rev. James, and Maisha), the artists (Axel and myself), and the institution (Bromley by Bow Centre). The participants were objectified by the project that had aimed to represent and give them a voice. They also experienced a sense of abandonment as a result of the perpetual cycle of short-term participatory research projects. The artists were impacted by finding themselves in polarising positions of vulnerability and power, and in being perceived as elitist and “socially uselessness” because of their chosen profession. The institution was experiencing an increasing dependence on grants due to the financial withdrawal of the state. This drove the institution to consider the artists as service-providers and participants as tokens of success so that they could acquire more grants.

My assessment of the Bromley by Bow project also highlighted the service-based logic fostered by the research grants (Lent and Studdert 2019; Stocks-Rankin, Seale, and Mead 2018). Of course, there are PA practices that challenge this paradigm. The dependence on these funds created challenging working conditions for the participants, the researchers, the organisers, and me (artist). These challenges included financial restrictions, a limited timeframe, and pressure to produce quantitative results. For example, the condition of me being paid imposed a service economy logic (with expectations of performance and efficiency) on the the art project. In exchange for my salary, I was expected to provide a “service provision for the state agency”. This led me to criticise my own assumptions and the status quo surrounding my position, such as those that led me to select photographs of the participants based on the exclusive aesthetic values of my professional background (excellence, quality, skill, or virtuosity). It should be noted that these status quos are often found in neoliberal PA projects carried out in a communitary context. To counteract these prejudices, my research revealed the need to

constantly question my automatic behaviours and to think with effective plurality to embrace a diversity of “otherness”.

This practice-led research and its critical examination has served to advance my overall research process on how to decolonise participation by providing a practical understanding of the neoliberal aspects embedded in my own work. My project at the BbBC and its takeaways enabled me develop strategies to navigate with neoliberal participation, such as engaging in self-reflection, giving in to the unknown (for the artist, as well as for the participants), and sharing decision-making power. It also made me mindful how exhausting it is to engage in and manage participation, and emphasised the need for all people involved to practise self and community care during the process. The following section will expand on these issues by bringing forward a more explicitly decolonial standpoint. In it I will propose a shift from neoliberal participation in art to principles of communal friendship, a decolonial PA approach that would allow people in unequal positions of power to better relate to each other.

2nd YEAR (2018-2019)

Section 05 – Participant as Friend?

Note to the reader: At times, my writing may seem paradoxical, contradictory, or inconsistent. Although my English editor, Nadine Blumer, has partially filtered the text, the inconsistencies that are left reflect the flow of my ideas. I have made a conscious choice to preserve this essayistic style which mirrors my working process and underlines the Freirian notion that a person is always in the process of becoming, and thus full of contradictions: “Como seres inacabados, inconclusos, em e com uma realidade, que sendo histórica também, é igualmente inacabada” (Freire 1974, 42).¹⁵ In addition, embedded in my text is a hidden conversation with my supervisors, Kristen Kreider and Alison Rooke, regarding the evolution of my ideas. I mention them because it is crucial to understand that behind the “I” that guides this essay and takes full responsibility for it, there are also layers of other voices, each with their own singularity, collaborating in the thinking and writing process. My supervisors have been the first public audience to my ideas, and their responses have thus had a significant influence on my reflections on participation.

With this text, I seek to engage in a conversation with art practitioners who are concerned with participation in the context of culturally diverse societies in the Western world, amid the enormous cultural collage that defines our time (Geertz 1994). My text draws inspiration from community and resistance systems from Latin American populations and anticolonial writers. My goal is to bring a decolonial perspective to this research for us to rethink participation in art. To have a decolonial approach requires first to situate myself (Smith 2012), so I aim to render visible the power relations at play both inside and outside of this essay by acknowledging my positionality – a Canadian born to immigrant Guatemalan parents, an able-bodied male, an artist, a PhD student, and a contractual lecturer – as well as the situatedness of the institution where I produced this text and where it will receive commentary – Goldsmiths

¹⁵ “As beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire 2017, 57).

University, whose faculty is composed of a majority of White scholars, and which is based in the United Kingdom, a former colonial empire.

What do I mean by decoloniality? I use the term to acknowledge the legacy of the anthropos, the “other”, which I cannot escape and that is shaping my work and my relation to the world. My awareness as a colonial subject, as an anthropos who “dwell[s] and think[s] in the borders” (Mignolo 2011, 277) has led me to think decolonially. Decoloniality is a state of being in, with, and within difference¹⁶. By recognising the roots that are mine (what are yours?), I seek to render borders visible. Moreover, as part of my doctoral studies, I have been facing resistance to what I consider the effects of the coloniality of power (Quijano and Ennis 2000). These effects are aligned with and stem from a Eurocentric system of hierarchies, knowledge, and culture. As this research moves forward, the decolonial approach will appear more clearly in my writing and practice, “*não mais como uma realidade estática, mas como uma realidade em transformação, em processo*” (Freire 1974, 41).¹⁷

*“Posso juntar, somar, relacionar coisas que tradicional e oficialmente as autoridades apresentam como diferenciadas ao extremo. Tudo aqui se junta e se torna sincrético, revelando talvez que, no sobrenatural, nada é impossível.”*¹⁸ (DaMatta 1984, 75)

I have a project, an event, a performance, an exhibition, and I ask someone to participate; this person then becomes an audience, a public, and a participant. Do I invite a participant to my party, to my wedding, or for supper at my home? I would invite a colleague, a sister, and a friend... Could *they* ever be participants? Even if they were attending my party, I would not want to label them as participants. Perhaps the personal relationship makes it unimaginable that a “part” of my brother or my friend would be involved in my party, i.e., that I would be splitting

¹⁶ The necessary condition for the anthropos to think decolonially is to dwell and think in the borders of local histories, to become epistemically disobedient by delinking from the narratives of modernity (Mignolo 2011) and dualist categories of Western thought and experience (Quijano 2007). This is what Frantz Fanon (2015) conceptualises as “sociogenesis” and what bell hooks (1990) refers to as “being the margin” (343).

¹⁷ “[T]o see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire 2017, 56).

¹⁸ “I can join, add, link things that traditionally the official authorities present as differentiated to the extreme. Everything here joins and becomes *syncretic*, perhaps revealing that in the supernatural, nothing is impossible.” Emphasis added.

the friend (subject) by transforming him into an “object of research”. It is easier to do such things with strangers. Or perhaps all this simply depends on where the event is happening – if it is in my home, an intimate space, in contrast to the street, a public space. These spaces – private or public – rely on different sets of rules and social norms, such as, for example, the expectation of care and generosity (home) versus the logic or norm of economics and formality (street) (DaMatta 1983a). As Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta (DaMatta 1983a, 164) writes, “living in a society divided into spheres, which complement one another but are in frank competition, leads to a fragmented vision of oneself and of the world”. From this perspective, it sounds easier to fragment my friend into a participant. It is helpful to know that the Latin etymology of participant composed of *participare* + *capere*, part + take, to *take part* in something but also to *take a part* “of” something. As my English editor, Nadine, pointed out, in English you can also say to *partake*, which means to take part in something. This may be interpreted as to *part* something and *take* it, underlining the transactional side of participation – or is it the exploitative and colonial side of it?

Participant is a tricky concept in the so-called art world. At first view, it may appear to be an inclusive term: in participatory art (PA) projects, the term ‘participants’ usually refers to a harmonious community of people who come together on seemingly common ground for a shared artistic purpose. But, in our service-based economy, which is focused on providing adaptable and optimised services and products to consumers, our professional framework as artists increasingly includes the title/role of a “cultural-artistic service provider rather than a producer of aesthetic objects” (Kwon 2002, 4). This context creates the risk of excluding, fragmenting, objectifying, and instrumentalising the subject, that is, the actual person that exists behind the label participant. As discussed in [Section 01](#), this environment leads to neoliberal participation.

Community researchers, however, have started to recognise the risk of the term in the context of community spaces such as the Bromley by Bow Centre and Poplar Union in the UK, where the previously ubiquitous term participant is now quickly being replaced by words such as *volunteer*, *member*, or even *client*, each of them used depending on the context. As stated by the community researcher Maisha Chowdhury (Chowdhury et al. 2019, 7), who participated at

the *Community in the Making* project, such alternatives are a way of maintaining distance from “out of touch” institutionalised research or projects that local residents are far too familiar with (something that I was reminded of on various occasions during my project at the Bromley by Bow Centre, as in my first conversation with Becky, who wanted to escape the normative canons of research). Some of these alternative terms also attempt to foster a sense of community among the different partners involved and to create a safe space where they can relate to one another. These changes can also be understood as an effective nonfinancial incentive for people to participate in such initiatives.

An analysis of participation can be traced back to theorists of participatory democracy (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and George Douglas Howard Cole) who emphasise the need for civic participation in the political process (Pateman 2000). In the field of art, however, an exploration of participation exists almost exclusively in relation to the development of PA in the last few decades (Bishop 2006a), which has developed varied forms and objectives, including social, dialogical, relational, and community-based art (Finkelpearl 2013). Recently, participatory artists and theorists have committed themselves to rethinking social and public spaces. Thus, PA has become increasingly central within contemporary art practice in the UK and elsewhere in the Western world. In turn, this has led to a critical examination of the potential of PA (Bishop 2012; Burton, Jackson, and Willsdon 2016; Finkelpearl 2013; Jackson 2011; Kester 2011). Surprisingly though, not much critical literature has addressed the politics and affects of the participant regarding process-based art projects employing a decolonial approach, or the evolution and erosion of the term in the field of contemporary art. Some notable exceptions include architect Markus Miessen (2011) who argues for conflictual participation and art historian Holly Arden (2014) who examines the relationship between art and the public. And more recently, exciting avenues have opened up such as a book on the decolonisation of participatory research through art-based methods (Seppälä, Sarantou, and Miettinen 2021a), and the *Participator in Contemporary Art* (Kaitavuori 2020) which examines the different forms and features of the participant in PA. However these references do not aim for a decolonial perspective towards the politics of participation and (participatory) art. Beyond these works, there has not been significant critical research regarding the colonial relationship between the

artist and the participant. What then is left of the participant and how would it be possible to redefine the word and reveal its complexities?

In the field of ethnographic research, extensive inquiries have been made into the subjectivities of doing fieldwork with participants in community spaces (Behar 1996; Geertz 1994; Hastrup 1992; Rooke 2010; Tedlock 1991; Tillmann-Healy 2003; Van der Geest 2015). Hence, community staffers are now aware of the implications of the word ‘participant’ and how their users relate to it. We cannot say the same of the art world, where such a shift in terminology is yet to be achieved, examined, or debated in depth. A parallel can be made with art discourse and the “highly ambiguous nature of the public” where “it seems an oversight that the relationship between art and the public *as such* has not been considered in any considerable critical depth” (Arden 2015, 104).

As researcher Yaiza Hernández Velázquez argues, there is a “new institutional call to turn museums (at least partly) into ‘community centres’” (Hernández Velázquez 2018, 129). In this context, PA projects are receiving growing institutional recognition in the West (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts 2018; Tate 2016), leading to higher numbers of open calls for participants. If we think about this increase of PA projects, it becomes apparent that it is crucial to unpack terms like *participant*, *participation*, and *participatory art*. This is particularly the case because such projects are also of interest for quantitative and qualitative social science researchers, policy makers and cultural workers, all of whom are tasked with systematically capturing the positive impact of PA in improving health and social relationships (Rooke, Slater, and Cuch 2012). Indeed, artists and participants must take an active part in shaping the wider discourse around participation, be it on the level of theory or practice, not only to bring different perspectives, but also to shift or decolonise its terms. Artists should commit to giving voice to the people directly involved. In such a discourse, we would have on one side, the voice of someone – the artist – who “manipulates” the parameters of the situation; and on the other side, the participant who makes the existence of this situation possible. The result would be a powerful encounter, created in a realm of senses ingrained both in the body and in local histories (Mignolo 2011). This must be narrated (more) and shared (more) in the public discourse about participation.

This is especially true if we understand, firstly, that participation in a democracy, as well as in art, has come to mean nonparticipation or tokenism (Arnstein 1969; Beech 2008; Miessen 2011); and secondly, that there is an increasing shift from service- to exchange-based paradigms among state-funded art and health commissions and, consequently, higher expectations for participatory artists. In the last decade, we have witnessed an increasing demand from community centres for a major transition “from a service paradigm to one of exchange, dialogue and collaborative creativity [that goes] against paradigms where participants are users or clients and there are expectations about how they should be ‘treated’ and worked with” (Rooke, Slater, and Cuch 2012, 80). A 2018 evaluation of the Bromley by Bow Centre model reported a similar assessment. The research concluded that at the centre, there was a “tension at play, which relates to the organisational response, which varies between meeting needs through a service paradigm and creat[es] opportunities through a community development paradigm” (Stocks-Rankin, Seale, and Mead 2018, 120). The report’s conclusion, as shown in the table below, indicates that there is need for a transition when it comes to community involvement, where the service-provider paradigm for healthcare is not sufficient. However, this transition entails much tension, which has consequences on the politics of participation, both for the artist and the participant.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM	VS	SERVICE PARADIGM
Finding / creating opportunities		Meeting needs
Conversation		Tasks
Work holistically – see the interconnections between issues and look to the assets available		Prioritise immediate need
Wider determinants		Biomedical / clinical
Family / village		Professional and efficient
Relational		Transactional

Figure 27. Table presenting how tensions manifest in a participatory model (Stocks-Rankin, Seale, and Mead 2018, 121)

In the sections that follow, I would like to address some of the key implications for the artist and the participant regarding the transition from a service-based to a community development paradigm. I will do so by inviting my readers to imagine the possibilities of framing the participant as a friend. What might we learn or realise conceptually and practically by engaging in this playful exercise? As you will see, I am asking for a radical shift in the understanding and practice of the term participant in the West. Since reciprocity matters, this shift from participant to friend also implies the transformation of the artist into a friend. I have been developing friendships as part of my artistic practice since I began working as an artist. The project I led at the Bromley by Bow Centre was no exception, even if the general context proved to be challenging (as I described above). As the title of this section suggests, I thus invite you into a dialogue that questions how this radical shift can become possible.

As mentioned, in art, participation has become a passive word prompting polarised debates that, at best, create the illusion of involvement. The concept thus needs to be taken back to its original meaning: an act of sharing and of distributing power that can push the public realm towards social justice. I do not propose to offer a fairy-tale solution by replacing participant with friend or to contribute to the philosophical discussion on the politics of friendships in the West (Agamben 2009; Aristotle 1926; Blanchot 1997; Derrida 1993; Foucault 1994; Levinas 1969; Montaigne 2004; Nancy 2000; Plato 2001)¹⁹. I am aware of the criticism this would foster in the field of art or within “research as friendship” (Oakley 2015). Rather, my aim is to render the status quo surrounding participation in art visible and to use friendship to explore other types of relationships as an alternative to the logic of participation.

Autoethnography of Friendship

My family experiences and our origins in the Global South have influenced my ideas surrounding friendship. I grew up in Canada with a Latin-American background, raised by my Guatemalan parents who would wake me up with rancheras everyday for breakfast. My parents

¹⁹ For a philosophical analysis of friendship within art and community-based projects, see Davis, Heather. 2015. *Distance in Proximity: Spiral Garden, Community-Based Art, and Friendship*. *Third Text* 29 (1–2): 47–60.

were part of the first wave of the Latin-American diaspora, having fled Guatemala in the 1970s. They did so not in response to the CIA's disruption of their country's social framework, but out of economic need. Since my childhood, I have often been surprised by the clash of attitudes between my parents and their Canadian-born peers, and what I naively perceived as a welcoming *Québécois* culture, a vision that will fade with time. Early in my childhood, I would help my parents at their workplaces: cleaning a bank with my dad at night after closing time or spending a weekend in a wealthy American mansion where my mom was a nanny and cleaner. These experiences made me aware of the life of an immigrant (some of whom are undocumented), working for survival with the hope of a more prosperous future.

Some people would make fun of my parents' accents. To this day, my mum will stay silent at the openings of my shows to avoid having her own voice heard and judged. Her presence hovering quietly on the sidelines among the loud voices of others. I do not have many recollections of her speaking French, the dominant language of Montreal, the city we lived in. My dad, on the contrary, would speak in his typically loud gregarious way with our shy French-Canadian neighbours, struggling angrily when people made him repeat himself. I suppose these requests for repetition reminded him that he was an immigrant and brought about the awareness that he was the "other", ultimately infantilising him through language (Mignolo 2011). In his mind, he was speaking clearly. Several times in my life, I felt shame when I heard my father speaking French or when he did "non-Canadian" things, like when he grew chickens in our backyard, in the urban outskirts of Leonard Cohen's Mile End Montreal, before the police forced us to kill them because a neighbour had complained about the noise.



Figure 28. My dad in front of our house, Mile End (Montreal), 1982, photography



Figure 29. My sister and I in the backyard, Mile End (Montreal), 1982, photography

As I grew older, I also felt incomprehension when I heard that my father was reprimanded for “unprofessional behaviour” at work because he had offered plants as a gift to his colleagues. He conflated the logic of generosity (home) with the logic of formality (street) by giving a gift in a fragmented society (DaMatta 1983a). For many years, I struggled with the feeling of not being “normal”. I internalised the stigma of being different without being able to understand it fully.

In this sense, bell hooks' (1990) ideas about being in the margins resonate with my family's immigrant experience. Of course, being a female Black American growing up in a small US town in the 1970s, only to then become a leading feminist thinker and professor (hooks 1990, 341), is wholly different from my experience as a Latino-Canadian man raised in multicultural Montreal, and subsequently as a mid-career artist doing a PhD and working as a contractual lecturer. Mine is a completely different history in terms of gender, race, and class but, in some ways, we also share common roots, such as the experience of oppression and marginality as visible minorities born in North America to working-class families and studying/teaching in predominantly White universities. Being the margin (or, as hooks writes, "we are the margin") is the experience of struggling for freedom of expression after a history of being silenced (hooks 1990, 343). Being a second-generation immigrant has put me in an in-between position insofar as it has led to an internalised conflict between being silenced and being given voice. In other words, I carry within me the conflict between the historically oppressed Latino immigrant and the covert "gringo".

Vulnerability, Power, and Friendship as Survival

In 1994, I was living in Baltimore to improve my English and working without papers and under a false name to pay for my undergraduate studies. I was sharing a studio apartment with a Nicaraguan and a Salvadoran, both of whom had at that point been undocumented immigrants for a couple of years. The apartment was a small room filled with three single beds and a fridge. That summer, I remember going out for supper with my flatmates to a Chili's Tex-Mex type casual restaurant. We ended up waiting for thirty minutes, hungry and annoyed, in the rather unpacked restaurant for the White waitress to come and serve us. We had to persuade her to come to our table to take our order. I initially thought she was simply an unqualified employee, whereas my roommates immediately chalked her reluctance up to racism. By then, they were well accustomed to waiting excessive amounts of time or receiving bad treatment in restaurants. Yet they never complained, because, as I later learned, they were scared into maintaining a friendly disposition to avoid further troubles, always aware of the precarity of their undocumented status.

That summer, I thus learned to travel from a place of privilege and authority (look, she does not like her job, and I could complain to the manager) to a position of objectification – via the immigrant label – and the experience of discrimination (wow! she is treating me badly because of my race and I must shut up). When hooks says, “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (hooks 1990, 341), I apply this to myself and I need to stretch it, in the sense that, as someone of mixed nationality, I have been navigating outside the main body while also being part of it. This process of self-dissolution is inherently anxiety-provoking (Hastrup 1992, 119). My mixed heritage has contributed to my profound sense of displacement (Behar 1996, 21), but also to my acceptance of contradiction as a state of being, as I relentlessly shift between a position of authority and vulnerability.

This contradiction, as we have seen, is at the heart of participation as it applies to the artist or researcher engaged in participant observation (Behar 1996; Hastrup 1992; Rooke 2010). When acknowledged, the ability to move back and forth between positions is a strength. When I worked with the local community of Bromley by Bow, I was moving between and within a position of power and vulnerability, which allowed me to interrogate my situatedness as a PhD researcher, an artist, and an employee. Marginality is not just about domination; it can also be a site of resistance. As hooks notes, marginality is a place where counter-hegemonic discourse may be produced – a place to imagine alternative worlds (hooks 1990, 341). Friendship has been a resource for my former flatmates, my parents, and me in sustaining the life of a migrant: building a community of immigrant friends to whom to relate and with whom to share culture shocks and migratory grief. Maintaining friendly relations with our neighbours was also important to us, for friendship was a necessity and a tool for survival.

Communality and Friendship

Throughout my life, I have had several opportunities to visit the Guatemalan town my father comes from, which is mostly composed of *mestizos(as)*²⁰. His outgoing gregarious behaviour

²⁰ *Mestizo(a)* refers to a person of mixed/combined ancestry of White European (Spanish) and Indigenous Latin American (mainly Itza people in the region of my dad).

would then make perfect sense to me. The people there *viven* (live/exist) and *conviven* (live together/coexist) with an approach that is not inspired by the Christian viewpoints that still overshadow my father's native village, but by Indigenous ways of thinking such as the concept of *vivir bien* (living well) which for the Aymara people is *Suma Qamaña*²¹ (Acosta and Abarca 2018; Bretón, Cortez, and García 2014; Yampara Huarachi 2011). There, it is normal for strangers to stop you in the street to say hello and to start a conversation. There, everyone – from your enemy to your friend – is somehow a “relative”. They are friends but this does not diminish the likelihood of being robbed or betrayed by them occasionally, too. In the village that my father grew up in, the socio-political context makes people relate to one another as friends because they (might) need each other at some point and vice versa. Relationships of reciprocity are central there. They *conviven* under what I consider comparable to the *circular* and *accumulative* Andean Indigenous economy, “*todo circula, hasta productos que para nosotros son basura. Las basuras también sirven allá. O sea nada es desechable, [...] de todo se extrae conocimiento y beneficio, se parece a una pelota de trapo que está hecha con restos de muchas cosas. La gente que sabe vivir y convivir con los diversos mundos duerme sobre esa acumulación*”²² (Yampara Huarachi 2011, 16).

This kind of friendship, where things are reciprocal, circular, and cumulative, even if contradictory, implies a particular sense of the common that is closely connected to the *communal*. By *communal*, I refer to the Indigenous concept of “collective rights to the use and management of resources [...] in the benefits of what is collectively produced” (Mignolo 2009, 6). In the communal system, the capitalist notions of property, of development in terms of growth and accumulation, and the distinction between owner/worker, disappear. Having its

²¹ The concept of *Suma Qamaña* or *vivir bien* in Spanish “living well” has contradictory and diverse definitions. The Aymara activist Simon Yampara Huarachi (2011) defines it as “wellbeing and harmony paradigm of existence. *Qamaña*, in Aymara, means living, life. *Suma Qamaña* refers to *living well* in the sense of integral and right living, in harmony with nature. The *Suma Qamaña* is a paradigm of life that all humanity is looking for, because it implies the wellbeing and harmony of all and not of a few.” (Yampara Huarachi 2011, 20) All translations by author unless otherwise indicated.

²² “Everything *circulates*, even products that are trash for us. Garbage also serves there. In other words, nothing is disposable, [...] of everything is extracted knowledge and benefice, it looks like a rag ball made with the remains of many things. The people who know how to live/exist and living together/coexist with the different worlds sleep on that *accumulation*.” Emphasis added.

foundation in ancestral agrarian societies, the communal is different from the commons, which belongs to democracy, and from communism or socialism, which developed as responses to liberalism and capitalism (Mignolo 2009).

A Non-Continental Understanding of Friendship

My experience growing up in an immigrant family is quite distant from the fusional friendship between writers French Étienne de La Boétie and Michel de la Montaigne, “parce que c’était lui, parce que c’était moi” (Montaigne 1972, 144). This view of seeing two friends as equal reinforces an idealistic perception of relationships, which hardly reflects the reality of people in precarious and vulnerable conditions. It is also different from the sense of belonging, “la communauté inavouable”, that the philosopher Maurice Blanchot beautifully reveals through the experience of death that all of us shall experience at some point (Blanchot 1983); from Jean-Luc Nancy’s *La communauté désœuvrée*, where the “distance in friendship is what paradoxically also makes our ties stronger and generates proximity” (Davis 2015, 56); and from the notion of unconditional hospitality according to Emmanuel Levinas who claims that “love before being loved is the ethical act of friendship” (Davis 2015, 56). All of these thinkers were part of the French poststructuralist movement and remain prominent references within academia and the art world (Kester 2011, 12, 54). In these realms, they carry influence especially regarding the discourse on friendship (missing from the list is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and others), which I was extensively exposed to during my undergraduate studies in Canada. Most Western ideas on friendship emerge from a “continental” context, that is, relating to the continent of Europe, as well as from Aristotle’s definition of the three levels of “philia”: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and friendships by virtue (Aristotle 1926).

I mention these philosophers briefly, for my intention is simply to highlight how much the Western perspective has defined the discourse about friendship. Thus, in what follows, I will place emphasis on Latino/immigrant anecdotes to offer an alternative, that is, a non-continental perspective on the conceptualisation of friendship. This kind of friendship, which I will temporarily name “communal” friendship, has various historical roots.

This alternative formulation of friendship shares similarities with the “continental” versions, but there are important differences as well. For example, a communal friendship approach is concerned with dialogue. As Freire argues, “ao fundarse no amor, na humildade, na fé nos homens, o diálogo se faz uma relação horizontal, em que a confiança de um pólo no outro é consequência óbvia” (Freire 1974, 46)²³. This relates as well to a grammar of decoloniality and of an “immigrant consciousness” (Mignolo 2010) linked to notions of survival, *vivir bien*, reciprocity, circularity, accumulation, and communality. As Mignolo explains, immigrant consciousness “implies de-linking from the imperial concept of the subject and from any pretense to uni-versality” – it is the “awareness of being out of place with regard to the regulations (i.e., the cosmology) of modernity; the awareness, in short, of the colonial wound” (Mignolo 2010, 17). Communal friendship is an alternative to neoliberal participation, drawing as it does on global equality, social and economic justice (Mignolo 2011).

Informant, Researcher, and Friend

American anthropologist Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy has discussed *friendship as method* for qualitative ethnographic inquiry (Tillmann-Healy 2003). As I mentioned, ethnographic research is more engaged with questions related to the methodology of participation as compared to the art world, especially concerning the relationship between ethnographer and informant versus artist and participant. There is much to gain from the critical attention demanded by the postmodern and interpretative turn that anthropology has taken regarding the intersubjectivities and reflexivity of the researcher (Rooke 2010, 27). Specifically, we must consider the relationship between the artist and the participant as a colonial relationship. This “ethnographic turn” critically examines the ethnographer’s work, from participant observation and writing fieldnotes to writing up the research document and exposes the researcher’s problematic position of authority (Behar 1996, 8-9). There are similarities here to the ambiguous and colonial position of the participatory artist in a community setting, particularly in regard to many of the criticisms directed at ethnographic methodologies and central to

²³ “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (Freire 2017, 72).

debates on reflexive anthropology²⁴, such as matters having to do “with the power relations of research” (Rooke 2010, 28), the oppressive nature of ethnographic writing (Behar 1996; Hastrup 1992), the objectification of the informant (Hastrup 1992), and the ethics of intersubjectivity (Behar 1996; Rooke 1992). When I became aware of Tillmann-Healy’s article *Friendship as Method* and the debates surrounding it, which have mostly been articulated according to Western values and within a continental theoretical discourse, I was left with mixed feelings, as they opened an understanding of friendship and methodology that was both similar and different from my own.

According to a contemporary anthropological framework, friendship is defined as:

A human relationship in which the other is treated as a complete human being. The philosopher Kant has characterised the core of moral acting in a phrase that comes down to this: one must always treat others as an end in themselves; one should never use others as means to an end. Friendship could be described as a relationship in which this ideal is achieved (Van der Geest 2015, 4).

Friendship occupies a marginal position within the matrix of interpersonal relations in Western culture, argues Tillmann-Healy by citing Rawlins (1992) and Werking (1997). In many Western societies, friendship is considered a voluntary relationship in contrast to the obligatory ones, such as with family, religion, or the law:

Friends come and stay together primarily through common interests, a sense of alliance, and emotional affiliation (Weiss, 1998). Friendship, according to Rawlins (1992), ‘implies affective ties’ (12). In friends, we seek trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding, and acceptance (see Rubin, 1985) (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 731).

This conception of friendship, defined as a voluntary relationship that is attributed a marginal position does not coincide with my personal experience. The strong sense of being a “relative” among, for example, immigrant communities, applies to concepts such as reciprocity, trust, care, generosity, and humility. Rather than conceiving of this relationship as a voluntary one, the communal kind of friendship is based more on an obligatory dynamic that I prefer to think of in terms of survival or resistance.

²⁴ An overview of the debates of reflexive anthropology and its main protagonists can be found in Rooke (2010).

For qualitative social science researchers, working with “friendship as method” involves bringing friendship into the role of the researcher. This means observing the “pace of a friendship”, where the “project’s issues emerge organically, in the [...] flow of everyday life”; situating the research “in the natural context of friendship”, in their private and public space; and, doing “research with an ethic of friend, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love. [...] Friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying ‘them’ to studying *us*” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735). Friendship as method, argues Tillmann-Healy, is based on several qualitative approaches such as interpretivism that “take[s] reality to be both pluralistic and constructed in language and interaction”; feminism and its “political commitments to consciousness-raising, empowerment, and social” transformation; standpoint theory and its use of dialogue, relationship and an ethic of caring towards empowerment; queer methodologies and their challenge of heteronormative binaries in favour of sexual/gender identities understood as fluid; the notion of “working the hyphens” that blurs the line between researcher and researched by authentic engagement, relational truths and social justice; participatory action research (PAR) that “aims to produce knowledge and action directly useful” for the participant by using dialogue; and, interactive interviewing that requires intense collaboration and sharing of personal experiences (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 732-733). Dutch anthropologist Sjaak van der Geest (2015) also suggests that friendship as a methodological tool can be linked in another way to research, as “friendship developed in the course of doing research, *because of the research*” (Van der Geest 2015, 7), thus giving light to uneasy and often unspoken aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, such as emotional labour and its ethical repercussions (Rooke 2010).

In general, these observations from established scholars bring normative and institutionalised (academic) recognition to our dialogue regarding how a radical shift from participant to friend may be possible. I am indebted to the aforementioned scholars, especially in relation to the ethical questions that my proposal has raised among my colleagues, examiners, and supervisors. Moreover, many of these approaches entail affinities and dissimilarities to the kind of friendship I am proposing, such as the participatory action research – an approach I applied to the Bromley by Bow project discussed in my previous section.

I am aware that neither this general overview on qualitative approaches related to “friendship as a method” nor the survey of “continental” friendship provided here reflect the exhaustive literature written on these matters. Although I know that I am expected to expand on them in order to develop a dialectical argumentation, that is, a conception of knowledge that originated in the West (Yampara 2011), I would like to invite you, the reader, to engage instead in epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2011). I would like our conversation to create space and to give recognition to alternative systems of thought that deal with border thinking and decoloniality from which we can find ways of rethinking “participation” in the West. Before moving on, I would like to make a last comment regarding one of my findings.

Friendship as Methodology in Community Art

The Canadian writer Heather Davis (2015) makes a plea for implementing friendship as method within community-based art spaces. Davis argues that, “friendship, specifically ‘friendship as method’ as developed and articulated by sociologist Lisa Tillman-Healy and others, creates a useful and generative resonance between the practices of community-based art and research on this subject” (Davis 2015, 49). She continues by writing: “And so, friendship, a structure taken from everyday experience which maintains its relation through distance, is one that can usefully be transformed into a working methodology for artists and researchers to work through distance, rather than presume proximity to begin with” (Davis 2015, 60). Davis’ proposal contains moving examples of friendships and valuable insights in response to the increasing commodification of community-based arts practice. Nevertheless, I do not fully apprehend friendship as a working methodology or in terms of “proximity that is generated through distance” (Davis 2015, 58). Davis’ case study is based on the Spiral Garden, a long-term community art project at the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto, Canada. Her example made me think of a Mexican film I watched during my latest fieldtrip to Guatemala, *El señor doctor* (Delgado, 1965). The story is about a provincial doctor from the Mexican suburbs who comes to Mexico City for an internship at the national hospital. The movie depicts Cantinflas (Mario Moreno), a well-known Mexican comic, as *el señor doctor* (Mr. Doctor) who repeatedly transgresses the norms of the medical institution by becoming friends with the patients.



Figure 30. *El señor doctor* (1965), extract. *El señor doctor* (Cantinflas) watching TV with a patient

Cantinflas has a long history of personifying the poor and the marginal, from the illiterate to the janitor, as a way of revealing societal incongruities. *El señor doctor* quickly becomes the patients' favourite, especially for the ones who are most in need. As mentioned, in my personal history, my experience of friendship has come from a need for survival and "awareness of being out of place" (Mignolo 2010b, 17). It is from this standpoint that I want to guide our dialogue on how we can transform *participants* and *artists* into *friends*.

To be clear, I propose to shift our terms of discussion on friendship with a grammar of decoloniality and border thinking, a position from where *we* can relate. By "we", I am including the *artist* and the *participant* that dwell as "communal" *friends*. Our dialogue is about borders and about how to play with and invert these borders. *Participant as friend* brings borders into the discussion and makes visible the borders of things that at first appear incompatible or contradictory.

Communal Friendship

So, how to shift the terminology of *participant*, one that is so rooted in distance, formality, independence, service, tasks, transactions, temporality, linearity, dispossession, and fragmentation (all aspects specific to the service paradigm and to the coloniality of power) so

that it matches the grammar of *friend*? How do we change participant into a communal friend with a vocabulary of circularity, accumulation, survival, *vivir bien*, communality, and humility that are specific to “immigrant consciousness”? I want to clarify that this communal friendship is composed of contradictions, as the examples above demonstrate. My intention is not to romanticise the idea of Latinx friendship. Rather, I believe that we can learn from the complexities of this stance on *friendship*, in particular in how it allows for paradoxes and contradictions to exist and coexist in *vivir bien*.

A communal friendship entails attitudes allowing for *convivir* with incompatibilities (Acosta and Abarca 2018; Yampara Huarachi 2011)., and it is a mode of survival that is at stake when power dynamics, precariousness or polarised logics are enacted. I will elaborate on this in the subsequent sections, but I turn now to a brief outline of three of these attitudes: syncretism, the carnivalesque, and dialogue.

One of the aspects of communal friendship is its “syncretic” attitude, something different from Western categorisations of friendship (Agamben 2004; Derrida 2005). The conception of “syncretic” refers to my earlier quotation from Roberto DaMatta: “*Posso juntar, somar, relacionar coisas que tradicional e oficialmente as autoridades apresentam como diferenciadas ao extremo. Tudo aqui se junta e se torna sincrético, revelando talvez que, no sobrenatural, nada é impossível*” (DaMatta 1984, 75). In this passage, DaMatta suggests that syncreticism is a language of relationship and connection. A language that seeks a middle ground since the cohabitation of incompatible elements/systems can be possible. I use the term “syncretic” with precaution, however. Other terms that might be fitting are hybridity, emulation, camouflage, disguise (Yampara 2011) and *structural coupling*, where a system appropriates elements from the *entorno*²⁵ of other systems, such as political, social, or religious components (Mignolo 2009). Most importantly, syncretism refers to a tool of resistance, which implies a contradiction or a problematic combination. The syncretic strategy allows for the co-

²⁵ Social organisations, in Andean vision, are made of a core and an environment (*entorno*). In this respect, Mignolo argues that neo-liberal state multiculturalism rhetoric of “inclusion”, namely the Bolivian state, is an attempt to co-opt the environment (*entorno*) while ignoring the core of the Aymara Indigenous. (Mignolo 2009).

existence of incompatibilities, such as an Indigenous leader using a Christian medallion, which in fact gives him the right to practise his rites without being a Christian.

Another attitude that is important to mention here regarding the grammar of communal friendship is the “ritual rule of inversion” and its ability to temporarily unravel “hierarchical connections”, such as the carnival celebrations typical of many societies of the Global South (and of some societies of the Global North). According to DaMatta (1983a), the carnival is an event that offers a type of chaos “during which it is possible to unite what we do with what we want and think” (DaMatta 1983a, 164) for a defined and controlled duration. In other words, it is a space that produces a “juncture of home with street, of body with soul, of desire hidden by the repressions of order with the open and uninhibited manifestation of them” (DaMatta 1983a, 165). The carnival, as DaMatta suggests, creates social events that obliterate hierarchical orders and open opportunities for free expression and a sense of belonging, a space where all people are (or feel) equal, as social distinctions such as gender and class vanish temporarily. For DaMatta, this ritual is characterised by metonymy, that is, “a context in which container and contained are contiguous, tending toward coherence and even identification” (DaMatta 1983a, 169). The carnival “disintegrates hierarchical connections and makes it possible for the signified to be equated with the signifier and the means with the ends” (DaMatta 1983a, 169).

As stated previously, another aspect that is part of the grammar of a communal friendship is dialogue which, according to Freire implies that “*ao fundarse no amor, na humildade, na fé nos homens, o diálogo se faz uma relação horizontal, em que a confiança de um pólo no outro é consequência óbvia.*” (Freire 1974, 46)²⁶ It is necessary to elaborate Freire’s statement and the three words – love, humility, and faith – as they are probably the central link that sustains my call for a radical shift in the way we approach the terms participant and artist. Dialogue, like our conversation, is made of multiple individual voices, or “I”, where things keep evolving in an organic, accumulative, and durational logic rather than a linear, transactional, temporal, and distant one.

²⁶ “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (Freire 2017, 72).

Before moving on to the next section, I wish to reiterate that I am interested in the implication of participation when it enters the “social”, the in-between space of art and community – the politics of the participant in PA projects. The social is culturally diverse; as was the case for Bromley by Bow. As my research has shown so far, over the last fifty years, along with the growing institutionalisation and the increase of PA in the West, I argue that *participant* has evolved into *neoliberal participant*, a polarised label that is too rigid and potentially alienating for the person who is so defined.

Section 06 – How My Practice and Research Evolved

During my second year of doctoral research (2018-2019), I took time to analyse how the key learnings of my contextual review of participatory art (PA) in the West ([Section 01](#)) and the critical examination of my practice-led research *Community in the Making* ([Section 03](#)) could be transformed into a PA practice that would move away from neoliberal participation. Thus, I delved into the multiple meanings of “doing participation” from an ethnographic and artistic perspective.

I started with the acknowledgement that our service-based economy transforms artists into service providers and creates the risk of excluding, fragmenting, objectifying, and instrumentalising the subject, that is, the actual person that exists behind the label ‘participant’. These observations allowed me to expand on the concept of neoliberal participation and to define an alternative approach, communal friendship. During the second year, I delved further into decolonial theories to offer an alternative to the way we approach the participant in PA. In the progression of my doctoral journey, this represented my first attempt to offer a critical reading regarding the colonial relationship between the artist and the participant. Through my examination, I learned that my immigrant background can inform my way of approaching the participant in ways that are more adapted to the realities of a culturally diverse context. As such, this reflection on my experience is useful for PA practitioners wishing to work with/in/for culturally diverse contexts and to find ways for decolonising PA practices.

This transitional period has allowed my PA practice to evolve in conceptual terms by questioning my (our) relationship to participant through communal friendship. However, during this time, I still left little room for a real dialogue with the different stakeholders of my research. In other words, the experience of the second year have subsequently helped me to realise this important shortcoming in my research and artistic practice. During the third year of my PhD (2019-2020), I will use these key takeaways to advance my research on the level of practice and theory. The projects that I engaged in offered more space for artists and participants to actively shape my discussion around the decolonisation of PA. The projects that follow will create experiences which give special attention to our (their) local histories involving a realm of senses for thinking, doing, and feeling.

3rd YEAR (2019-2020)

Section 07 – The Terms and Conditions of Participation as a Racialised Artist

Note to the reader: The passage of time has influenced the lines before you, composed of multiple voices hidden in the collective “I”. While you might read this document in a matter of a couple of hours, I wrote it during a period of several years. During this period, my life and work were affected by several events that cannot be disconnected from these words and their evolving meaning. The contradictions surrounding my arguments are linked to the unfolding of time. As mentioned, I have chosen this style to highlight the Freirian notion that a person is always in the process of becoming.

Since completing the previous section, I have been hired as a full-time professor at the École des arts visuels et médiatiques in the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Canada. This employment alters my positionality and the power relations at play in these chapters. My tenure-track position provides me with certain privileges, thereby pushing me further away from the margin and the precariousness that is frequently experienced by Latinx immigrants and freelance artists. My work as Professor of Critical Approaches to Cultural Diversities furthers my research on participatory art (PA) among marginalised groups, yet it also stigmatises my role within the academic establishment. I am alarmed by the lack of racial diversity in my department and the university as a whole. The institution appears to be ill equipped to deal with the problem, as can be attested by its insufficient efforts to collect and communicate demographic statistics or to publish action plans to fight systemic racism. To borrow Sarah Ahmed’s (2012) brilliant interrogation of “diversity as a set of practices”, I wonder if by representing the category of diversity in my institution, I contribute to a “containment strategy” (Ahmed 2012, 53) that allows racism and inequalities to be overlooked. In other words, in providing a “bit of the Other” (hooks 1992) and creating a false impression of social inclusiveness and diversity, I may risk instrumentalising my role “in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo” (hooks 1992, 367) while indirectly sustaining White supremacy and systemic racism.

My new duties at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) have allowed me to develop a new platform for critically rethinking the problems I encountered during the first year of my doctoral research, while continuing to employ a dialogical approach (Freire 2017). In September 2019, during a Master's level seminar that I led at UQAM, I cofounded the Arts Research Centre in Cultural Diversities (ARCCD). My student-colleagues were the primary cofounders, contributors, and audience of the Centre. The ARCCD aims to explore the intersection of art, participation, and communities from a decolonial perspective which examines various power relations. Indeed, the founding of the Centre was partly motivated by my desire to open new discussions on some of the key concepts of my research and to receive feedback on notions such as participant as communal friend. Because my research claims to decolonise PA, in my work as a researcher I see a contradiction with my participant observer stance that my research has developed so far which offers little power to my participants-informers to intervene directly in the issues of my research. This section and the related projects are intended to correct these flaws. The ARCCD has also provided a space for employing such concepts in public, thanks to podcasts, seminars, publications, articles, workshops, and film production.

One of the first activities within the ARCCD and the Master's seminar was to challenge the institutional use of the term "diversity" and to analyse its use and impact in Western societies. After discussions that took place during the few first weeks of our seminar, we decided to rename the ARCCD the Arts Research Centre in Cultural ~~Diversities~~, applying strikethrough in Diversities, thereby calling into question the term. The Centre prompted interrogations rather than providing answers. Our discussions raised multiple questions. How can we come together when we have different views? How can we participate in multiple ways? What tools can we use to come together with the aim of transformation and resistance? How can we enact social change in between the spheres of art, community, and pedagogy? How can one have a radical practice within an institution? What does de-/anti-colonisation entail nowadays? Through exploring those questions, the Centre aims to continue to explore strategies that can help navigate the neoliberal context of the West, especially within PA practices. Thus, the activities of the Centre have allowed a collective rethinking of terms such as friendship, participation, cultural diversities, racial representation, and decoloniality. Rethinking these terms is an

important step towards moving beyond the instrumentalising conditions of participation in the West and closer to the ideal of communal friendship.

In what follows, I will share certain observations and analyses that emerged from a selection of initiatives conducted by the ARCCD in 2019 and 2020. Moving from theme to theme, I will present the contexts in which I developed my learning and unlearning. More specifically, I will explore the work of the Centre to examine the concept of communal friendship further. As mentioned in my introduction and in the previous section, communal friendship is an alternative approach to participation in art, informed by decolonial theories, that allows people with various positions of power to relate to others in a dynamic involving notions such as dialogue, *vivir bien*, sharing, giving, reciprocity, displacement, oppression, and loss.

In contrast, neoliberal participation is an approach to participation concerned with individualism, transactions, fragmentation, and commodification – all of which are specific to the service-based paradigm which is intertwined with and constitutive of the colonial matrix of power. This chapter will reveal a plethora of difficulties that I experienced through my encounters with the neoliberal conditions of participation in art which allowed me to develop a reflexive communal friendship approach. Learning about my difficulties can be beneficial for developing PA projects that would be more responsive to the pernicious consequences in citizen participation implemented by neoliberalisation. The key lessons that emerged from my experiences were the requirement of self-criticality, an ongoing examination of (my) various positions of power, learning to unlearn, and avoiding tokenism. In sum, the activities of the Centre have allowed me to explore the tensions between neoliberal participation and communal friendship. In this section, I argue that moving away from the instrumentalising conditions of neoliberal participation requires an ongoing willingness to change and to be changed by using a Freirean approach of praxis, which involves a constant learning process through action, reflection, and change.

Communal Friendship and Decoloniality

In the [Section 05](#), I announced that my goal was to rethink participation in art by considering a shift to principles of communal friendship, drawing inspiration from Latin American

communities and “immigrant consciousness”. I have been cautious not to appropriate Latino culture or to endorse the dominant (White) culture in a way that would contribute to maintaining the status quo. It might seem paradoxical that I write about being a colonial subject while I am also in positions of power and influence. Yet, drawing on Nirmal Puwar’s (2004) insights, although I have entered various organisations and hence received some degree of legitimation, as a racialised minority, I remain “a marginal outsider” (Puwar 2004, 119). Therefore, I have been eager to critically examine my privileged position to understand the implications of terms I previously used, like Anthropos, and my need to incorporate a decolonial perspective in my research, writing, and practice.

Seeking to develop the concept of communal friendship and hoping to draw inspiration from decolonial artistic interventions, I invited the Mayan Indigenous K’iche activist artist Lucia Ixchú for a public discussion in September 2019 (see [Section 08](#) for more details on this activity). This event prompted me to reflect on the complexities related to decolonisation as a way of thinking, writing, and producing art. At the end of her talk, which explored what the work of decolonisation through art entailed in Guatemala, Lucia questioned the way that history is typically presented, suggesting that anti-colonial struggles are, in fact, ongoing. As she said during the conversation “Guatemala is still colonised by the USA and Canadian mining companies, I prefer to use the term ‘anticolonisation’ rather than ‘decolonisation’”²⁷. Her argument made me reflect on the political dimensions of historically specific concepts. Lucia’s comments and position expose that an anticolonialism that calls into question the very principles and the (ongoing) existence of the colonial system, must appear in Guatemala to make way for the emancipation process of *decolonisation*. In other words, anticolonisation precedes decolonisation; it is a requirement for the after, the undoing of colonialism, the decolonisation, which is not (yet) possible.

The terms *anticolonialism*, *decolonialisation*, and *decoloniality* share important roots that I will present briefly. *Anti-colonialism* or *anticolonialism* is a concept that defines resistance

²⁷ No audio recording is available for this event because of a technical error. The event was only documented with photos, with permission from Lucia Ixchú and the public. For further information on this activity, see [Section 08](#)

movements fighting colonial and imperial powers with the aim of independence, equality, and social justice. Anticolonialism as a philosophical concept had a resurgence during the first half of the twentieth century in the contemporary Global South with writers such as Aimé Césaire (1973) and Frantz Fanon (2004). *Decolonialisation* succeeds anticolonialism and is therefore closely linked to it. It refers more generally to the historical and political undoing of colonialism in Africa and Asia during the Cold War. The issue of intellectual decolonisation has been significantly discussed in Latin America in the last decade under the term *decoloniality*. *Decolonial theory* is associated with *postcolonialism* which is a theoretical perspective concerned with the legacies of colonialism as a cultural, economic, and political practice (Mayblin 2018). Some of the prominent authors of the field include Edward Said (1979), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), and Homi K. Bhabha (1994).

If both postcolonialism and decoloniality are related to the politics of knowledge production and the history of Western colonialism, one of the differences is their initial geographical origins and focus: Middle East and South Asia for postcolonialism and South America for decoloniality. Decolonial theory proposes delinking the structure of knowledge to reconstitute languages, ways of thinking, living and being in the world that the rhetoric of modernity denied (Mignolo 2017). Decolonial theory is more action-oriented and, as Gurminder K. Bhambra suggests, “strongly linked to world-systems theory from the outset as well as to scholarly work in development and underdevelopment theory and the Frankfurt School of critical social theory tradition” (Bhambra 2014, 115). The field has been prominently represented in the USA by Walter Mignolo (2011) who draws on the work of Anibal Quijano (2000b; 2007a) and Enrique Dussel (1993).

I first became familiar with decolonial theories in 2011 in Cordoba, Argentina through the artist Norma Pellegrino, one of the participants of my workshop *Movimiento social del cuerpo* [Social Movement of the Body] (2011). Her doctoral research was cosupervised by Walter Mignolo, who happens to have been born there. The workshop explored other ways of knowing through the body and she connected Mignolo’s decolonial theories with the techniques I was using at that time, especially Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2014). Since that time, my research, writing, and practice has drawn inspiration from decoloniality and its various

forms of resistance, pushing me to implement my art through an action-oriented approach that aims to bring critical awareness on inequality and social injustice.



Figure 31. Ritual led by Lucia Ixchú during the public discussion, 2019, photo by Romeo Gongora

Lucia's 2019 presentation detailed past and present struggles related to global inequality and economic injustice for the Guatemalan people. By voicing her concerns and those of the people directly involved, her intervention shifted the terms of discussion on inequality and social injustice by employing a grammar of decoloniality and border thinking. In so doing, it revealed a realm of affects ingrained in the body and in the local histories that she conveyed to us. Despite our differences, we (the audience) were able to relate to each other through the local histories that she shared. Our participation in the discussion shifted from distant spectatorship to personal engagement. The discussion with Lucia filled me with emotion and the feeling of solidarity, as it touched upon the struggles that my Guatemalan family has endured. At the end of the conversation, Lucia offered us a moment of hope, giving each visitor a green leaf and asking us to make a silent wish. We then used the leaves to create a collective spiral. This healing ritual brought us together as one fleeting community of communal friends with differences. All in all, Lucia's presentation revealed the necessity for tools of resistance to negotiate with dominant power structures in Guatemala, including artistic interventions such as her punk music festival where people came together to call for social change. This event engaged with decolonial practice by putting Mayan Indigenous K'iche cosmologies at its centre and emphasising non-western communities decolonising (via) punk music, a counter-culture genre of music created in the West. Her talk and artistic practice helped me to further develop

my concept of communal friendship and its links to decoloniality by questioning dichotomies such as centre-periphery and upholding values of mutual respect and reciprocity.

Communal Friendship and Strategies of Resistance

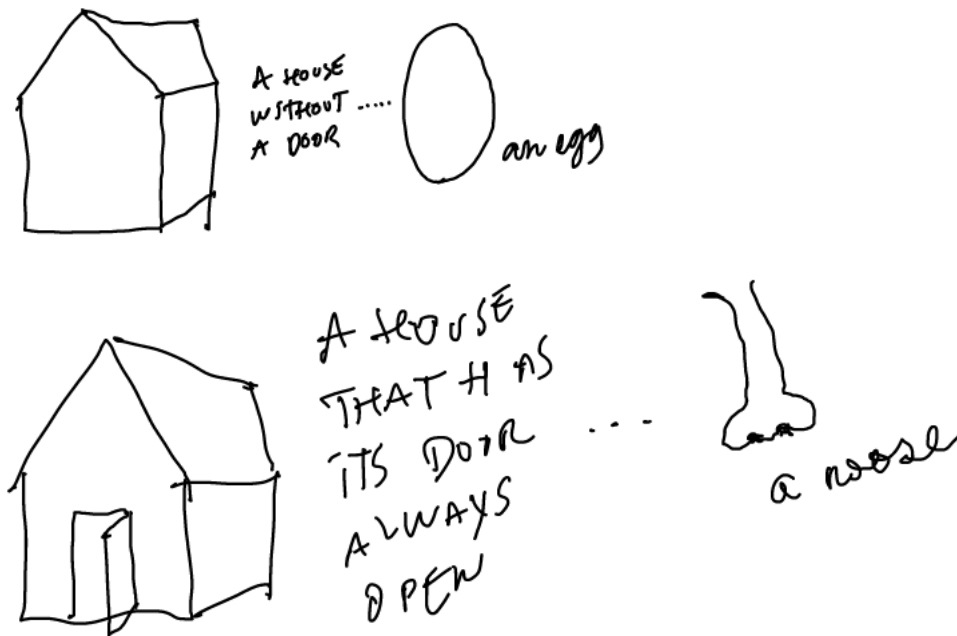


Figure 32. Drawings documenting the Zambian games of proverb Tcho Chizin, 2019

In this subsection, I will discuss a series of workshops that explored ideas shared by Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire regarding the reconstruction of societies. In these *Minilabs* that I gave with my friend, artist, and PhD colleague Anawana Haloba, we specifically explored how Fanon's and Freire's works may contribute to mediating and transforming society.

The Minilabs got off to a rocky start. We attempted to organise the first sessions at Bergen University in Norway, but the large number of workshops in the university, the students overburdened by work and study, and, most importantly, their expectation to consume a product rather than to engage in a critical exercise of self-scrutiny, led to a lack of participation. After two attempts, we concluded that we were not able to create critical reflection and action among the students, which made us question the relevance of doing the Minilabs in an academic institution in the first place. All of this reflects the impacts of neoliberalisation within educational institutions (Olssen and Peters 2005).

We therefore decided to try implementing some of our ideas in a different location: Anawana's home-city Livingstone, Zambia. Anawana pointed out that in Livingstone, in contrast to Bergen, emerging artists were eager to participate due to the lack of art educational systems. At the time, Anawana was setting up the Livingstone Office for Contemporary Art (LoCA), a non-profit art research centre, and she anticipated that our workshop would foster critical thought within the artistic community. Over the course of an intensive ten-day workshop, *Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing* (see [Section 09](#) for more details on this activity), we explored alternative and Indigenous ways of thinking about knowledge and methods to deconstruct dominant colonial paradigms that drive art production in Livingstone's art scene. With a group of emerging Zambian artists, we created for the first time a series of podcasts²⁸ about our lives in Livingstone, stimulating collective discussions about what matters in art-making processes. This project engaged with decolonial practices by celebrating Indigenous knowledge and insisting on the importance of local art in its historical and contemporary expressions.

During one workshop, Anawana brought along a group of elders to play a series of language games with us. Bringing a group of elders, which included Anawana's mother and her friends, opened a performative space. They shared their traditional Zambian culture by playing and even dancing, giving the younger participants lessons derived from experiential knowledge. One of the elderly women explained a logic game called *Icho, Chise*. She explained that *Icho* in Bemba language means "there it comes" which is a way for the player to invite others to participate in the game. The persons accepting the call answer *Chise*, "let it come". In one of my conversations with Anawana about the outcomes of our workshop, she described that these kind of exchanges "are logic-games in which situations or propositions are brought up among peers, who together investigate the problem to come up with a fitting solution. [...] The answer is not based on hierarchy, and every solution is scrutinised and eliminated before the propounder picks the most compelling answer." (Haloba 2021). On that day, we sat in a circle and one of the elders shared a clue (for example, "a house without a door"). Each person guessed the answer until the winner found the solution (in this case, it was "an egg"). One of the elders

²⁸ You can listen to the podcasts at this link:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/tuning-in-other-ways-of-seeing/id1546695364>

explained to me after the workshop that such games had given them a way of sharing their culture when it had been prohibited during the British colonial period (1890s-1964). During colonialism, the clues were not merely a game, but a disguised tool for resistance: they helped to disguise real intentions from the colonial authorities. The *Icho, Chise* game is an example of a tool for resistance used by the oppressed in the shape of reversed discourses (Vinthagen and Lilja 2020) that would be overlooked by the colonial powers. As Howard Caygill (2013) explains, *resistance* is associated with concepts such as repression, reform, and revolution in its relation, response, challenge, and negotiation of power. Games imply strategy, opposition, or even struggle, which relates to communal friendship and neoliberal participation insofar as they install a set of rules governing relationships.

Let me mention another example. Nelson Sisi, one of the workshop participants, told me about a trick that young *Zambians* use to avoid deception and mockery when flirting unsuccessfully. Called *Fwaizo Botkanizo*, this approach consists of contradictory speech where you want something but you refuse it aloud to confuse the other (or the enemy). “To want but refuse”, as Nelson put it, is an approach for negotiating with power structures by disguising your real desires or intentions. This approach is similar to a reflexive practice of communal friendship insofar as it draws on Roberto DaMatta’s conception of “syncretism” which suggests the cohabitation of incompatible elements/systems (DaMatta 1984).

My work is precisely interested in resistance from the Other (the colonised, subaltern, oppressed, marginalised, etc.). The games that were (and still are) systems of resistance rely on strategies that enable communities to coexist (or *convivir*, as I developed in my previous section) with incompatibilities or contradictions. My interest in these tools of resistance that rely on modes of *convivir* with polarised logics explain why my artistic work and research has been drawn toward decolonial theories. As I have explained in the preceding subsection, the concept of communal friendship brings borders into the discussion; it makes visible the borders of things that at first appear incompatible. The fundamental base of a reflexive communal friendship is finding ways to navigate with power dynamics to move away from alienating neoliberal participation. It is about negotiating reciprocity even if there is an unequal balance of power. This quest requires an approach of praxis (Freire 2017), involving an ongoing

learning through action, reflection, and change that can be done through dialogue. The workshop engaged all of us in finding ways to challenge the dominant (colonised) paradigms that are in place in Livingstone by exploring Indigenous ways of thinking about knowledge and methods such as the *Tcho Chizin*. Making podcasts allowed us to get together and implement these alternative ways of thinking to question our ways of living and of making art.

Communal Friendship and Dialogue

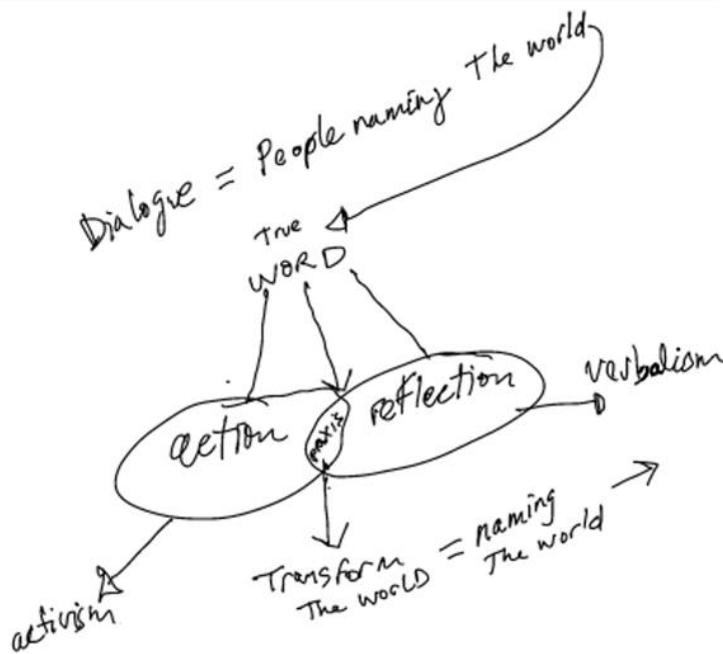


Figure 33. Personal diagram of Freire's Dialogue, 2019, drawing

The word is the essence of dialogue. True words, made of reflection and action, transform the world. A true word without action is changed into an alienating verbalism. There is no transformation without action. A true word without reflection is converted into activism, which makes dialogue impossible. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. **Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming.** Dialogue is an **encounter** between people in order to name the world. It is an existential necessity. Adapted extracts of Freire (2017, 60), emphasis mine.

The generosity and engagement of the participants in the Zambia workshop *Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing* was fulfilling. The workshop allowed us to challenge dominant discourses by applying decolonial concepts such as critical consciousness (Freire 2017). On a more personal level, I felt that I was helping, giving, and receiving. However, my stay also made me reconsider my fundamental conduct as an artist and a communal friend. While the journey allowed me to

rethink neoliberal participation, Freire's concept of dialogue opens other ways of seeing my contribution in the workshop.

Learning how to make a podcast together for the first time meant being aware of and learning from each other's differences. This is especially important when you are considered an *Mzungu* (someone with white skin) in a Black African country. This imposed Whiteness prompted me to ask myself how I could advocate for a transition from the term participant to friend in such a context, given that my difference represented a history of abusive power. Could the Zambians and I be communal friends? Furthermore, how could I acknowledge and navigate the unbalanced "power-geometry" (Massey 1993) and the limits of friendship in this context, given my position as an internationally nomadic artist whose mobility depended on the immobility of the participants?



Figure 34. Mr Chimba and Mr Kopeka making an audio recording during the workshop Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing, 2019, drawing from the photo by Romeo Gongora

My overall PhD research hinges on critical self-examination and the practices of humility and listening. The practice of (un)learning was particularly important in situations related to the ethics of documenting the workshop. On the first day, we asked the participants for consent in

documenting the workshop and distributing the podcasts for publicity purposes. They gave their consent in writing. Yet, problems started when I selected a photo for the publicity of the workshop: two people (Mr Chimba and Mr Kopeka) recording the podcast in the backyard of the Livingstone National Art Gallery. Instead of the usual photo displaying a group of people within the white walls of the classroom or gallery, I spontaneously chose this photo for its aesthetic quality of presenting two people in action, concentrated on their task of audio recording against the backdrop of a dry field. I thought it was an interesting photo to represent a workshop in Zambia. I remember having stepped out of the air-conditioned gallery and seeing Mr Chimba and Mr Kopeka working under the hot sun. While taking the photo, I was wondering how they could work in such boiling hot conditions, when a group of wild elephants had passed by the same field half an hour before.

When I started using the photo for the publicity of the workshop, my colleague Anawana confronted me on the visual ethics of my practice and my lack of consideration for the people in the photo. She prompted me to consider my ethics as a *Mzungu* in relation to the people I was depicting. She criticised and challenged my ethics, slowly revealing her opinion without clearly stating it. I was in shock when I understood that she was implying that the photo I had selected exoticised the people and the workshop. At first, I felt that her comments were ridiculous, but she kept insisting on the point, which irritated me. That evening, I went to sleep thinking about how difficult it was to represent people without being criticised in one way or another. Nevertheless, the next morning, when I was able to see the situation from my friend's point of view, I realised the necessity of learning to unlearn. In this case, I needed to unlearn my automatic behaviour that objectified the participant and to learn to acknowledge my own privilege and the complex social constructions of race and histories of representation. I asked myself whether I would have selected this photo if the participants were my friends. My answer was yes. The participants gave their consent for the documentation of the workshop. However, the problem was who was taking the photo (an *Mzungu* in Zambia) and who would be looking at it (the Western world). The photo was problematic insofar as it contributed to racialised histories of representation. I was able to learn because Anawana was my friend and she trusted me enough to speak honestly and to confront me, to *speaking truth to power*.

This experience illustrates the unequal power I had as a visiting Mzungu artist, starting with my mobility (Massey 1993, 62). When power and privilege are present, situations can become complex despite the best of intentions. My experience as a nomadic artist engaging in participatory works is related to Rosi Braidotti's analysis on the "nomadic subject" (2012). If mobility intensifies power differences and other forms of structural inequality, Braidotti argues for a non-unitary subject, one that is always in a state of becoming and situated, i.e., embedded and embodied, within an ongoing politically and ethically informed reading of the present. Furthermore, this experience complexifies my initial claim of engaging with decolonial practices. It highlights the constant risks of coloniality and the necessity of valuing honesty and integrity by sharing power and resources. From this example I learned that to improve my decolonial practice I must establish an ongoing dialogue with collaborators in my art projects. This requires working together with participants to both identify problems and find solutions in order to understand the ethics and histories of racial representation in the unique contexts of specific locations.

Communal Friendship and Terms of Participation

Combined with the politics of participation in art, racial representation is a particularly complex issue. Paradoxically, after unintentionally reproducing the White colonial gaze in Zambia, I have been categorised as a racialised artist on the other side of the world (Montreal). This has prompted me to reflect on issues such as tokenism, relational identity and intersubjectivity, this time not only in relation to the participants, but also to myself.

In the summer of 2019, I was invited to contribute a two-year series of essays exploring cultural diversity for a Quebec art magazine. For the first essay, *How Can We Work Together to Tackle Racial Injustice?* (see [Section 11](#) for more details), I was commissioned to produce a critical reflection piece about the current buzz around cultural diversity in art institutions, and more specifically in the Quebec visual art scene. The first draft that I sent to the director was not well received. After long negotiations with the magazine and meetings of their committee, the director and the board committee refused the initial version of my text because of issues related to the language and writing style. Paradoxically, the magazine's refusal embodied some of the very critiques I wrote about in my essay. For example, my article challenged readers to think

about how racial participants have been instrumentalised under the cultural politics of diversity. I called for us to set our own terms and conditions for participation to avoid tokenism. The editors proposed to postpone the publication for the following edition with compulsory amendments.

This experience with the magazine enacted some of the very critiques I am troubled with here. Nirmal Puwar (2004) explores similar situations of endorsement and denial of racialised minorities by the hidden “rules of the game”, as theorised by the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu and Wacquant argue that the “rules of the game” inside an institution are never explicit and always changing, yet all players in the game believe it worth playing (*illusio*) (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98). Important for its success is the “feel of the game”, an understanding of the logic of the game inherited from past experiences of social conditioning (*habitus*) (Bourdieu 1990, 52–64). For newcomers and “space invaders”, i.e. the inside/outside position of racialised minorities inside organisations (Puwar 2004), success depends on the social capital they can draw upon. Social capital, argues Bourdieu, is a symbolic process of acknowledgment and recognition through the network of personal relation. Moreover, Bourdieu claims that the art world is an especially intense space of symbolic power, particularly in relationship to questions of distinction and taste (Bourdieu 2012; 2009; Grenfell and Hardy 2007). Nevertheless, my “social capital”, obtained through my institutionalised recognition and the endorsement of my peers, was not sufficient. My methodology did not use or “speak the imperial-legitimate language” (Puwar 2004, 119), the distant “we” that was commonly used by the magazine. Furthermore, my choice of English was a bad move in the intercultural Quebec where French language matters. As Puwar argues, “we witness a number of policy initiatives under the banner of ‘diversity’, the ‘guarded’ tolerance in the desire for difference carries in the unspoken small print of assimilation a ‘drive for sameness’” (Puwar 2004, 124).

However, after careful consideration, I decided to cease my collaboration with the magazine as contributing would have required that I explain the choice of my biographical writing style, justify my choice of language and, once again, educate. I do not regret not playing by the *rules of the game*. However, this example shows that we, the art magazine, and I, failed to confront systemic racism and the bureaucracies (including editorial policy) that maintain it. It would

have required a willingness from both sides to (un)learn. It echoes an ongoing discussion with my peers of Goldsmiths' Racialised Postgraduate Network (GRPN)²⁹ where we refuse to take (sole) responsibility for the individuals' education and accountability regarding learning to tackle racism.

My experience shows that we, non-White and White subjects, must collaboratively rethink the terms and conditions of participation under which we contribute together, beyond the tokenistic (and commodified) ways implemented by the cultural and institutional politics of diversities in the western neoliberal context. This is especially the case with participatory (art) projects that engage non-White people, whom White people often lead and instrumentalise under the institutional terms equity, diversity, and inclusion. I want to be careful of using the terms non-White and White, as it can oversimplify the complexity of the problem. As June Ying Yee (2008) argues, the categories of “non-White” and “White” people risk installing a “false binary approach that denies the complexity of Whiteness as encompassing an intersectionality of social locations other than race; they note that Whiteness can also include privileges based on gender, class, ability/disability, and sexual orientation.” (Yee, 2008) In this case, it is helpful to unpack “Whiteness” as a category, especially in relation to my shifting relationship to Whiteness during my workshop in Livingstone (Zambia). Whiteness is a social and cultural construction that ideologically and institutionally situates White people in a place of power and privilege because of their skin colour and White racial identity (Yee, 2008). White identity and the West are often conflated in the idea of Whiteness, a metaphorical trope that carries themes such as of invisibility, normativity, neutrality, colour-blindness, and racism.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed (2012), bell hooks (1992) and Nirmal Puwar (2004), my article examines decolonial strategies for racialised participation in art such as negotiating the terms and conditions of participation with mutual respect, reciprocity and sharing power. Similarly to the critical voices on decolonisation in the art world (Kassim 2017; Marboeuf 2018), my article called for criticality towards art institutions proclaiming a commitment to ‘diversity’. Ahmed

²⁹ GRPN was founded in 2017 and it is a Goldsmiths Student Society which came together to support the interests, wellbeing, and productivity of racialised doctoral and master's students.

(2012, 11) argues that the policies of cultural diversity can become a substitute for action, so reconsidering its terms of participation is essential in order to take an active part in reshaping together the wider *discourse* around racialised participation in relation to systemic racism, institutional status quo and structural inequalities. Using a decolonial approach, my article proposed to understand discourse as involving not only our thinking and the words we speak, but also our senses and emotions. Whiteness as a social construction not only perturbs the discursive and institutional spheres (Yee 2008), but also the affects, perceptions, and emotions that model subjectivities. Personal stories that involve not only our “rational” thinking, but also our affect and subjectivity (such as mine and other racialised artists’ before me) are essential to decolonising the wider discourse around “racialised participation” on the levels of both theory and practice. In sharing our stories, we move towards the decolonisation of the ways we experience, produce, and evaluate art. We – non-White and White subjects – need to examine how questions of (colonial) power and participation are shaped. This requires an ongoing willingness to change and involves a constant praxis of reflection and action. Reflecting on sharing and giving power is at the core of a reflexive practice of communal friendship that can help change our neoliberal participation.

Communal Friendship and (Power) Sharing

Aiming to reflect on the modalities of neoliberal participation in art with fellow artists and community-workers, the researcher Becky Seale and I have been recording *Communities in the Making*, a series of five podcasts³⁰ focused on learning from the PA commission we did in the Bromley by Bow Centre (BbBC) in East London. The project engaged former participants of the BbBC workshop in conversation, asking their input on the issues they experienced during their own participation in community art projects. As mentioned above, members of this group had experienced disappointments and a build-up of tokenism. Engaging people who are directly

³⁰ The series of five podcasts is available at this link:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/communities-in-the-making/id1555629042>

affected by community art projects – people that we usually talk about rather than collectively address – is a decolonial praxis (Dei 2019) that I embraced in my work now. My research has advanced my artistic practice through this finding as I have since taken particular care to engage people directly involved.

In one of the first podcasts, *Are we Friends? A Focus on the Relationships That Make the Project*³¹ (see [Section 10](#) for more details), we examined the difference between ‘participant’ and ‘friend’ specifically in relation to the issue of sharing and giving power. Becky and I asked Rev. James Olanipekun, Alison Neville, Eddie Colaxis, and Desmond McLaren (all former members of the workshop) to reflect on the nature of relationships developed during our project in comparison to broader critiques of unequal power relations that exist in various modes of participation in the art and health sectors. The encounter allowed us to exchange and I was able to hear what the people I had worked with had to say about some key aspects of my PhD research. Becky and I had to adapt our academic language since Alison, Eddie, and Desmond were not familiar with our abstract and theoretical terms.

The podcast allowed us to analyse the notion of *participant*. In the last part of the episode, when we asked what relationships we built during the workshop, Rev. James said: “*with this [BbBC] project, it’s more partnership because the researchers are heading for something, the respondents are there because they want to see a change. It’s beyond being a participant. If it was just participant, I will not be seated here today still continuing. A partner is continuous.*” Alison then emphasised the distinction of partnership between participant and friend: “*For me to have a friend is you got to be a friend: supporting, listening, and helping. With participation, you get that in a different way: once it’s finished you go separate ways, with a friend you will stay in contact.*” Becky and I asked if the language we used made a difference. Rev. James replied, “*the words do matter because they bring accomplishments, [...] because the way you describe something or somebody is the way you get it back.*” His comment pointed out one of my previous findings that the label “participant” is potentially alienating for the person who is

³¹ You can listen to this episode at this link:
<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/episode-2-are-we-friends-a-focus-on-the/id1555629042?i=1000515785936>

so defined. Framing the discussion in relation to unequal power relations in the context of art and health, Becky then asked if the term participant: *“has there something to do with power? Rev. James you were talking of reframing participant as partner because in a partnership you give and you get something back. It’s like what you were saying Alison, to be a friend you have to be a friend and give back. I wonder if with participants there is a sense of I am here and you giving to me, it’s not going both ways because there is no trust.”* Rev. James replied, *“Gain trust, gain confidence, then you can become friends.”* Desmond would later add that in the BbBC project *“we became friends, it is a title that needs to be earned. We can’t just use it in any way we want.”*

A take-away of this session was when Alison and Rev. James emphasised how a sense of listening, sharing, and giving during and after the BbBC PA workshop fostered a friendship between us. As Becky summarised at the end of the recording in the wooden room of the BbBC, *“friendship happens outside of the work we are doing together”*. Rev. James added that even if the art project is finished, *“we are here, still connected, I could have said I am busy but because I know I am meeting friends [I am here,] friendship can be worn far away”*. This makes me believe that they accepted our invitation to be in the podcast because of a spirit of communal friendship; otherwise, they would not have participated.

These comments by Alison, Becky and Rev James, which you can listen to in the podcast, suggest that to step away from neoliberal participation requires time and a continuing relationship. A key implication of that kind of relationship takes shape in terms of your engagement. I was aware that none of our guests were paid for their presence, time, or travel. Some of them were categorised as being part of a low-income group and used a walking aid, yet they arrived half an hour early. What motivated them to engage with such solidarity, when common sense might expect money to be the primary driver when you have low or no income? Perhaps engagement, sharing, and giving make people feel good. Perhaps the participation gave them a meaningful purpose for the day; perhaps it was the belief that we can collectively transform our communities. By *helping* each other once again, the recording of the podcast reinforced the bond initially developed during the BbBC workshop between Becky, Rev. James,

Alison, Eddie, Desmond and myself, reiterating the concept of communal friendship I expanded on earlier.

Alison, Desmond, Rev. James, Becky, and Eddie's contribution in the discussion helped confirm and expand the grammar of communal friendship, offering the vocabulary of partnership, trust, helping, continuity, support, listening, generosity, reciprocity and sharing (words that they used during the podcast). As Rev. James stressed, "*words do matter because they bring accomplishments*". All these terms relate to the principles of relationality, interconnection, and interdependence, echoing in many ways the decolonial thinking that denaturalises power (Dei 2019). Including the opinions of the participants in the podcast might seem easy. Yet it required moving away from a superficial and instrumentalising form of participation, the willingness to be challenged and changed, as well as learning to hear/listen and giving the participants their space.

The fact that Becky and I returned to record a podcast with our BbBC comrades a year after the end of the workshops created the opportunity to reflect on our experience and to continue working together. Yet the podcast also reversed the initial power positions. While the documentation of my first-year practice allowed for a critical analysis of the workshops, I took the position of a researcher in front of an "object of research". Paradoxically, in the early part of my research I criticised the "objectification of the informant" (Hastrup 1992). In parallel, I received criticism from my supervisors and examiners that I had not sufficiently included the voice of the participants in my research project. Learning from that stance, I felt the need to shift my standpoint from researcher examining a collective to one that returned to the community, by offering to the BbBC workshop's participants the opportunity to take part in the discussion and to include their views in my research. A key lesson of this experience is that the sharing of power at the centre of a reflexive communal friendship involves distributed agency as well.

Key Ideas on Communal Friendship

In conclusion, the co-founding of the Arts Research Centre in Cultural ~~Diversities~~ offered a space of dialogue to critically rethink a reflexive practice of communal friendship by including

the inputs of people impacted by these issues. This platform emerged from my need to take note of other voices, a criticism that was raised for my first part of the research. Thus, the selection of activities conducted by the Centre and presented in this chapter permitted me to discover that moving away from neoliberal participation requires a distribution of power and agency through self-criticality and an ongoing examination of (my) various positions of power. One of the main lessons is the willingness to go back and forth between reflection and action. This chapter challenged me to re-examine some findings and assumptions outlined in my first section, regarding decolonisation and tokenism. My difficulties in being a communal friend gave me tools for developing better PA projects as a nomadic artist.

A first outcome was my recognition of the need to maintain awareness of the historically loaded term decolonisation. This brought me to define anticolonialism, decolonialisation and decoloniality, and to ponder on their implications for my work as an artist of Guatemalan origin. In this regard, critical attention to the intersubjectivities of my situation will help me to avoid decontextualising Latino culture and enacting cultural appropriation. I then reflected on different strategies and tools of resistance in Zambia, relating this to the communal friend that navigates through neoliberal participation. My journey in Zambia highlighted the complexities of racial representation and the need to think about my own subjectivities as an artist in the field, such as being a White subject doing a temporary project in Zambia. I explored the necessity of dialogue, which is possible through friendship. This brought me to acknowledge the complexities of racial participation and the need to work together in terms of our participation to enable change. This involves not only sharing and giving power but also continuing to listen.

In this section, I exposed several contradictory situations putting into question my privileged position as an internationally mobile artist. Any definite answers to unsettling questions concerning power relations are beyond the scope of this work. Rather than providing answers, my text offers a reflexive approach to my own experience and demonstrates that even with the best intentions and a decolonial approach, an artist such as myself can still reproduce colonising behaviour. This array of complex situations proves that when privilege is present, there is no easy solution for a genuine participation that involves sharing power. My responsibility as an

artist is then to understand, acknowledge, and expose those complexities. In this regard, I will be using the outcomes of this section and the key concept of communal friendship to develop my final art project and my reflexive diary.

In the following sections, I will present documentation of my research-based art practice through five projects organised by the Arts Research Centre in Cultural Diversities that I cofounded in 2019. As I mentioned, the Centre offers an experiential platform for defining and critically questioning key concepts of a reflexive communal friendship such as friendship, participation, cultural diversities, racial representation, and decoloniality.

My intention behind the Centre was to include in the discussion the input of the various stakeholders who were involved in my research. By inviting them to jointly reflect on the key issues of my research, I wanted to shift the power relations between the researcher/artist and the informant/participant I had during my doctoral stage. As mentioned, the first part culminated in a critique of the *Community in the Making* project where I had a participant-observer approach as an outsider. This new portion puts forward different projects, such as conferences, workshops, and audio interviews, where my degrees of power as a researcher/artist and positions as an insider varies. These projects resulted also from other key learnings I gained during the first part of my doctoral research, such as recognising my intersubjectivities and reflexivity as a researcher (Rooke 2010, 27) and the colonial relationship between the researcher/artist and the informant/participant.

As mentioned in my introduction, the following sections are descriptive. In [Section 13](#), I will reflect on the learnings I have made through practice and thus develop my research process to decolonise my/our approach to PA. The learnings so far have allowed me to see the need to engage in my own work the different stakeholders of my research. The following projects have evolved to address this shortcoming.

Section 08 – Project 02: *Art and Decolonisation in Guatemala*

Title

Art and Decolonisation in Guatemala: A Conversation with Lucia Ixchíu

Date

September 11, 2019, from 5.30 to 6.30 p.m.

Location

Le Manoir des beaux-arts
Montreal
Canada

Extended Credits

Conversation Guest Speaker: Lucia Ixchíu
Conversation Host: Romeo Gongora

Event Coordinators (Concept and Research): Romeo Gongora and Lucia Ixchíu
Event Coordinator (Organisation): Romeo Gongora
Documentation (Audio and Photo): Romeo Gongora and Ellen Vanderstraeten

Funding: Faculté des arts de l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)
Acknowledgement: The video and audio material were generously supplied by Le Manoir des beaux-arts

Audience

Staff and Master's students from the École des arts visuels et médiatiques (UQAM) and residents

Website

<https://cardcarccd.wixsite.com/cardc/post/11th-september-art-and-decolonization-in-guatemala-a-conversation-with-lucia-ixchi>

Overview

A discussion on art and decolonisation in Guatemala between the activist artist Maya K'iche Lucia Ixchíu and Romeo Gongora. The encounter addressed the socio-political context of Guatemala and the challenges of making artistic interventions with a decolonial approach. The conversation was followed by a Maya K'iche ritual.

Key Ideas

Decoloniality as a state of being, anticolonisation and decolonisation, border thinking

Contributing voices

In this project, Lucia Ixchíu proposed and performed the ritual at the end. My input consisted in organising and facilitating the conversation. I chose the questions, discussing them previously with Lucia. No audio recording is available for this event because of a technical error. The event was only documented with photos, with permission from Lucia Ixchíu and the public.

Documentation

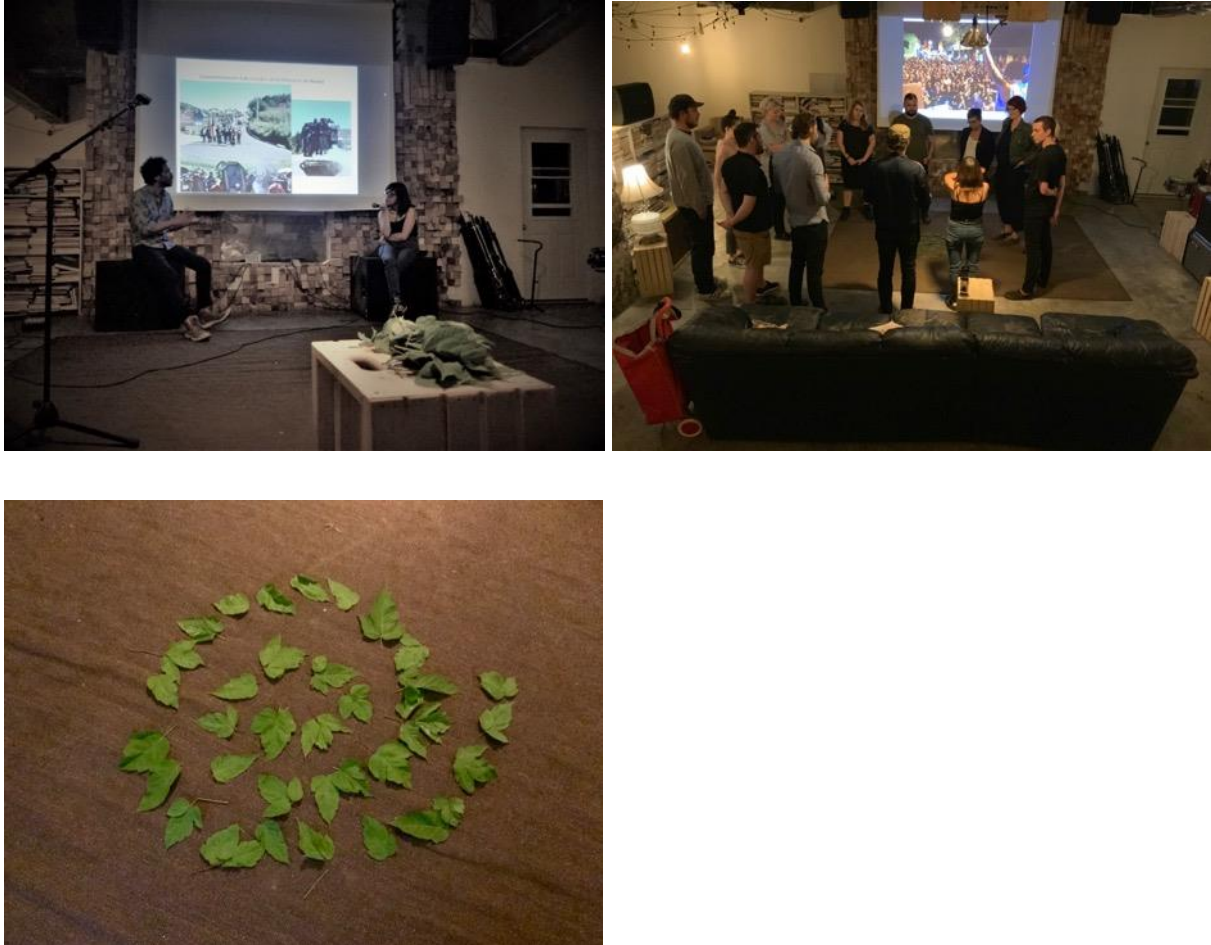


Figure 35. Various views from the conversation and the ritual, 2019, photo: Ellen Vanderstraeten

Section 09 – Project 03: *Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing*

Title

Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing

Dates

July 29 to August 10, 2019

Locations

Livingstone Office for Contemporary Art (LoCA)
Livingstone
Zambia

Livingstone National Art Gallery
Livingstone
Zambia

Extended Credits

Workshop Participants: Winston Chola Chilumba, Chansa Chishimba, Bernard Kopeka, Samuel Manduli, Alumedu Maonde, Dumisani Moyo, Arnold Mubita, Sunga Mwila, Sisi Nelson, Jeff Nkata, Dominic Nshimba, Augustine Sikambala, Kangwa Yombwe, Yande Yombwe

Workshop Coordinators (Concept and Research): Romeo Gongora and Anawana Haloba

Workshop Coordinator (Organisation): Anawana Haloba

Workshop Coordinators Assistants (Organisation): Dominic Nshimba and Sisi Nelson

Workshop Facilitators: Romeo Gongora and Anawana Haloba

Documentation (Audio and Photo): Romeo Gongora and Dominic Nshimba

Podcasters: Winston Chola Chilumba, Chansa Chishimba, Romeo Gongora, Anawana Haloba, Bernard Kopeka, Arnold Mubita, Sunga Mwila, Sisi Nelson, Jeff Nkata, Dominic Nshimba, Kangwa Yombwe, Yande Yombwe

Podcast Coordinator (Organisation): Romeo Gongora

Podcast Developer (Encoding and Distribution): Alex Marchand

Funding: *Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing* was commissioned by the Livingstone Office for Contemporary Art (LoCA) and presented at the Livingstone National Art Gallery.

Acknowledgement: *Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing* is part of the LoCA Mini-Lab programme, an intensive 3-4 week interdisciplinary workshop held annually. Anawana Haloba is the founder and coordinator of the Livingstone Office for Contemporary Art (LoCA). The chairs were generously supplied by Wayi Wayi Art Studio.

Podcast

Access to the podcast on Apple Podcasts:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/tuning-in-other-ways-of-seeing/id1546695364>

Overview

Tuning-In: Other Ways of Seeing was an intensive ten-day workshop that took place in Livingstone, Zambia. The workshop explored alternative and Indigenous ways of thinking with a group of emerging Zambian artists, giving them tools to create a series of podcasts rethinking Zambia's contemporary life. Through individual and collective exercises guided by Anawana Haloba and Romeo Gongora, the participants explored how to conceptualise, produce, and broadcast a podcast.

Key Ideas

Dialogue, art and critical pedagogy, ethics for documentation, alternative systems of thought, resistance systems.

Suggested bibliography

Fanon, Frantz. 1999. *Les damnés de la terre*. Edited by Gérard Chaliand. Collection Folio Actuel 25. Paris: Gallimard.

Freire, Paulo. 2017. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin Books.

Contributing voices

In this project, each podcast was conceptualised and produced by the participants with the support of Anawana Haloba and me. You can see the credits for each podcast and take note of the participants' input through the link I provided above. My input consisted of conceptualising, organising, and facilitating the workshop in collaboration with Anawana Haloba. The event was photo documented by me with the permission of the people involved in the project.

Documentation





Figure 36. Various views from the workshop and the logo, 2019

Section 10 – Project 04: *Communities in the Making: Are We Friends?*

Title

Communities in the Making: Are We Friends? A Focus on the Relationships that Make the Project

Date

February 26, 2020

Location

Bromley by Bow Centre
St Leonard's St, Bromley By Bow
London E3 3BT, UK

Extended Credits

Podcast Guests: Rev. Eddie Colaxis, and Desmond McLaren Alison Neville, and James Olanipekun
Podcast Hosts: Romeo Gongora and Becky Seale
Podcast Coordinators (Concept and Research): Romeo Gongora and Becky Seale
Podcast Coordinators (Organisation): Romeo Gongora and Becky Seale
Podcast Developer (Audio Editing, Encoding and Distribution): Alex Marchand
Documentation (Audio and Photo): Romeo Gongora

Funding: Faculté des arts de l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)

Acknowledgement: The podcast recording space was generously supplied by Bromley by Bow Centre.

Target audience

Artists, academics, community organisers, artists/researchers who have never worked with communities before, and staff from the Bromley by Bow Centre.

Podcast

Access to the podcast on Apple Podcasts:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/communities-in-the-making/id1555629042?i=1000515785936>

Access to the podcast on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/12odyM6i0nWobfWRKp3FHB?si=u0IVxcZ7Q7W0KJng6kWOFA&nd=1>

Overview

Are We Friends? A Focus on the Relationships that Make the Project is a podcast episode by Becky Seale and Romeo Gongora that explores the many relationships happening in participatory art (PA) projects involving the community. In this episode,

guests Rev. James Olanipekun, Alison Neville, Eddie Colaxis, and Desmond McLaren ponder on relationships between the organisers themselves, between the organisers and the people who participate, as well as between the participants themselves.

Key Ideas

“Communal” friendship, participation, power, sharing

Credits

Supported by the Bromley by Bow Centre and Faculté des arts de l’Université du Québec à Montréal

Contributing voices

In this project, you can take note of the input from guests within the audio episode in the link I provided above. The episode was audio edited and broadcasted by Alex Marchand with the support of Becky Seale and me. The event was photo documented by me with the permission of the people involved in the project. My input consisted of conceptualising, organising, and facilitating the audio episode in collaboration with Becky Seale.

Documentation



Figure 37. Guests from the podcast episode Are We Friends? A Focus on the Relationships that Make the Project, 2020

Section 11 – Project 05: *How Can We Work Together to Tackle Racial Injustice*

Title

How Can We Work Together to Tackle Racial Injustice?

Dates

2020-2022 (cancelled)

Location

A Contemporary art magazine
Montreal
Canada

Extended Credits

Author Essay: Romeo Gongora
Editing: Stephanie Schwartz

Acknowledgement: I would like to acknowledge the following people Alison Rooke, Maya Rae Oppenheimer, Francine Couture and Dominique Fontaine for their reading and input.

Readers

French and English art readers from Quebec and internationally

Overview

A two-year collaboration with an art newspaper based in Montreal that consisted of writing a series of essays about/on/with cultural diversities. The director and the editorial committee refused my first essay that was inspired by parts of my written diary. After careful consideration, I decided to cease my collaboration with the magazine.

Keywords

Terms of participation, cultural diversity, tokenism

Contributing voices

In this project, the invitation and theme for the essay was made by the art newspaper. My input consisted of conceptualising and writing an essay. The essay was edited by Stephanie Schwartz. You can read the essay in the section documentation I provided hereafter.

Documentation

Here is the complete essay refused by the art magazine:

How Can We Work Together to Tackle Racial Injustice?

I recently returned to my hometown Tiohtiá:ke (Montréal³²) to begin a new position as Professor of Critical Approaches to Cultural Diversities at the École des arts visuels et médiatiques in the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). In the last months, my new duties prompted me to reflect on the term “diversity” which I hear a bit everywhere, often combined with the term inclusion, participation, integration and “vivre-ensemble”. My recent reflections were also stimulated by invitations to participate in a Montreal-based exhibition on Latin-American art in Canada and a round table on North-South cooperation in art residencies. This was in addition to being asked to contribute a book chapter (which I was pressured to accept in order to bring diversity among the other seven White authors) and to join an artist-run centre board for the same reason. And not least of all, I received the request by the magazine in your hands to open a discursive space on the meanings of “cultural diversity” in the (Quebec) art world. All those racialised invitations, as much I am honoured, oddly stigmatises my role. I wonder if by providing “a bit of the Other” as bell hooks would say and by creating a false impression of social inclusiveness, I am instrumentalising my role “in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo”, a White supremacy. So why did I accept to be tokenised in such way? Money? Fame? Power? I would lie if I said I had no other choice than accepting, but as I write, I realise that I would not have a job nor any projects to share my voice in key Montreal (cultural) institutions if I had refused those racialised participations.

My new duties at UQAM allowed the development of a new platform for critically rethinking the term “diversity”. I cofounded what I initially called *The Arts Research Centre In Cultural Diversities* in September 2019 during a Masters level seminar I led at UQAM. Our first class activity was to challenge the use of the institutional term “diversity” and to analyse its use and impacts in Western society. The discussions I had with my student-colleagues at the Centre regarding the terms and conditions of diversities in Western (and Quebec) art worlds, triggered memories of the beginning of my career as an artist in Quebec.



Photo: My siblings in the backyard, Mile End (Montreal), 1982

³² Tiohtiá:ke (Montreal) is located on unceded Indigenous lands and the Kanien'kehá:ka (Ga-niyen-gé-haa-ga) Nation is recognised as the custodians of these lands and waters.

I was raised in the historic immigrant neighbourhood of Mile End by my Guatemalan parents who were part of the first wave of the Latin-American diaspora, having fled Guatemala in the 1970s; they did so not in response to the CIA's disruption of their country's social framework, but out of economic need. At the end of high school, I still hear my parents' disappointment when I told them that I wanted to be an artist. With their many sacrifices to uproot the family and position us children for success, my parents hoped that I would take a profitable job as an engineer or nurse. They subtly resisted my aspirations for a long time and so did I, by internalising a sense of indebtedness to them. In my early years at university, I carried around a brown leather briefcase and I told whoever asked that I was studying accounting. I remember the bizarre confusion of the renowned abstract painter Jean McEwen when I took out my brushes and tubes of paint from my briefcase during his studio class at Concordia University. I am not sure he was aware of what was going on in my mind as a second generation immigrant. Concealing our true desires from others and even ourselves is a reality shared by many Latinxs immigrants, as well as this sense of indebtedness that we carry since childhood. We learned to deprioritise our individualistic desires in the face of overarching family obligations. The economic factor is a good example; the prospective lack of jobs in arts is probably one reason why there are so few students of immigrant origin in the art departments of Quebec universities in my time and to this day. No statistics are available to back my claim but you only have to attend one of my classes to see the evidence.³³

My first solo exhibition in a professional, non-academic context was in an artist-run centre in 2006. I remember not being invited as a culturally diverse artist and that the gallery had a cracking wooden floor where it was once located in Montreal's historic Belgo Building. These creaking floors were symbolic of grassroots arts communities who sprung up during the decades when gallery space was affordable in Montreal's old buildings. However, as the American political theorist Wendy Brown argues, since the 1980s neoliberalism has transformed Western (visual arts) communities, bringing intensified class inequality, an ever-growing intimacy between corporate and finance capital and the state, fragmentation and commodification of culture, and the normalisation of market values in all social spheres³⁴. Artist friends have been renovicted in the last decade, their studios now inhabited by trendy design agencies or call centres. Artist-run centres have gone from cracking wood floors to greyish cement surfaces aspiring to compete with mini-museums and their clean white walls. Where is the subversive impulse of resistance by these organisations – initiated by

³³ For example, universities in Quebec do not collect race-based data as they consider it illegal, preventing any action to be taken. I am alarmed to observe in 2020 the absence of strategy in Quebec to deal with the visible lack of racial pluralism in (art) institutions, such as art departments in universities, by the collection and communication of demographic statistics or action plans that acknowledge or propose to deal with this lack. The UK has seen a wave of change such as in Goldsmiths, through the mobilisation of the student protest group Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA) that occupied part of the university during four months <https://www.gold.ac.uk/students/dth-protest-college-response/#d.en.554679>

³⁴ Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (First Edition). New York: Zone Books

Quebec artists in the 60s, the historical peak of artist collectives as social actors – in reaction to the commodification of art and the lack of opportunity to present experimental work? Nowadays, most of these galleries are marked by accentuating precariousness, trapped in bureaucracy constricted by a lack of staff and financial dependence on governmental grants. In parallel, arts granting agencies have not only put forward policies aimed at fostering private partnerships to compensate cuts to funding, but also installed a playground of policies “to promote and develop cultural diversity in the arts” since the early 1990s with the racial equity policies from the Canada Council for the Arts, the early 2000s with the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and its Plan d'action pour la diversité culturelle (information only available in French) and in the local scene with the Conseil des arts de Montreal and its Policy for the Promotion and Development of Cultural Diversity in the Arts, all those action plans have installed evaluation criteria that increases the chances of funding if you are/include “diverse” artists.

As Quebec’s art world has changed over recent decades, so has its relation to immigrants since early 2000, as the debates surrounding reasonable accommodations in 2007, the Charter of Quebec Values in 2013 and the new Act Respecting Laicity of the State - Bill 21 in 2019 clearly demonstrate. These controversies all rose in reaction to recurring tolerance problems in a Quebec society caught between Canadian multiculturalism and Quebec interculturalism. The main distinctions between both models, at least on paper, consist in the integration of ethnic groups under a common national identity through politics (multiculturalism) versus one through a common culture and French language (Quebec interculturalism).

While Quebec society was undergoing neoliberalisation and a resurgence of essentialist nationalism through governmental policies of discrimination, the visual arts community began a drastic turn to “cultural diversity” encouraged paradoxically by institutional grants such as Vivacité Montréal and the municipal policy from the Conseil des arts de Montreal. In the last 30 years, we have seen in the Western art world, and more specifically in the last 20 years in Quebec where I am located, a growing obsession with diversity and inclusiveness. This is evident in a crescendo of projects (exhibitions, residencies, grants, diversity awards) promoting the Other, from the categories of Black to Arab, to an assembly of all diversities through the concept of “One World”, and to, most recently, Latin-American.³⁵ But I also observe that in 2020, directors, established curators, board of trustees, and artists who serve in the major (Quebec) art institutions, and who decide what good³⁶ art/artists enters their premises, are predominantly White people. To clarify my statement, I draw on curator Andrea

³⁵ This also includes Canadian arts funding aimed at reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, a topic that deserves further study.

³⁶ Andrea Fontana argues that “the notion of excellence and its registers in western European art was a core issue that was contested in the 1980s and 1990s by First Nations artists and artists of colour. At the heart of this new debate on excellence are questions about who produces art in Canada and what constitutes art. The concept of excellence has been deployed as a benchmark of good art and invokes the register of European /western art as an exclusionary device.” Fontana. 2011. PhD Thesis, *Where Outreach Meets Outrage: Racial Equity policy formation at the Canada Council for the Arts (1989-1999)*.

Fatona's thesis in 2011 about the enduring impact of racial equity policies that emerged at the Canada Council for the Arts in the early 1990s on Canada's culturescape: "although significant transformations have occurred at the Canada Council for the Arts that have led to increased funding and visibility for racialised artists, Black artists remain almost invisible"³⁷. So how come visible minorities remain invisible in the (Quebec) art scene after such increasing racial equity policies promoted by the state? What will happen for us, racialised artists, when the trendiness (grants and awards) for diversities are exhausted in the (Quebec) art scene?



Photo: Romeo Gongora, exhibition "The Recipe: Making Latin-American Art in Canada" at OBORO, 2020

My concern is that this attraction of the (Quebec) art scene for the Other, the Latino in my case, just keeps instrumentalising and commodifying ethnic minorities under the name of diversity. I share bell hooks' fear regarding breakthroughs in the US during the 1990s in the acknowledgement of racial difference. She wrote that the "over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the White palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten"³⁸. hooks emphasises the colonising impulse that motivates the narrative fantasy of inclusiveness for the Other. Over this concern, we have to reconsider the terms of participation within Quebec's art system under the policies of cultural diversity, which by installing a superficial sense of inclusiveness, avoid genuine discussions around racism in the (arts) communities and prevent effective change. My question is then how can we work together to tackle racial injustice? As hooks argues "mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy" (371). As such, we must collaboratively rethink the politics of our participation in the Quebec art system, as majorities and minorities,

³⁷ Fatona. 2011. PhD Thesis, *Where Outreach Meets Outrage: Racial Equity policy formation at the Canada Council for the Arts (1989-1999)*.

³⁸ hooks, bell. 1992. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 380. Boston, MA: South End Press.

and consider the terms and conditions under which we contribute together, beyond the tokenistic way implemented by the politics of diversities.

The dialogue I hope to create by beginning this series of interventions in ----- seeks to work collaboratively to tackle questions of (colonial) power and its relationship with art and race by voicing the concerns of people directly involved. We, non-White and White subjects, must together take an active part in reshaping the wider discourse around "cultural diversities". This can occur on the levels of both theory and practice, not only to bring different perspectives, but also to shift or decolonise its terms. Discourse here involves not only our thinking and the words we speak, but also our senses and emotions. We need to examine how these are shaped in relation to racism and explore how they can be changed. Voices of the Other, and the stories of your own experiences, are essential for opening this conversation and making change.

Section 12 – Project 06: *The Dead Are Restless, They Speak!*

Title

The Dead Are Restless, They Speak!

Organisers

Anawana Haloba and Romeo Gongora

Dates

Public discussion: November 14, 2019, from 6 to 8 p.m.

Workshop: November 11, from 1 to 4 p.m., and November 12, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Location

Goldsmiths College
London
United Kingdom

Extended Credits

Public Discussion Guests: Francisco Carballo (Goldsmiths), Ros Gray (Goldsmiths), and Susanne Winterling (Trondheim Academy of Fine Art)

Public Discussion Hosts: Romeo Gongora and Anawana Haloba

Public Discussion Documentation (Audio and Photo): Romeo Gongora and Emily Perry

Workshop Participants: Alessandra Ferrini, Daniel Keller, Maria Kheirkhah, Emma Sjøvall

Workshop Facilitators: Romeo Gongora and Anawana Haloba, and Susanne Winterling

Workshop Documentation (Audio and Photo): Romeo Gongora

Public Discussion and Workshop Coordinators (Concept and Research): Romeo Gongora and Anawana Haloba

Workshop Coordinators (Organisation): Romeo Gongora and Anawana Haloba

Public Discussion Coordinators (Organisation): Romeo Gongora and Anawana Haloba

Funding: Goldsmiths' Mountain of Art Research (MARs) and Université du Québec à Montréal

Audience

Staff and students from Goldsmiths and University of Bergen, artists, and general public

Website

<https://cardcarccd.wixsite.com/cardc/copy-of-061119-1>

Overview

The Dead Are Restless, They Speak! consisted of a three-day workshop and a public discussion that brought together practitioners, scholars, and their public and, to critically engage with the writings of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire. The event explored how Fanon's and Freire's works can mediate and transform society.

Keywords

Art and radical pedagogy, decolonisation, critical consciousness

Contributing voices

In this project, you can hear the public discussion through the link I provided above. The event was documented by me with the permission of the people involved in the project. My input consisted of conceptualising, organising, and facilitating the event (public discussion and workshop) in collaboration with Anawana Haloba.

Documentation



Figure 38. Guests from the public discussion *The Dead Are Restless, They Speak!*, 2019





*Figure 39. Various views from the workshop *The Dead Are Restless, They Speak!*, 2019*

Section 13 – How My Practice and Research Evolved

During my third year (2019-2020), the activities that I engaged in through the Arts Research Centre in Cultural Diversities (ARCCD) allowed me to explore the tensions between neoliberal participation and communal friendship further. In [Section 07](#), I argued that moving away from the instrumentalising conditions of neoliberal participation in participatory art (PA) requires an ongoing willingness to change and to be changed by using a Freirean approach of praxis (Freire 2017), which involves a constant learning process through action and reflection. With this objective in mind, I examined my various positions of power, aiming at self-criticality and ongoing dialogue with the people involved in my projects.

During this time, my artistic participatory practice evolved in several ways. To begin with, I started addressing local histories and alternative ways of knowing, acting, and sensing. This took me from examining the realities (and ethos) of a decolonial art practice in contemporary Guatemala with Lucia Ixchú ([Project 02](#)) to working with a group of emerging Zambian artists in collaboration with the artist Anawana Haloba ([Project 03](#)). With these and other new projects that I undertook, my practice took a more action-oriented approach that is intrinsic to decoloniality. I paid attention to engaging people who were directly concerned with my research, instead of talking about them. Although I have been working towards social justice and making artworks with and about immigrants in marginal contexts since 1998, the decolonial aspects of my practice had previously remained largely implicit. During the third year of my PhD, I sought to actively disentangle dominant colonial paradigms – something I had not yet been able to do with the Bromley by Bow project. [Projects 02](#) to [06](#) sought, each in their own way, to put the notion of communal friendship to practice.

These experiences showed that decolonial praxis is no easy task. Indeed, engaging participants and sharing power is not enough; an artistic and reflexive practice of communal friendship also requires seeing the situation or project from my friend's point of view, supporting, listening, and investing time in order to build mutual trust. My experiences have contributed to our understanding of the importance of ongoing dialogue, identifying problems with the people concerned and finding solutions together, dealing with issues related to resistance to the Other (the colonised, subaltern, immigrant, etc.), installing reciprocity even if there is an unequal

balance of power, and finally, acknowledging my own privilege and the complex social constructions of race and histories in (art) representation. These outcomes are useful for a participatory artist seeking to work with, in and for a multi-cultural context. In the following sections, I will continue to build upon these insights and address some of the shortcomings of the third-year projects.

4th YEAR (2020-2021)

Section 14 – Excavating *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*

Note to the reader: This section is marked by a particular context of loss and incertitude. The endless passage of time and life experiences continue to shape the meaning of my research, disrupting the conventional linear development of a project (Puwar 2020). In the last months since I started writing this section, a pandemic outbreak provoked a series of social distancing measures that radically affected the social space and had a major impact on participatory art (PA) practices. Once simple social behaviours like shaking hands or hugging a friend are nowadays potentially deadly and transgressive actions. This new situation requires flexibility for me to produce my final art project based on relationality.

In parallel, my two supervisors Kristen Kreider and Alison Rooke are leaving/retiring (have left/retired) from the university. As they have been the first “audience” to the evolution of my ideas for the last three years of my doctoral studies, their absence (to come) will definitely influence the layers of multiple voices hidden in my collective “I”. Since rewriting a new version of this section, I have been assigned Michael Newman and Nirmal Puwar as new supervisors. I am revealing these names, as I did in my first section, to show that this multi-layered “I” participating in the writing process brings uncertainties about how they will impact my academic research.

*In addition, in the wake of the massive global impact of the Black Lives Matters movement, I have been involved in creating antiracist committees at different levels at the *École des arts visuels et médiatiques*, the faculty union (*Syndicat des professeurs et professeures de l’Université du Québec à Montréal*) and, hopefully, the *Université du Québec à Montréal* administration. The disruption of the institutional status quo has been (is) met with resistance, all of which has provoked anxiety. The section that follows uses a continuous Freirean movement of praxis, involving a constant learning process through action, reflection, and change. Thus, the words to come are an encounter between practice and writing, between the action of making my final art project and the reflection on writing about it. In this regard, I have been using the outcomes of my previous sections and the key concept of communal friendship to engage my final art project with decolonial principles – such as using in my work*

notions of sharing, trust, continuity, support, listening, reciprocity, relationality, connecting, mutual interdependence, difference, displacement, resistance and inclusion of silenced histories.

The first steps of my practice-led doctoral research started with the long-term PA commission *Community in the Making* (2016-2018) at the Bromley by Bow Centre in London. With the local habitants, we would envision the future of their neighbourhood, using utopia as a method (Levitas 2013) while experiencing the pervasive effects of our neoliberal participation. I never thought that this twisted path would lead me, in 2020, to Montreal, Canada, creating an artwork revising knowledge from the past that could help redefine the way we/I inhabit our present.

My current practice-led research retraces the first wave of the Guatemalan diaspora in Quebec. I follow the traces of different Latin Americans who arrived in the early 1970s in Montreal (Canada). The work presents the realities of being an immigrant as well as changes that occurred in society and governmental immigration policies in Canada and Quebec since the 1970s. It is an ongoing project made of personal stories told through sound, moving image, text, and photos, exploring how Guatemalan immigrants adapted to living in Quebec and the new forms of Quebec identities that emerge from their experiences³⁹. As I learned through my last project, *Community in the Making*, navigating from the instrumentalising conditions of neoliberal participation to a reflexive communal friendship requires time, presence, and continuing relationship. In response, my current artwork is a form of open-ended research that relies on relationality developed through time and continuous presence. In the following paragraphs, I will explore this ongoing work in roughly two parts: the first part details its origins and engages with issues of reflexivity, oral history, social scenes; and the second part develops its methodology and the works produced through a series of portraits of my communal friends.

³⁹ You can listen to some of these experiences at this link: <https://clubtikalguatemala.com/tour/>

Catching Migration Stories

Back in Montreal in the summer of 2019, I met René Lara, a Guatemalan that had arrived in Montreal in 1970, around the same time as my parents. We have been in constant communication ever since that summer. First in person and then over the phone when the pandemic erupted, talking about how he knew my parents and me as a kid, about the first wave of the Guatemalan diaspora that arrived in Quebec in the early 1970s, and the life of an immigrant at that time in Quebec. Talking with him made me aware that the acquaintances who surrounded me in my childhood are slowly disappearing along with their historical knowledge. In the natural flow of the discussions with René, I proposed to investigate (t)his legacy. By word-of-mouth, I was introduced to some of these long-settled migrants⁴⁰ and their memories. Most of the people I spoke with knew my parents from close or far, showing how tightly knit and small the Guatemalan diaspora community was in the early 1980s. I conducted biographical interviews and informal conversations with some of them, thereby slowly giving shape to my practice-led doctoral artwork. René would call me to put me in touch with Ismael Recinos or José de Oliva; Ismael would then put me in touch with Santiago Franco, and so on, building my research through an organic snowball method.

Despite the slow pace, my research sometimes feels like a relay race. René's recent phone calls informed me of the death of Josefa Diaz, known as Dona Chepita, our 102-year-old Guatemalan "ambassador" famous for her small height and long hair down to her feet. More recently still, René told me about the death of Adriana Ramirez, a devoted Christian and "Cursillista⁴¹" figure of the Latinx church community in Montreal. Both women are clearly rooted in my childhood memories and their deaths are a reminder of the significance of archiving their stories. Seeing René's name on my phone has started to instill fear, as it comes with a reminder that the clock is ticking for the Guatemalan elderly who saw me grow up. The slow and irremediable loss of these migration stories makes me realise how the body is an archive and a transmitter. In her analysis of carrying as a method, Nirmal Puwar reflects "on processes entailed in carrying

⁴⁰ I no longer refer to my acquaintances as migrants since I feel that this institutional term is negatively loaded and objectifies them.

⁴¹ An apostolic movement of the Catholic Church.

projects inter-generationally, across time and space, involving listening to the body as an archive” (2020, 2). Archiving these stories from an auto-ethnographic standpoint, as a Canadian born to immigrant Guatemalan parents, is not only about analysing or producing an archive, but also about continuing its inter-generational displacement in me. It feels essential to record this past while it is still possible.

Reflexivity as an Insider-Outsider

Being back in touch with the community in which I grew up has brought me mixed emotions. My position as a native in the community I am researching sets me in a complicated system of power, debt, and guilt, evoking ideas of mutuality, equality, difference, otherness, hierarchy, and sameness (Portelli 1991a, 31). The people involved in my practice-led doctoral artwork knew me as a child. One of the reasons they might be engaging in my research is duty linked to their past relationships with my father. My calls with some of them seem to confirm this, as they never fail to send their greetings to my father (René would usually say “*Me saludas a tu papa*”) although they have not spoken with him for a decade. For them, I am also someone who went away and returned with increased social capital. I represent a hybrid figure with power, at once a child, a family member, an academic researcher, an artist, and a friend. Indeed, the concept of friendship can imply a power relationship (so being a reflexive communal friend involves self-examination and making visible my/our various positions of power). My status is in constant mutation, requiring me to have an acute awareness of the power dynamics involved. Interestingly, during the duration of my doctoral research, I went from being an outsider in the Bromley by Bow project to an insider-outsider within my current artwork.

In adopting an auto-ethnographic approach involving participant observation in a community I grew up with, I am conscious of my contradictory position of authority and vulnerability. My first chapter engaged in criticisms of ethnographic methodologies and debates on reflexive anthropology (Behar 1996; Hastrup 1992; Rooke 2010). The capacity to move back and forth between these contradictory positions is a strength, insofar as it allows the “researcher”, and the “informant”, to reflect on intersubjectivity and reflexivity or to stimulate self-scrutiny and self-awareness (Portelli 1991a, 44). As a participatory artist, I have explored the art of dialogue

for several years in my process-based art. This new autobiographic work in-process allows me to take the time to reflect on how I can listen more carefully (Back 2007).

The following reflections stem from conversations I have had with these Guatemalans immigrants. As a researcher who makes their voices public through text and creative projects, it is important for me to make transparent the collaborative work involved in the dialogues. I have included extracts and footnotes of these other voices to distinguish the narrative of my reflexive diary. You can also listen to excerpts from these interviews on a web page and hear Ismael Recinos, one of the founders of the club, speak about his experience with the club. I will elaborate more on these two creative projects further.

Dialogue in Art and Oral History

Listening to personal histories has been at the basis of my work as an artist. Already in 2006, I remember doing interviews in Mexico with unfaithful people, and then collaborating in the recording of a video from the interviews. While therapeutic, the result is an analysis of romantic perceptions of engagement. In this project, as in others I did, “conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself” (Kester 2005). At such, my work can be read under the categories of PA, dialogic art, conversational art or relational art, to give a few examples. Why did I never come across (or need to dig into) the research methodology of oral history before becoming an academic artist-researcher? Broadly defined, oral history as a genre is a research methodology that “refers to the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past” (Abrams 2010, 2). Alessandro Portelli argues that there “is no oral history before the encounter of two different subjects, one with a story to tell and the other with a history to reconstruct” (1998, 28), stressing that oral history is intrinsically a dialogic process. As artists, we have been producing work that permeates the category of oral history without the contemporary art discourse labelling it as such. An example of this is the work of Ricardo Basbaum, *The Production of the Artist as a Collective Conversation* (2014). The project is an accumulation of conversations, experiences, and audio, visual and print documents initiated by Basbaum with students and invested publics. Another example is the work of Katerina Seda, *It Doesn't Matter* (2008), which explores the impacts of communism in people's lives. The project is a series of over 600 drawings executed by Šedá's grandmother,

collecting various tools and supplies sold through the hardware shop her grandmother managed for over thirty years under communism. These kinds of practices involve meeting people, listening, recording, interacting, and collaborating. At what moment is an artwork labelled as oral history? More than a debate over categories, I want to bring attention to what it means for the artwork when oral history (or academia) is applied as a research methodology to conceptualise, produce, and evaluate it. I am surprised to find very little literature between dialogue-based art and oral history that establishes commonalities and distinctions in these practices⁴². The questions and issues that have come up in the study of oral history from an academic perspective (ethics, reflexivity, etc.) can be useful for artists who are working with human subjects through conversation. In respect to my practice-led research, a crossover of oral history methodology contributed in my reflection on issues of orality (e.g., rhythms and cadences), narrative (e.g., structure of the narration), subjectivity (e.g., reflexivity), memory (e.g., validity, truth, and legitimacy of the material) (Portelli 1991b), publication (e.g., kind of audience) or collaboration (e.g., equality and difference) and the practice of ethics (e.g., consent form).

⁴² Connections have been made with the ethnographic move in contemporary art with, for example, the critics of Hal Foster , “Artist as Ethnographer” (1999), and with the implication of using oral history in art education (Desai 2001).

The Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala



Figure 40. Wedding at St-Jean Baptist Church on Rachel Street, 1981, photography

As I said previously, the project initially started by hearing the personal stories of Guatemalans immigrants, my community. I gathered recollections, which brought up emotions and affects. The people I spoke to had arrived, lived, or worked with my parents during their early years in Montreal. They had known me as child, though my own memory of them is blurred or non-existent. Speaking mainly over the phone has resulted in their ghostly voices recalling a past life. Thus, as much as they are *participating* in my PA project, I can hardly speak of them as participants. The project really kicked off in my mind after several weeks of familiar conversations with René, when I came to hear about an enigmatic social club, a childhood memory that had vanished. I still remember that we used to meet most of the Guatemalan newcomers in the basement of St-Jean Baptist Church on Rachel Street in the Mile End, Montreal, where *La Misión Española* [The Spanish Mission] was located. *La Misión* was the meeting point for the larger Latin American communities at that time. It was there that my parents were building a community of immigrant *friends* to relate to and with whom to share the culture shock of being an immigrant. A few blocks from there was the social club.



Figure 41. *El mejor tesoro*, theatre play directed by René Lara at the Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala, 1979

Called *El Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala* [Social, Cultural and Sports Club Tikal Guatemala], the *Club Tikal Guatemala* as it was dubbed aimed to provide a hub for the Guatemalans newcomers. Recalling the place, José de Oliva notes that the Club offered “a team of football, social and cultural activities such as theatre, plays, patriotic parades, and folkloric dances” (Oliva 2020) which he was involved in for all his youth as one of the dancers. The club had a 700-square-metre space on the second floor of a building on Rachel Street with a kitchen, a bar, and an actor’s room also used as a refuge for newly arrived Guatemalans while they were looking for work or lodging in Quebec. Four thousand Guatemalans and Latin Americans passed through the club.

Interestingly, as my English editor Stephanie Schwartz pointed out to me, “many buildings in this neighbourhood performed the same functions for waves of immigrants. For example, La Sala Rosa (today a food and performance venue) was once home to the Workmen’s Circle, a fraternal organisation for Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the 1920s⁴³.” These semi-

⁴³ For further information on the Workmen’s Circle, see: <http://imjm.ca/location/2302>

public spaces (which might include places of worship, picket lines, street markets, cinema clubs, etc.) are “social scenes” which allow for an intimate experience in the public sphere (Puwar 2020; 2007; Ramírez 2014). Carolina Ramírez, who examined the Latin American social football scene of South London, notes:

In diasporic contexts, social scenes reflect how dwelling, displacement and belonging are rearranged through the production, relocation and re-experiencing of physical, social and emotional landscapes (Knowles 2003, 168-70). These topographies allow an 'extraterritorial' approach to diasporas, in which, rather than a 'desire for homeland', what is at stake is a 'homing desire', which is oriented towards the local dimension of experience and not only to a place that remains behind (Brah 1996, 180). This is important because not all diasporas maintain an ideology of return. Furthermore, it is politically radical in that it insists that ‘people can live anywhere, making new homes away from home: that there is not any primordial connection between race and place’ (Alexander and Knowles 2005, 8). (Ramírez 2014, 671)

Ramírez frames the relevance of social scenes in the context of displacement as a productive space for desire and foreseeing a future. The founders of *El Club Tikal Guatemala* were eager to succeed in Quebec society.



Figure 42. Some of the board of trustees of Club Tikal Guatemala during its 8-year celebration, Hispanoamerica newspaper, 03 April 1980 (left to right: Francisco Chang (treasurer), Carlos Humberto Pineda (vice-president), René Lara (cultural organiser), Ismael Recinos (president), Manuel Freire (representative for Carling O'Keefe brewing company), Edgar López (sport organiser) Carlos Chavarria (first member), Olga Escobar (Latinoamerican queen, 1978), Cesar de Leon (secretary)

The club was registered as a charity and a board of trustees oversaw its management between 1972 and 1982. The following people were included in the board of trustees, (as told by Ismael Recinos, one of the club founders interviewed) and as members:

Ismael Recinos: President/Director
Carlos Humberto Pineda: Vice-president
Eric Hernandez: Treasurer
Edgar Lopes and Francisco Chang: Treasurer and substitute
Miguel Rivas and Cesar de Leon: Secretary
Edgar Carranza: Substitute
Hugo Maroquin: Substitute
René Lara: Auxiliary and cultural organiser
Edgar López: sport organiser
Santiago Franco: Football coach of the club
Amilcar Vargas: Football coach of the club
Ricardo Ulloa: Taekwondo coach of the club
Carlos Chavarria: First member

The list presents an obvious gendered dimension to the club. All the official organisers and trustees were men. This gender distinction of the club highlights the pervasive gender ideologies of the 70s and the importation of the *machismo* (a sexist form of exaggerated masculine pride) culture associated with Latin Americans. Indeed, in founding the club, the men were acting much as they had in their country of origin, venturing out into the society, developing ties, and engaging socially. In their Guatemalan hometowns, they had likely been in the habit of visiting the neighbourhood *tavernas*; a social scene that was transported and recreated through the founding of the club. The club was a predominantly masculine place in much the same way as the bars the men had left behind, providing a familiar space outside of the household, a traditionally female sphere. It allowed the men to meet up with each other in a relaxed social setting, share a drink, smoke, and discuss culture, football, and other interests. Furthermore, the club allowed them to forge social roles in the public sphere and to gain recognition, even if it was within their own cultural community. In the host society, they faced discrimination daily and were trying to make ends meet, mainly by working as manual labourers. In this situation, the club became even more important, and it could be seen as a very first step of civic participation in the new country.

It should be noted that while men were on the board of trustees, there is all indication that women were working tirelessly behind the scenes. On top of the usual domestic work traditionally relegated to women, the women were also essential to *El Club*. According to my informants, they were involved in the day-to-day infrastructure and performed various tasks such as participating in the activities, preparing food or distributing flyers. Doris Lara, René's wife, explained that:

Llamaba a los integrantes del grupo cada semana para recordales las practicas, informarles donde si iban a reunir, básicamente era la secretaria del grupo. Y participe también en la obra de teatro [Entre cuatro paredes]. Yo era el enlace entre René, los integrantes del grupo y hablaba con los organizadores. Le llevaba la agenda a mi esposo para recordarle todo lo que se tenia que hacer..." [I called the members of the group every week to remind them of the practices, to inform them where they were going to meet, basically I was the secretary of the group. And I also participated in the play [Entre cuatro paredes]. I was the liaison between René, the members of the group and I talked to the organisers. I took care of the agenda of my husband to remind him of everything that had to be done.] (Lara 2020)

Doris managed the everyday tasks for the folkloric dance group until 2019. This was an almost 40 years of commitment by Doris to help René voluntarily run this group. Women's presences contributed as well in the homely atmosphere of the social scene (Ramírez 2014, 674) and reinforced the solidarity among the members.

The board of trustees also gives an insight into the well-organised structure and ambitions of the charity. Their inventiveness is surprising considering the absence nowadays of a social club despite a population in Montreal growing between 1971 and 2011 from 8,210 to 82,935 Latinx (Armony 2015). Between 1971 and 1980, a total of 930 Guatemalans came to Canada and 6,215 people arrived during the period of 1981-1990 (Garcia 2006). The migration increased as the social conflict in Guatemala escalated and more restrictive immigration policies were enacted in the United States (Garcia 2006; Wei Da 2002). Guatemalan migration to Canada is closely dependant on American policy and after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, "the number of overall refugee claims in Canada fell from a record high of 44,063 in 2001 to less than half that number in 2003. Immigration numbers also failed to reach government targets" (Garcia 2006). In 1972, the core founders were newcomers who needed to learn the French dominant language and to maintain full-time manual jobs. Ismael, René, Santiago, my father and others I interviewed, were manual labourers employed in construction or manufacturing, and service occupations, like most of Central American newcomers during this period. Women were

employed in service occupations and in managerial, clerical, or professional occupations (Garcia 2006). Nonetheless, *El Club Tikal Guatemala* was functioning on a volunteer basis; auto financed by the activities' sales and the core members. It must have been an important commitment. In this, I learned the Guatemalans followed a long history in Canada of mutual aid societies established by immigrant ethnic groups including Italians, Jews, Chinese and others. However, I was not done with being surprised when Ismael Recinos told me that the final aim of the club was to create *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* [Guatemala's home in Montreal].

La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal wished to achieve more permanently what *El Club* was doing: reuniting newcomers and helping to sustain the life of immigrants. The idea behind *La Casa* was not about nourishing an ideology of return, a desire for a "homeland" for their members (Brah 2005, 177; Ramírez 2014, 671). My conversations with the founders suggest that *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* would have been a shared place to encompass their struggle of belonging in Quebec. Avtar Brah explains this tension inherent to the concept of diaspora as a process of inclusion and exclusion, "inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (Brah 2005, 189). *El Club* offered temporarily a way to sustain the alienating status of the founders and their comrades by allowing a space to collectively maintain ways of thinking, living, and being in the world (Mignolo 2017) denied by the dominant power structures in Quebec. As I mentioned in my first chapter, adapting to appropriate behaviour of the welcoming society was not without conflict for people like my parents, or some of the members I interviewed (Oliva 2020; Recinos 2020a). Social scenes were a place of resistance which allowed immigrants to coexist (*convivir*) in, with and within an oppressive society and in a situation of an unequal balance of power. *El Club Tikal Guatemala* a few blocks apart from *La Misión Española* must have offered a different scene of communality. *La Misión* was the place of sociality where my parents were offered amusement, labour, clothes, food, furniture, etc. as Latinx immigrants more generally. Building communities under the (colonial) shadow of the church, with inclinations of evangelisation, is different from friendships formed through Guatemalan national ties. Yet Guatemalan friendships were not void of internal conflicts.

After ten years, *El Club Tikal Guatemala* closed in 1982 for lack of money and participation. The issues the club faced included an unpaid debt caused by the theft of royalties from sales, unpaid long-distance telephone calls, the increasing arrival of other Latin Americans with different aims, active members returning to their country or joining a rival association, and the unwillingness to pay memberships for the activities. Selling the sound system was not sufficient to save the place (Recinos 2020b). My discussions with José de Oliva (2020) and Ismael Recinos (2020c) suggest that the social club collapsed because of individualistic behaviours. Ismael justified the distinction from his first wave of arrivals who were more “educated” or “ambitious” in leaving an imprint on Quebec society and the ones who came in the following decade, in the early 1980s, that were more “labour migrants” interested in making money to send remittances to their dependents. The club remains alive in the collective memory of the Guatemalan diaspora of the 1980s and immigrants who participated in these activities from near or far. My discussions with the protagonists reveals that the place is still remembered with a mixture of nostalgia, proudness, sadness, loss, and resentment. René Lara commented during an interview with me: “el lugar fue una gran aventura [...] pero su fracaso y consecuencias dejo un sabor amargo que todavia algunos de nosotros preferimos no recordar” [the place was a great adventure [...] but its collapse and consequences left a bitter taste that some of us still prefer not to remember] (R. Lara 2020b, you can also hear an extract of the discussion on the Club Tikal Guatemala website). The founders lost more than money in this self-governed project. The termination of the Club marks an end to a period of collective hope for this group of Guatemalans, who no longer collaborated as a team.

There is no academic research about this initiative that was active between 1972 and 1982 in the Mile End of Montreal. Nor is there literature about the rich Guatemalan and Salvadorean scene that established itself in Quebec during the early 1970s or research comparing why some social clubs for immigrants in Montreal, like for the Jews or Moroccans, were successful in creating long term cultural services when Guatemalans and Latin Americans failed. Ismael Recinos, the director of the club, destroyed all his personal files in 2019, leaving me to rely on oral memory work alone. I have found a small number of photos representing *El club* through my interviews. It is hard to acknowledge that so little documentation is archived about local

stories of the Latinxs diaspora in Quebec⁴⁴. Nevertheless, there is a “widespread recognition that histories, and especially those that come under the category of being ‘invisible’, can be partially told through personal stories”, argues Nirmal Puwar (2007, 254), citing Portelli (1997) and Thompson (1988). This invisible material is a considerably rich inspiration for artists when it involves “critical imagination”, as a radically democratic, pedagogical, and interventionist place which dialogically and ethically reinvents our societies (Denzin 2003).

The invisibility of *El Club Tikal Guatemala* has motivated me to make a reconstitution of its premises enacting a utopian goal of fictively constructing what *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* might have been. By word-of-mouth, with René Lara as my starting point, I had accessed and interviewed some of the founders in a mix of Spanish and French. In the spirit of the Club, my intention with the interviews is (was) to build a team of members that (will) engage in the reconstruction of this story.

Methods of Excavating La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal

Rather than solely archiving the past existence of *El Club Tikal Guatemala*, my final practice-led doctoral artwork began with the intention to explore the collective future of *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*. My way of working collaboratively was informed by dialogic participative and critical pedagogy approaches (Boal 2014; Denzin 2003; Freire 2017; Puwar 2012). While I helped direct conversations on aspects that were of interest to uncover the story, my aim was to understand the roles and the activities performed inside the club. The individuals I interviewed decided which part to focus on and explore. My role was then to stimulate us/them to share/enact it. A continuous process of feedback has been happening over the course of this project, where each person invariably affects the other. This dialogue involves ongoing praxis, i.e. (un)learning through action, reflection, and change (Freire 2017). I see this creative process as co-learning and transmitting experiential knowledge about art, resistance and communality, immigrant realities as well as how they shape our identities. The intergenerational displacement

⁴⁴ Except a few studies by the sociologist Victor Armony (2015) and the historian José del Pozo about the Chilean communities (2009).

of my/their stories and the shared desire to work together in its reconstitution helps to navigate the unequal balance of power related to social and educational status involved in our interactions. Also, by engaging with issues of reconstitution, resurgence, re-emergence, and re-existence, my project puts into practice what Maldonado-Torres (2008) refers to as the *actitud des-colonial* (a decolonial attitude, see [Section 01](#) for more details). These complex realms of reciprocity, dialogue, *vivir bien*, sharing, giving, displacement, oppression, and loss involved in our collaboration are what I define as a reflexive communal friendship. This type of relationship is linked to what anthropologists have called ‘fictive kinship’, that is “a relationship, based not on blood or marriage but rather on religious rituals or close friendship ties, that replicates many of the rights and obligations usually associated with family ties” (Ebaugh and Curry 2000, 189). For Ebaugh and Curry, fictive kinship is an important concept within immigrant communities, as it “provides social capital for them as they confront problems of settlement and incorporation into the host society” (2000, 190). As shown in the project *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*, communal friendship is related to fictive kin systems in these aspects.

The art commission *Community in the Making* (2016-2018) at the Bromley by Bow Centre was a tightly outlined three-month programme of coproduction (like the linear and a goal-oriented approach I discussed in the preface) with local communities and sponsors. This institutional framework prompted a set of questions that I struggled with throughout the process. How to conciliate performance and caring in an institutional framework? What kind of relationship is still available in a participatory artwork when you are simultaneously the friend, the artist, the researcher, and the student? Drawing on the key lessons from my doctoral research, this final project is an assemblage of open-ended collaborations without anticipated outputs (exhibition). Thus, I shifted my approach to the “participants”, “informants”, “objects” for a reflexive communal friendship. An affective relationship that has a beginning but no predetermined end, which, as a result, completely shifts the way I approach such an encounter. This unknown “future” opens up a space for uncertainties, impermanence, improvisation, reflexivity, organicity and nonlinearity. It is an open-ended process rather than the initial short term-ness of the Bromley by Bow Centre project. In this respect, there is non-durational contingency; this new “project” does not end with my PhD, which allows for a more organic approach. The

temporality of my research is important, especially in regard to the problem of building genuine relationship and producing knowledge with short-term fieldwork (Puwar 2012; 2020), which has been the key lesson of my [Section 03](#) and [13](#) and the considerable literature in PA field (Beech 2008; Bishop 2012; Kester 2005). In the field of academic research, there is much criticism of the performative pressure of knowledge production (Evans 2005; Giroux 2002; Olssen and Peters 2005).

Portraits of Ghostly Voices

Below, I sketch portraits of four of the people with whom I have been collaborating most closely (so far) and the work we have done in excavating fragments of this story. I have added extracts of my interviews in the portraits to take note of their voices. You can hear these extracts, and others that will be added as the project progresses, on the website about the Club Tikal Guatemala I have developed⁴⁵. As I said, I can hardly speak of the following people as “participants”. My [Section 05](#) revealed how problematic it is to label a person as “participant” and to objectify people I would invite for my birthday or for dinner at my home as “objects of research”. Our past relationship and immigrant bond aligns us in a communal friendship relation leading to our engagement in this project with mutual trust, which nevertheless sets in play affective economies (Ahmed 2004). The current work has led me to reflect on the question that has been central to my academic research from a different perspective. What is left of the *participant*? How can we redefine the word to reveal its many complexities? “Participant” feels like a technocratic term, an instrument of science, that seeks to do away with affective and emotional bonds. For me these bonds are openings to journeys. I have followed old bonds (between families in the extended sense) and re-invented them in the context of my search for an archive of their journeys.

⁴⁵ You can hear the protagonists tell their stories of arriving in Canada, their experience with the club, and more, at this link: <https://clubtikalguatemala.com/tour/>

René Lara



Figure 43. René Lara and dancers from Grupo Folklorico Tikal Guatemala, 1982, photography (left to right: Francisco Chang (treasurer), Carlos Humberto Pineda (vice-president), René Lara (cultural organiser), Ismael Recinos (president), Manuel Freire (representative for Carling O'Keefe brewing company), Edgar López (sport organiser) Carlos Chavarria (first member), Olga Escobar (Latinoamerican queen, 1978), Cesar de Leon (secretary)

René Lara is my point of entry to this research. Born in 1938 in the village of Mazatenango, Guatemala, he arrived in Montreal in May 1970 for a holiday. He never left after the holiday and decided to settle down in the city. During the time that the Club existed, René Lara oversaw its cultural activities and organised exhibitions of handicrafts from Guatemala. He founded the *Grupo Folklorico Tikal Guatemala*, a dance group active in the Club from 1978 to 1982, and independently until 2019. During four years, the group presented over 70 dance performances from Guatemala, Salvador, Venezuela, and Costa Rica. As René Lara pointed out, “*el grupo era mixto con niños y adolescentes de Guatemala, Salvador, Argentina y España*” [it was a mixed group of children and teenagers from Guatemala, Salvador, Argentina, and Spain](R. Lara 2020a). He directed two plays of *El mejor tesoro* by Juan Fermín Aycinena (Guatemala, 1838-98) in 1979 and rehearsals of *Entre cuatro paredes* by Manuel Galich (Guatemala, 1913-84) in 1980.

With his help, I organised the first public presentation of the project. We worked together to create an installation of five photographs at the community-based art event

Intermissions: Social Installation in the Park by Intervals, an artist collective which I co-founded. Created in 2015, Intervals Collective brings together artists and cultural workers from Montreal's ethno-cultural communities. The members are Maria Ezcurra (artist), Dominique Fontaine (curator), Miwa Kojima (graphic designer/editor/artist), Thi-My Truong (art historian/museologist) and myself. Since its creation, we have met regularly to exchange ideas, share experiences and plan artistic projects. In 2020 we were invited by the Maison de la Culture Côte-Des-Neiges, in one of the most culturally diverse neighbourhood in Montreal, to curate the community-based art project *Intermissions: Social Installation in the Park* (2020). I invited René to collaborate in an installation in Jean-Brilliant Park. Informed by the interviews with him, which you can listen to on the website of the Club Tikal Guatemala, I wrote a description of the *Club Tikal Guatemala* on a panel, and he provided a selection of photos that we exhibited throughout the park. We discussed how the installation could help provide a sense of community identity among the large immigrant population of the area by expanding the Guatemalan (and Latino) communities' ongoing identification with Quebec.

With René, we are also currently working on his archives of the play *El mejor tesoro*, presented in *El Club Tikal Guatemala* in 1979, as a way to bring light to his engagement. Radio Centre-Ville, a Montreal radio station dedicated to programming intercultural shows, will broadcast some of these excerpts. My involvement in the process with René, as with the other stakeholders of *El Club Tikal Guatemala*, is that of an accomplice. I contribute to the research and organisation of the different elements. My role is to be a part of this common drive, which René and I have built up, to encourage opportunities to allow events and encounters which were not able to exist anymore to reemerge. For me, it is important to try making these silenced stories visible and repair and heal these colonial wounds. It is also an opportunity for me to offer possible ways to foster bonds of solidarity within the Guatemalan immigrant communities.

Ismael Recinos



Figure 44. Ismael Recinos and members from the Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala, 1981, photography

I had no memory of Ismael Recinos when I first spoke with him on the phone, but he says he has known me as a child. He used to meet up with my parents when they first arrived in Montreal, but later they lost touch. He said, “*Los conoci pequeños y eran niños muy educados*” [I’ve known you when you were small and you were very well-educated children], and he remembers that the Guatemalans made fun of my first name by referencing *Romeo y Julieta* [Romeo and Juliet] (Recinos 2020c). I have not seen him yet in person and I have no recollection of him from my childhood. His soft and slightly dysphonic voice has the typical rhythmic tone of the Huehuetenango area in Guatemala. He was born in the village of Santa Cruz Varias on 31 December 31, 1938, and arrived in Montreal on July 26, 1971. He worked for 36 years in a metal company. I discovered that Ismael is a prolific writer of essays, on issues such as the meaning of justice or the environmental crisis, and that he strives to publish them. His writing is striking, as the numerous pages composed with long sentences, many commas and very few periods, which resembles the rhythmic orality of his speech.

I invited him to write about the development of *El Club Tikal Guatemala* until its collapse, and the/his failed dream of building *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*. My initial proposal was a short novella of adventure telling the story of the club. Instead, he wrote *Historia de los*

Guatemaltecos en Montreal, a biographical depiction of his input in founding the club. We had some back and forth to make the story more precise with facts and dates. If this story of Guatemalans ends with the failure of a collective project, its title, *History of Guatemalans in Montreal*, offers a harsh perspective on the future that awaits Guatemalans.

I proposed a video version⁴⁶ of the text when I received the invitation to be part of an online colloquium *L'humain qui vient* (Le Fresnoy and l'humanité qui ouvre 2020). Two international research groups, Le Fresnoy and L'humanité qui ouvre (an art collective by two friends, Mario Coté and Julie Héту), organised the event. The conference brought together researchers and creators to reflect on how to offer new perspectives on the changes occurring in our present uncertain times. The text of Ismael, which is also a reflection on collective memory and learning from the past, was perfect for the theme.

We discussed recording a French version of the story, as it would be more accessible to the French viewers. We considered how his voice with an accent would bring forward the question of difference, central to the immigrant experience. I edited the video with extreme close-up shots of images he gave me. Your experience of the images will be different depending on the size of the image, that is, whether you watch the video on a laptop or a smartphone. The impossibility of seeing neither him nor the full images was a way to represent the immateriality of the archives, the mixture of reality and fiction that envelop the story of the club. The blurry souvenir of the past. Ismael watched the online video on Youtube and called me afterwards. I could hear his proudness for having his past stakes, and the missions advocated by the club, shared with an international audience.

Ismael's next idea is to organise a dinner with all the club co-founders who are still alive, and I will record the event. The dinner is an occasion to reunite together with food and music. This gathering of comrades will offer a space to recreate bonds, revive past stories of *El Club Tikal Guatemala* and discuss favourite topics in the club: culture, football and Guatemala. The event will be a way to redefine and expand discourses on (ongoing) identification with Quebec by

⁴⁶ You can hear Ismael Recinos narrate his story at this link: <https://youtu.be/XWSb47nj2AY?t=8676>

presenting settled immigrants sharing their lives and struggles. It will also be an opportunity to grow the archive documenting the history of this community.

Santiago Franco



Figure 45. Football team Tikal Guatemala representing the Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala, 1979

“Yo para el frances no sirvo” [I’m not good for the French language] (Franco 2020), was Santiago Franco’s reaction when I suggested doing a bilingual interview in Spanish and French and then we continued in Spanish for the rest of our discussion. Language and accents have been central elements in the project. As I explored in my first chapter, the French language has been a source of shame and subjugation for me, my parents, and probably Franco as well, as it places us in the position of the “other” (Mignolo 2011).

Santiago Franco was born in Chichicastenango, in the department of Quiche, and he was the football coach of the club’s team called Tikal Guatemala. *“Me imagino que era ustedes que se ponian a jugar pelota en esa callesita”* [I imagine that it was you guys who were playing ball in that little street] (Franco 2020). Santiago was our neighbour, but I do not have any memory of him either. I see that our past bond allows for a sense of solidarity which distances us from the service-based economy that was at stake in the project *Community in the Making*, and from

my role as a “cultural-artistic service provider” (Kwon 2002, 4). We are working together in archiving through images and text a 1976 Montreal football tournament where *Tikal Guatemala* won the final match. To navigate through the impossibility of face-to-face meetings, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled us to communicate and exchange documents through WhatsApp. So far, our collaboration has brought us to reconstitute key elements of the day, such as the nationality of the players and fund-raising activities. Exploring the football scene is a way to unpack discourses of national identity, gender, class and ethnicity and allows us to reflect on power relations (for a comprehensive examination of the football scene, you can refer to Ramirez’s (2014) study on the Chilean and Latin American football scenes in London). In this respect, winning the match in 1976 seems to mark a turning point in the narration of *El Club Tikal Guatemala*. The exploration of this representation (will) challenge(s) assumptions of fixed Latino identity, sense of belonging and new forms of Quebec identities.

My connection to Santiago and the others has been a way to redefine and navigate participation, a theme which I explored in the first section where it often referred to nonparticipation or tokenism (Arnstein 1969; Beech 2008; Miessen 2011). The friendships that we constantly enact involve a complicated sense of debt and guilt from each side. My collaborators might have seen it as their duty to help the Latino child that they saw grow up. They might also have felt shame in recognising that they are no longer in the same social scene, or a sense of exploitation. These issues force us to either negotiate or come to terms with varying power relations. In retrospect, I realise that enacting the practice of communal friendship in the making of *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* was a process of give and take. At times, my communal friend helped me, as he provided me with information about the club, but at other times, it was my turn, as he needed help to find contacts to publish one of his texts. Hence, a constant interdependence affects our power dynamics.

José de Oliva



Figure 46. *Grupo Folklorico Tikal Guatemala, 1979, photography*

José de Oliva's mother was my nanny for around two years. My dad brought me to her home, age 3 years, because she did not speak French. I was learning Spanish at her home and José, 10-years old, was also there. He remembers me “*avec les cheveux long, très très mince, timide mais très débrouillard*” [with long hair, very very slim, shy but very clever], he was especially surprised by “*la façon que t’avais développé le langage des signes pour réussir à te faire comprendre*” [the way I had developed sign language in order to make myself understood] (Oliva 2020). José de Oliva arrived, age 9, with his single mom and six siblings in Montreal on 3 October 1976 because of the devastating earthquake in Guatemala on 4 February 1976. His childhood story is filled with the trauma of loss, including his home and friends, but also with a strong sense of resiliency. He fought to succeed in Montreal, a familiar aspect amongst the Guatemalan immigrant people and families I know. They (We) felt significant pressure to work hard, succeed and to maintain a sense of pride, a feeling which is often referred to as the migrant work ethic (Dawson, Veliziotis, and Hopkins 2018). I can empathise with this aspect, as José is basically my peer.

For several reasons, my relationship with José is different from those I have with the people my parents' age. With José, there is an increased sense of friendship and reciprocity. Moreover, José and I have both studied at university and gone on to find qualified jobs: him as an engineer, me as a professor. Hence, we both have the social capital bestowed upon us as second-generation immigrants who learned French early on and had tools to advance socially and professionally. We have gained a professional status beyond what our parents could have hoped for and are both aware that the other one has followed a similar path. The power relationship between José and me is therefore deeply different from the other relationships I developed during the *Casa de Guatemala* project. It is also worth noting that it is clearly distinct from the relationships in which I engaged in Zambia, as José and I share a kinship linked to our shared family background and ethnicity.

I received his contact through René Lara. José was one of the dancers in *Grupo Folklórico Tikal Guatemala* for about twenty years and René offered him a sense of family. The time lapse of the research with José has evolved in an organic way, based on listening and accepting that he is not always available, and I gave him the space to approach me like a friend. I developed a similar relationship with the others as well, by staying out of the focus of the research, for example by reading the essays of Ismael or helping René with different tasks. I am giving time and resources to their creative projects too, and not only focusing on mine. This exchange dynamic is a characteristic of a reflexive practice of communal friendship which implies other paradigms than the service-based economy of delivering a project for a commission. José and I are working together in a dance choreography from his embodied memories when he was part of the *Grupo Folklórico* and inspired by photos. René Lara is advising on the choreography and lending traditional Guatemalan clothing. These short reenactments of dances are a tool for reworking the past and exploring transcultural identities performed within the new forms of dances that this work (will) produce.

Along these phone interviews, informal conversations after class or during Christmas, meetings in the funerals or in the church portico, text messages or emails, dinner, there has been the intricacies of slowly (re)discovering what *El Club Tikal Guatemala* really was and what *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* could have been. Between a video, an installation, a radio

programme, revival or a reenactment, the works I have produced (so far) with each member of the group has their proper format and aesthetic but share a common point of giving an insight in the life of the Guatemalan diaspora. My assemblage of projects, titled *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*, puts into action a reflexive communal relationship that aims for reciprocity in participation and attempts to facilitate an encounter with people that moves beyond treating them as “objects of research” or “objects of art”.

Co-learning by Participating Together



Figure 47. A group of friends and myself (right corner) at the Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala, 1980

I started my section by affirming that the initial impulse for my doctoral research *Awaken Dreams* was to work towards a utopian future (Levitas 2013), and that I would not have imagined this would lead me to follow ghosts in Montreal, Canada. Since rewriting this section, my father found a photo of me in *El Club Tikal Guatemala*. I do not remember anything from that day, but I recognise myself in the right corner, and my friends’ faces connect with recollections of playing in the park or the streets. My father is convinced that the photo was taken at the club, even though he has no memory of being there either. My mother also does

not remember that day or being at the club. I find myself grasping at the blurred memories of my past, imagining a party with marimbas, and gradually convincing myself that I was indeed in *El Club Tikal Guatemala*. With my happy face, I am surely looking at my dad taking the photo. Reality and fiction momentarily mingle like an awakened dream, recreating as a daydream *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*.

By revealing the complexities of the making of *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*, my practice-led doctoral artwork unsettles the assumptions behind participation in art. From the beginning of this doctoral research, I have explored the lack of understanding that surrounds the interaction between contemporary art and community spheres and their conflicting aims concerning the politics of participation. Firstly, by examining the current debate around PA in my [Section 01](#), I was able to make a critical reading in my documentation of practice of my long-term PA commission *Community in the Making* (2016-2018) at the Bromley by Bow Centre. This action-reflection methodology culminated by naming this experience as neoliberal participation. In the field of PA, this translates into an art practice that fosters a relationship with the participant prioritising attributes such as distance, formality, independence, service, tasks, transactions, temporality, linearity, dispossession, lack of power distribution, and fragmentation (all aspects specific to the service paradigm and to the colonality of power). The first part of my reflexive diary had the objective to move away from this neoliberal participation in art by theoretically considering a shift to principles of communal friendship, drawing inspiration from Latin American communities and “immigrant consciousness”. The second part challenged me to recognise that moving away from neoliberal participation in my art practice requires sharing power and agency through self-criticality and an ongoing examination of (my) various positions of power through the willingness to go back and forth between reflection and action to unlearn, to change. Since then, I co-founded the *Arts Research Centre in Cultural Diversities* which offered discursive events for critically rethinking key concepts of a reflexive communal friendship such as friendship, participation, cultural diversities, racial representation, and decoloniality.

How do we change *participant* into a *communal friend* with a vocabulary of dialogue, *vivir bien*, sharing, giving, re-constitution, displacement, survival, oppression, and loss that is

specific to a decolonial praxis and an “immigrant consciousness”? This section sums up the last three years of (un)learning and findings. The work in-process *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* has been my way to explore a shift in the terminology of *participant* so that it matches the grammar of *friend*. Reflexive communal friendship involves a decolonial attitude that allows coexistence (or *convivir* as I developed in my [Section 05](#)) in, with and within an oppressive society or a situation of an unequal balance of power. This current work is one exploration further among the action-reflection process that I have been creating during my doctoral research in response to our neoliberal and colonial context. My attentiveness as child, family, friend, immigrant, artist, and academic researcher has been taking shape and mutating along the path of this PhD in Art (Thesis by Practice), allowing me to develop alternative and decolonial modes of doing critical PA.

Section 15 – Project 07: *El Club Social Tikal Guatemala*

Title

El Club Social Tikal Guatemala

Dates

September 11-12, 2020

Location

Jean-Brillant Park
5252 Decelles Ave
Montreal, Quebec H3T 1N8
Canada

Extended Credits

Installation Coordinators (Research): Romeo Gongora and René Lara
Installation Coordinator (Concept and Organisation): Romeo Gongora
Installation Developer (Photo Editing, Printing, and Installation): Romeo Gongora
Printer: Université du Québec à Montréal

Event Coordinators (Concept and Research): Intervals Collective (Maria Ezcurra, Dominique Fontaine, Miwa Kojima, Thi-My Truong, and Romeo Gongora)
Event Coordinators (Organisation): Intervals Collective and Maison de la culture de Côte-Des-Neiges
Event Documentation (Photo): Alex Marchand

Funding: Maison de la culture de Côte-Des-Neiges, Conseil des arts de Montréal, and Université du Québec à Montréal

Acknowledgement: The installation *El Club Social Tikal Guatemala* was part of *Intermissions: Social Installation in the Park*, an event lead by Intervals Collective and presented in Jean-Brillant Park. The event consisted of a performative installation, workshops, mediation and skill-sharing activities, as well as a distribution on a digital platform.

Public

Local communities of Côte-Des-Neiges (Montreal, CA), artists, and general public

Website

https://intervalscollective.com/intermissions/?vp_filter=installation_romeo

Overview

El Club Social Tikal Guatemala presented the findings of my research on the project *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal (2020-)* during a public festival in the Côte-Des-Neiges neighbourhood of Montreal, Canada. The installation consisted of a series of placards placed in the Jean-Brillant Park in a way as to allow the spectator to stroll through the site. The placards presented a brief history of the Club Social Tikal Guatemala and archival images of its activities. Presented in a neighbourhood with a large immigrant population, the installation prompted discussions on immigration policies and solidarity.

Keywords

Art in the public space, immigration, critical consciousness

Contributing voices

In this project, René Lara's contribution involved giving me feedback on the conception of the installation, providing historical information about the club through audio interviews and supplying photos used for the installation. My input consisted of conceptualising and producing the installation. The event was documented by the photographer Alex Marchand with the permission of the people involved in the project. You can see the installation through the link I provided above, and you might take note of some extracts of René Lara's audio interviews through the Club Tikal Guatemala website that I developed⁴⁷.

Documentation



⁴⁷ <https://clubtikalguatemala.com/>



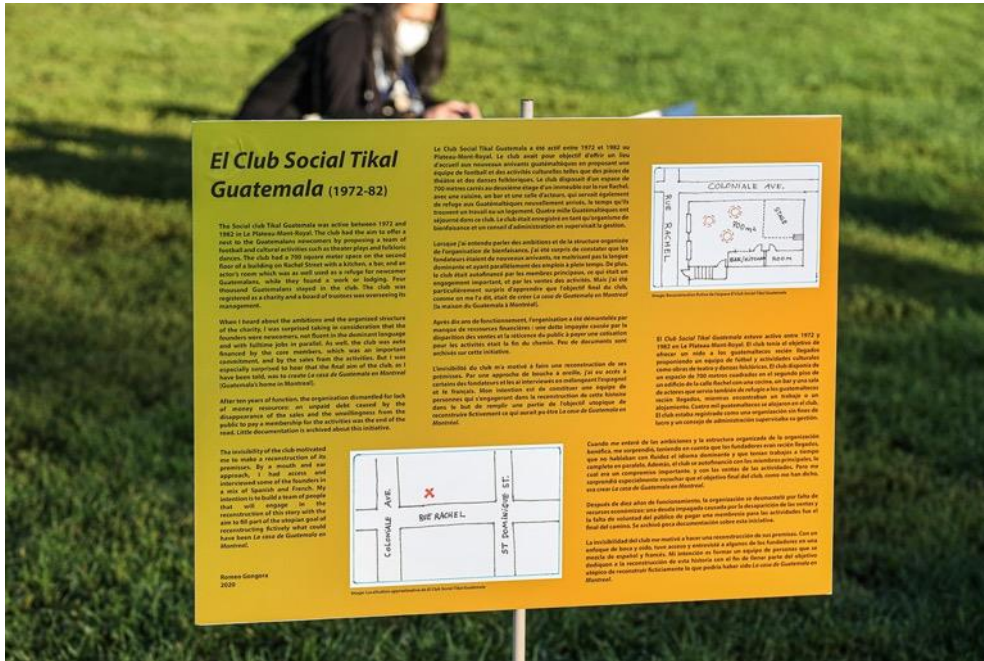


Figure 48. El Club Social Tikal Guatemala, 2020, various views of the installation for Intermissions: Social Installation in the Park (photo: Alex Marchand)

Section 16 – Project 08: *Historia de los Guatemaltecos en Montreal*

Title

Historia de los Guatemaltecos en Montreal

Date

Friday, November 6, 2020

Location

Youtube video

Extended Credits

Video Coordinators (Concept and Research): Romeo Gongora and Ismael Recinos

Video Script and Voice-over Narration: Ismael Recinos

Video Coordinator (Production and Post-Production): Romeo Gongora

Event Coordinators (Concept, Research and Organisation): Collective l'humanité qui ouvre and Studio national des arts contemporains Le Fresnoy

Event Documentation (Online Streaming): Hexagram

Funding: Université du Québec à Montréal

Acknowledgement: The video *Historia de los Guatemaltecos en Montreal* was part of *L'humain qui vient*, an online colloquium led by the collective l'humanité qui ouvre (Mario Côté and Julie Héту) and presented on Youtube. The event consisted of a two-day conference by researchers and creators reflecting on our present times.

Public

Staff and students from Université du Québec à Montréal (CA) and Studio national des arts contemporains Le Fresnoy (FR), artists, and the general public.

Website

<https://youtu.be/XWSb47nj2AY?t=8676>

Overview

Historia de los Guatemaltecos en Montreal is an online video showing close-up archival images of the activities of El Club Tikal Guatemala with a French audio narration by its co-founder Ismael Recinos.

Keywords

Video art, oral history, image in movement

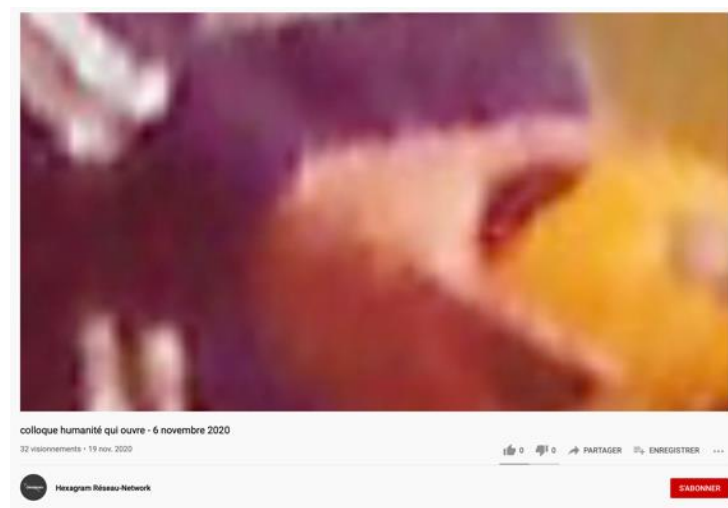
Contributing voices

In this project, you might take note of Ismael Recinos's audio narration through the link I provided above. Ismael Recino's contribution involved writing the video script, narrating the story, and providing photos for the video. My input consisted of conceptualising and editing the video. The video was shown by the collective l'humanité qui ouvre (Mario Côté and Julie Héту).

Documentation



The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the YouTube logo, search, and other icons. The video player itself shows a close-up of hands, with a red progress bar at the bottom. The video title is "HISTORIA DE LOS GUATEMALTECOS EN MONTREAL" with a subtitle "[HISTOIRE DES GUATÉMALTÈQUES À MONTRÉAL]". The author is listed as "Par Ismael Rodrigo Recinos Velásquez." and it is noted as "En collaboration avec Romeo Gongora". The video was uploaded in 2020 and has a duration of 2:39:19 / 3:13:13. Below the player, the video title "colloque humanité qui ouvre - 6 novembre 2020" is displayed, along with "19 views · Nov 19, 2020" and interaction buttons for likes, comments, share, and save. The channel name "Hexagram Réseau-Network" and a "SUBSCRIBE" button are also visible.



This screenshot shows a different view of the same YouTube video player. The video player shows a close-up of a person's face, possibly speaking. The video title "colloque humanité qui ouvre - 6 novembre 2020" is visible at the bottom of the player. Below the player, the video title "colloque humanité qui ouvre - 6 novembre 2020" is repeated, along with "32 visionnements · 19 nov. 2020" and interaction buttons for likes, comments, share, and register. The channel name "Hexagram Réseau-Network" and a "S'ABONNER" button are also visible.

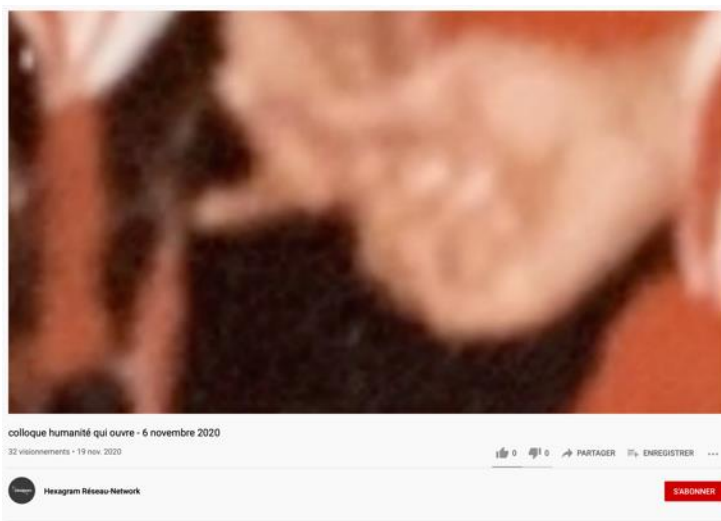
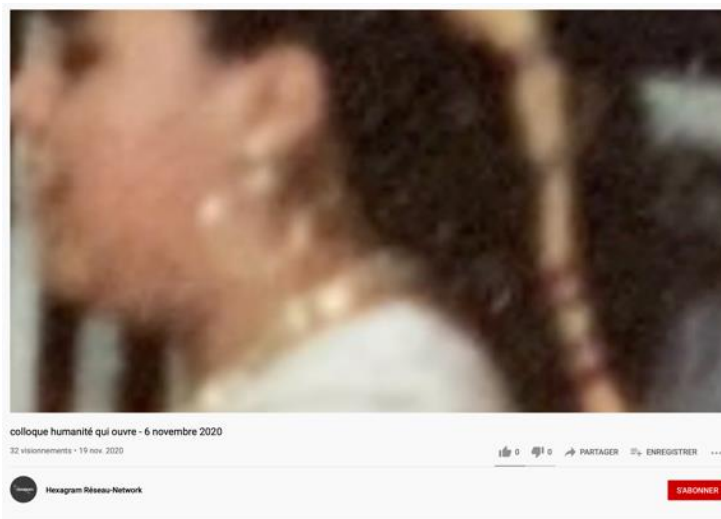


Figure 49. Historia de los Guatemaltecos en Montreal, 2020, various excerpts of the video on YouTube video presented at the online colloquium L'humain qui vient

Section 17– Project 09: *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*

Title

La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal (2020-)

Dates

2020-

Location

Montreal

Extended Credits

Archival Coordinators (Research): Santiago Franco, Romeo Gongora, René Lara, Doris Lara, José de Oliva, Carlos Pineda, Alfa Pineda, Ismael Recinos, Carlos Rivera, Ricardo Ulloa, and more Club Tikal Guatemala's former members to come

Archival Research Assistants: Caroline Foray and Ludmila Santana

Interviews Assistant: Andrea Calderón Stephens

3D Virtual Tour Coordinator (Concept): Romeo Gongora

Architect: Diego Cortinas

3D Modeling Coordinator (Programming): Florence Turmel

3D Modeling Assistants: Jean-François Gauthier and André Girard

Website Coordinator (Concept): Romeo Gongora

Website Designers: André Girard and Romeo Gongora

Website Programmer: André Girard

Funding: Université du Québec à Montréal

Public

Guatemalan diaspora and Latinx-American immigrants in Quebec (CA)

Website

www.clubtikalguatemala.com

Overview

La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal (2020-ongoing) is a long-term art process that I will continue to develop in the coming years. It has started with the investigation of El Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala, a social club that Guatemalan immigrants ran in Montreal between 1972 and 1982. As a first step, I have reconstructed the space in virtual form, drawing on extensive oral interviews with the founders, on-site research, and archival documents. The 3D virtual tour of the club is

available online for the public to view on a website that also contains a compilation of information about the club.

As the interviews and archival research continue to progress, new information will be added into the website and the virtual club. In other words, the 3D virtual tour will slowly bring the club back to life, adding color and realism to the current sleek and game-like design. The final step will offer a virtual reality experience, allowing the visitor to step into the club that I have reconstructed from the Guatemalans' memories and dream-like recollections. My aim is to transform the virtual *Club social Tikal Guatemala* into the *Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* that its founders imagined, while also allowing their dreams to evolve as they encounter the contemporary public. Indeed, as a final step, I hope to establish the *Casa de Guatemala* as a virtual platform where the Latinx diaspora and researchers alike can meet, post memories, share ideas, and forge new collaborative projects.

Key Ideas

Archival, 3D virtual reality, oral history, social scenes

Contributing voices

In this project, you can hear extracts of the audio interviews from the Club Tikal Guatemala's former members through the link I provided above. Their contributions involved giving feedback on the conceptual aspect of the project, providing me with historical information about the club through audio interviews and archival documents, and helping me contacting other former members or organising meetings. My input consisted of conceptualising, organising, producing, and facilitating the work with their help and others.

Documentation



Club Social, Cultural Y Deportivo 'Tikal Guatemala' (1972-1982)

62 Est, Rue Rachel
Montréal, Québec, Canada

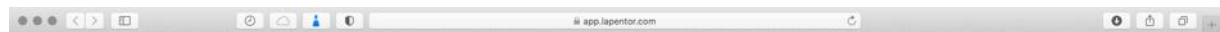


El Club Tikal Guatemala fue un club social activo entre 1972 y 1982 en Le Plateau-Mont-Royal (Montreal, Canada). El club tenía el objetivo de ofrecer un nido a los guatemaltecos recién llegados proponiendo un equipo de fútbol y actividades culturales como obras de teatro y danzas folclóricas. El club disponía de un espacio de 700 metros cuadrados en el segundo piso de un edificio de la calle Rachel con una cocina, un bar y una sala de actores que servía también de refugio a los guatemaltecos recién llegados, mientras encontraban un trabajo o un alojamiento. Cuatro mil guatemaltecos se alojaron en el club. El club estuvo registrado como una organización sin fines de lucro y un consejo de administración supervisaba su gestión.



pantalla completa / plein écran / fullscreen

Le Club Tikal Guatemala fut un club social actif entre 1972 et 1982 au Plateau-Mont-Royal (Montréal, Canada). Le club avait pour objectif d'offrir un lieu d'accueil aux nouveaux arrivants guatémaltèques en proposant une équipe de football et des activités culturelles telles que des pièces de théâtre et des danses folkloriques. Le club disposait d'un espace de 700 mètres carrés au deuxième étage d'un immeuble sur la rue Rachel, avec une cuisine, un bar et une salle d'acteurs, qui servait également de refuge aux Guatémaltèques nouvellement arrivés, le temps qu'ils trouvent un travail ou un logement. Quatre mille Guatémaltèques ont séjourné dans ce club. Le club fut enregistré en tant qu'organisme de bienfaisance et un conseil d'administration en supervisait la



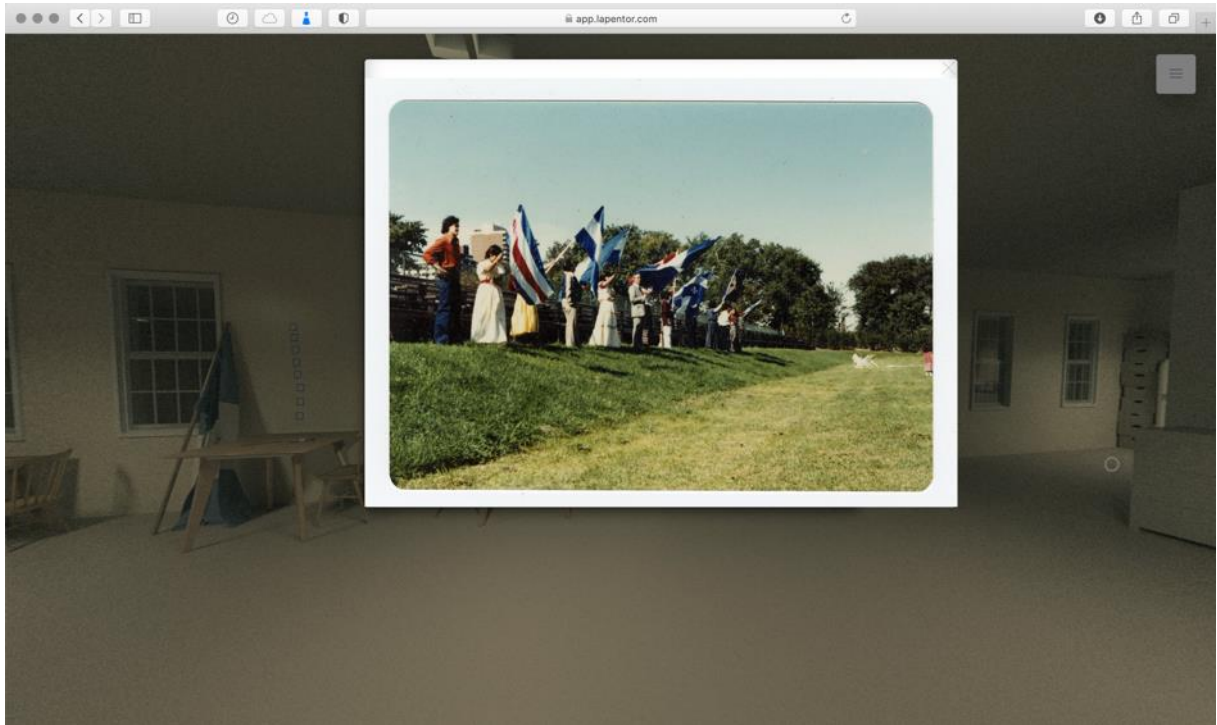




Figure 50. El Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala, 2021

Section 18 – Revisiting *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal*

The following documentation of my research-based art practice explores the progress of an ongoing long-term art project. It takes the form of a hypothetical critical reflection and does so with caution, as the project is a work in progress. It is difficult for me to examine the process impartially, as its evolution constantly changes the parameters of my reflection. I do not want to be a “participatory artist”, a role that I criticised at the beginning of my research. Thus, I have prioritised themes that respond to the (un)learnings I have experienced so far. One of these key un-learnings is the need to move beyond treating participants as “objects of research” or “objects of art,” and instead, moving into a reflexive practice of communal friendship that builds new bonds of kinship through the very ways in which one practices artistic projects.



Figure 51. Architectural view of 62 Rachel Street as El Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala in 1979, 2021, 3D modeling software SketchUp, architect: Diego Cortinas

Time and Relationship

Since starting to work with Ismael, René, José, and the others, I found myself having to work at their pace, which was initially slow for my taste. Setting up a simple meeting would often take two or three weeks. Hence, we developed our relationship in-between meetings with phone calls, text messages, and emails. Communication was slow and the project took time to unfold. René Lara would call me to hear my news yet only be available to meet two or three weeks later; Ricardo Ulloa (the taekwondo coach of the club) would tell me to call him on a specific date but would then not be available after all; and my friend, the architect Diego Cortinas, was only able to work on the weekends. This different temporal dynamic led me to challenge the output oriented attitudes present in (my) neoliberal participatory art (PA) practice. Working with a communal friendship type of relationship requires one to have or to implement an interpretation of time that might seem impossible or inefficient in our neoliberal society. This

alternative attitude sees the work as a process rather than a project with a start and end goal enabling slower, less output driven modes of building relationships and artistic works.

Slowly (re)discovering *El Club Tikal Guatemala*, I got to discover many dreams of the members as well: uniting Guatemalans in Montreal within one home, revealing the splendors of Guatemala in a foreign land and many others. As I continue developing relationships with them, I am (re)discovering a masculinity overlooked in my previous projects. The central axis of football, with several of the male founders being single at the time, provided a macho environment around the club. It has been easier as a male researcher to establish relationships with the men because of the gender roles enacted by Latin culture. Thus, despite the small number of women involved in the board of trustees, the culture of the club seems to have been dominantly macho. I have been uncomfortable with the invisibility of women repeating over time and not being able to talk to women when their husbands called me, even if several times I heard their voices in the background answering my questions when the men did not remember. Rare are the times I dared to ask to speak to the women, wanting to hear more of their side of the story but afraid of undermining the bond of trust I am building with the male founders. There is a desire to take hold of the *history* of the club, which until now has been obliterated and unheard by official Canadian and Quebec History. Nevertheless, I hope to approach these *herstories* as time passes with mutual respect for all the people involved. I already see that the dynamic with the women is gradually evolving. I recently interviewed Alpha Pineda, the wife of one of the club's founders, and I hope to do so with the other women involved. In this regard, the key learnings of [Section 14](#) have made me realise my need to work with female women researchers in order to help contribute to the process of building trust among my communal friends and gain access to the herstories that have not been sufficiently part of my project so far.



Figure 52. Traditional dance with Guatemalan costumes in Jarry Park in Montreal, Grupo Folklorico Tikal Guatemala, 1992

Finance

The type of relationship I am exploring with this project is based on exchange. Compared to other projects in which I have been involved, it opens a new perspective on participation. Indeed, my current paid position allows me the possibility to work on a long-term and open-ended project without worrying about making ends meet. I also have technical resources at my disposal by the university, which was not the case when I was a freelance artist working on the project *Community in the Making*. At that time, I was dependent on art commissions, art funded projects, artistic residencies, and their respective timeframes. Many of the stakeholders in my current project were not paid; I am indebted for their help. The exchange that took place in the project required reflexive communal friendship in various ways: suppers, phone calls, storage of belongings, etc.

I wonder why this communal dynamic has become harder to attain in our current time of hyperproductivity. This reality is in stark contrast to the experiences of the founders of El Club

Tikal. For example, René and Doris Lara worked for more than 25 years in the cultural activities of *Grupo Folklorico Tikal Guatemala* without financial compensation. The same was true for the Guatemalans participating in the artistic activities. In this respect, René Lara mentioned in a discussion with me that “*Mucha gente no cree que nosotros hagamos trabajado tanto tiempo sin ganar un centavo, pero lo que ganamos nosotros, nadie no lo puede quitar, esa satisfacción, ese cariño que nos ganamos pulso a pulso, eso no tiene valor*”⁴⁸ [Many people don't believe that we have worked so long without earning a penny, but what we earn, no one can take away from us, that satisfaction, that affection that we have earned by working hard, that has no value] (Lara 2020b). As immigrants, they were denied artistic recognition from the Quebec art scene; yet the social club provided them with a sense of community and belonging as José de Oliva stated as well, not to mention practical help.

⁴⁸ You can hear this interview on the website about the Club Tikal Guatemala I have developed: <https://clubtikalguatemala.com/>



Figure 53. Patriotic day parade, 15 September 1979, event organised by the Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala

The Past and Emotions

This project brings to light the Guatemalans' impressive commitment to building, establishing, and managing the club. As such, it is a thank you for their engagement. Most of the people with whom I am collaborating are elders and their time on earth is limited. I am grateful that they have been dedicating energy and time for my doctoral research project. My Guatemalan roots and the contributors' acquaintance with my parents have helped me to gain their generosity and trust. The fragile solidarity built along my research has created a special kind of relationship that I refer to as communal friendship.

Yet, for some of them, the experience has been emotionally difficult. Archiving the past involves emotional aspects, as recalling the past can be upsetting and emotionally draining. I presented these risks to them and explained that they were free to participate during my encounters as well as in writing in the consent forms. I am glad for having done so. One of the

persons I was working with asked to be less involved in the project, as he felt uncomfortable dwelling on his memories. He told me that excavating the *Club Social Tikal Guatemala* was like *digging up the dead*. I have hence tried to be sensitive to my communal friends, giving them time to process and to move at their own pace. I am hoping that the elderly men who continue with the project see that this project is for us: a way of sharing a legacy that has almost fallen into oblivion.

Throughout this experience, I have felt deeply proud of *being Guatemalan*. My relationships with René, Santiago and José allowed me to reconnect with this part of myself, and the ways in which they responded to my being Guatemalan evoked strong feelings in me. The contradictory feelings involved resemble what the Guyanese-British artist Roshini Kempadoo has described as her experience of being Guyanese. “[T]here is an overwhelming sense of deep melancholia, of loss, of helplessness of not being there, not being part, while on the other hand a larger than life feeling of pride – of still considered to be there, of feeling a connectedness to a mythical something called *being Guyanese*” (Kempadoo 2004, 1). This work of art has been for me a way to explore my relationship to an imaginary Guatemala of which I am part, even if I live in Montreal.

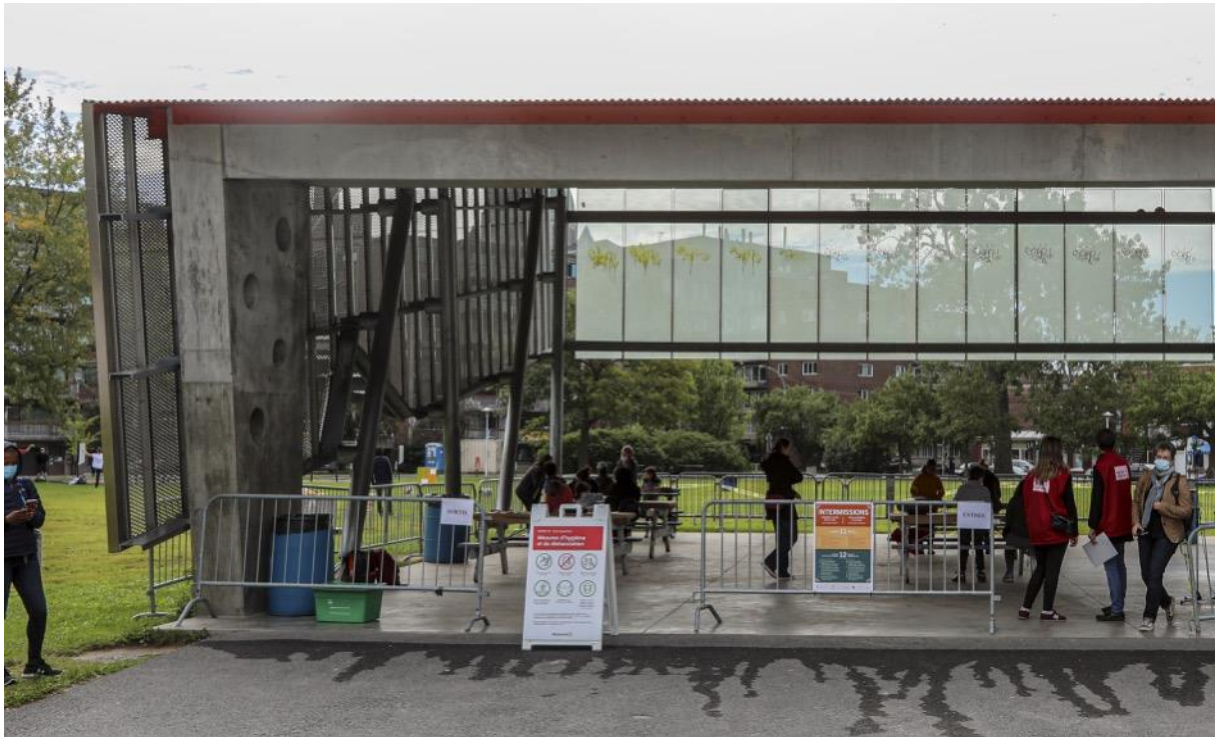


Figure 54. View of the main space for the event *Intermissions: Social Installation in the Park*, 2020, photo: Alex Marchand

Pandemic and Public Spaces

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has affected the way we experience public art, public spaces, and PA. Despite the havoc and suffering that it has caused, the pandemic has also forced me to rethink some of my artistic practices and habits. For example, as the government has ordered galleries and other indoor spaces to close to the public, artists such as myself have had to think of other alternatives to engage with the public. My colleagues and I from Intervals Collective saw this as an opportunity to explore the use of urban space, which led to *Intermissions: Social Installation in the Park*. The Côte-des-Neiges residents who stumbled upon the installation would most likely not have even known of its existence had it been in a gallery or a cultural centre. In Jean-Brillant Park, they were able to discover the artwork in the open air on a bright autumn weekend. Moreover, the Jean-Brillant Park has the advantage of being a particularly diverse social setting. Indeed, its green field, playgrounds and picnic tables invite university students, families, and recent immigrants alike to enjoy the urban atmosphere.

In addition, without the COVID-19 context, my first impulse might have been to prepare an indoor event (exhibition or performance) on the artefacts of the *Club social Tikal Guatemala* and the *Casa de Guatemala*. Yet, the development of a virtual platform will allow the project to extend over a longer period, and encourage a larger number of people to share, and be involved in the construction of the space.



Figure 56. Architectural view of 62 Rachel Street as El Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala in 1979, 2021, 3D modeling software SketchUp, architect: Diego Cortinas

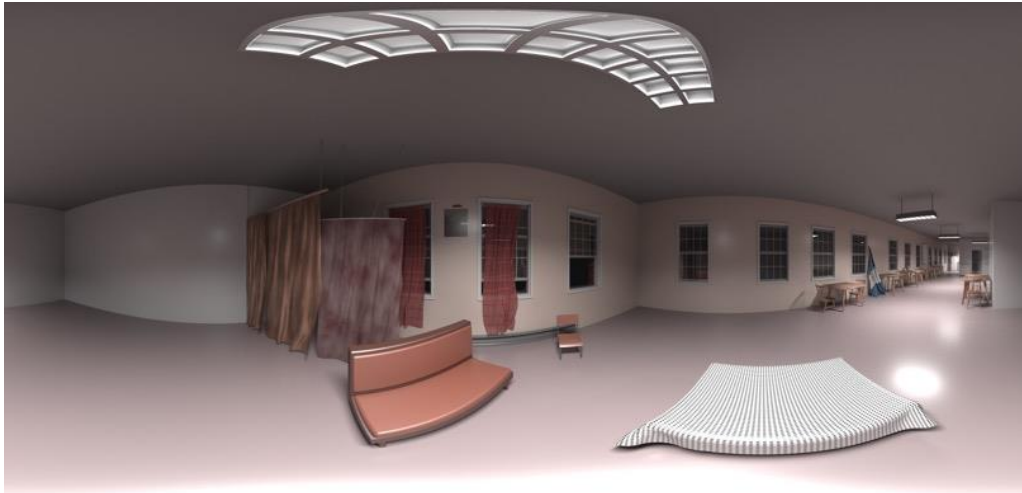


Figure 57. 3D scene of the El Club Social, Cultural y Deportivo Tikal Guatemala in 1979, 2021, 3D modelling software Autodesk Maya, 3D modelling: Florence Turmel

3D Scenes and Architectures as Archives

My project *Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* started with audio interviews and archival research in libraries. Yet, in April 2021, I was able to visit the second floor of 62 Rachel Street East where, according to my information, the former *Club Social Tikal Guatemala* was located. With

the permission of the apartment's tenants, I documented the space using the Polycam LiDAR 3D scanner app⁴⁹, which helped me reconstruct the club virtually.

My friend Diego created an architectural plan of the space, as it existed in 1979, with the 3D modeling software SketchUp⁵⁰ by using my 3D scans of the real space and the audio interviews from Ismael, René and Ricardo describing how the space used to be. A technician assisted me in creating 3D scenes with the software Autodesk Maya⁵¹ where we integrated some photographic elements from 1979. Finally, we shared these 3D scenes online using the free 360° virtual tour website Lapentor available for the public. I see this virtual 3D reconstruction of the club as an architecture as archive, i.e. an architecture which embodies archives of the past to bring it into the present time.

The more I excavate the Club Tikal Guatemala, the more I realise not only how the body as an archive carries projects inter-generationally across time and space (Puwar 2020) but how architectural space does this as well. One of my focuses in experimenting with 'architectures as archives' is to explore alternative ways of presenting and sharing the stories of the communal friends I have been working with, which could avoid the challenges in the ethics and histories of racial representation that I experienced in Zambia. Instead of representing and objectifying the racialised people with whom I am working, I have used the architectural space to voice their stories. Creating an architectural space from my research and oral histories is my way of "giving" my own community a voice. At the same time, I am not an empty vessel or transmitter, but rather a part of this process as a mediator. Hence, I am not 'giving' voice but rather coaxing personal dialogue as well as collaborating to place it in the public realm.

My exchanges with various technicians and experiments about the transposition of the space in 3D using modeling softwares made me discover the construction of 3D scenes which are 3D models constructed by software programmers. A 3D scene "is a rendered pano [panoramic

⁴⁹ <https://poly.cam/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.sketchup.com/>

⁵¹ <https://www.autodesk.ca/en/products/maya/>

photography] that you can interact like zoom in / out & move top / down / left / right.”⁵² Some platforms allow the creation *3D social scenes* that are 3D virtual meeting spaces where you can share online with communities such as Spoke by Mozilla⁵³. As mentioned, my long-term aim is to build a virtual space that will collect all the findings of *Club Social Tikal Guatemala*.

⁵² <https://lapentor.com/faq/>

⁵³ <https://hubs.mozilla.com/spoke>

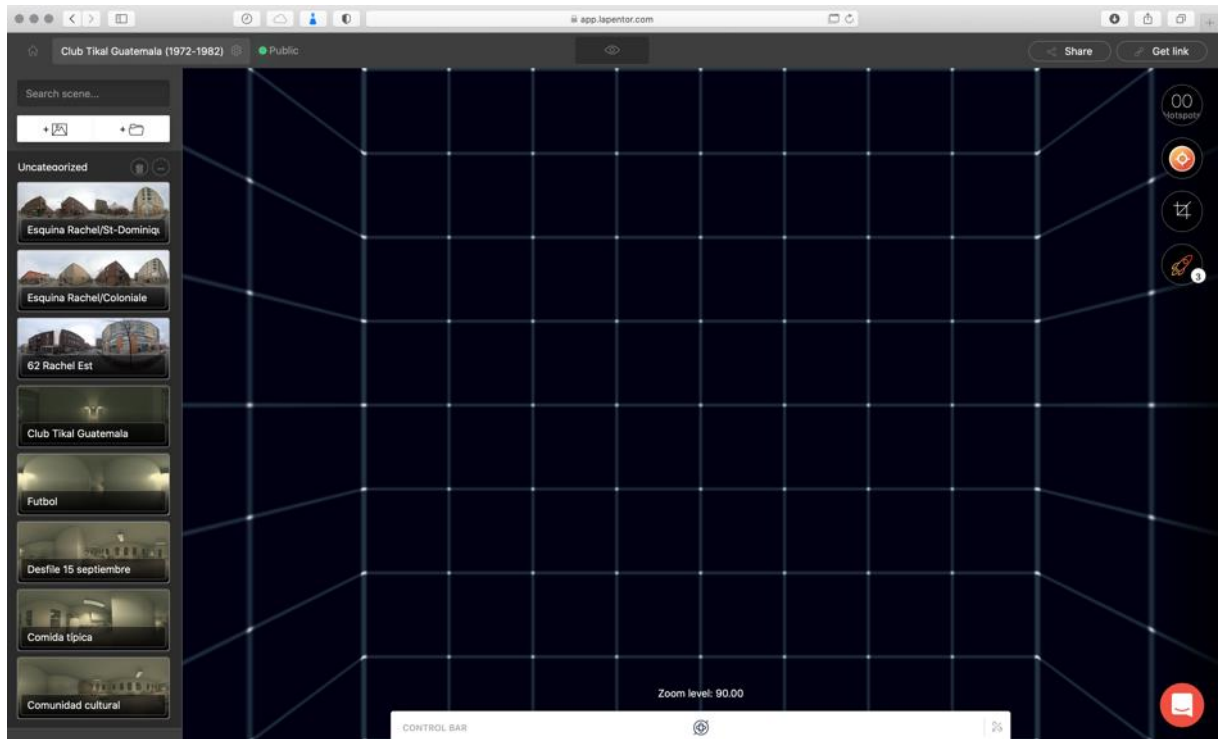


Figure 58. View of the Lapentor 360° virtual tour website user interface, 2021

Immobility and Location

Being back in Montreal gives me the possibility to develop a project with a long-term perspective. While some of the friends that have collaborated in the project have a temporary immigration status, my own situation is not a source of government regulation. As a Canadian citizen, I feel rooted in the city and more in control of the socio-political context of my project. Yet various problematics I encountered in the Bromley by Bow project (related to ethics, power, responsibility, mobility) remain unresolved within the current project as well. For example, one of the differences from the short-term Bow project is that I have the privilege to have a long-term relationship with the Guatemalan friends because of my family ties. This difference allows me the advantage of mutual trust. Yet, I need to criticise my own assumptions, for in retrospect, I realise that our mutual trust does not prevent different power dynamics from affecting our relationships. Power differences and other forms of structural inequality persist and require me to maintain a heightened sense of self-criticality.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced me to stay put in Montreal. This imposed immobility makes me reflect on movement and migration, the themes that I have been exploring with my communal friends. My video *Historia de los Guatemaltecos en Montreal* (2020) expanded on the issue of transition and change, while my ongoing work is about constructing virtual social scenes that inscribes the tension inherent to the concept of diaspora as a process of inclusion and exclusion (Brah 2005, 189).

Until recently, I used to work as a *nomadic subject* (Braidotti 2012) with ephemeral and collective types of art practices, such as performances and workshops. Now, the pandemic context has prompted me to explore the online world. My most recent artwork uses a medium requiring technological production where the software rendering of each 3D scene can take up to 10 hours and the work should be experienced through a computer or phone screen. Hence, my current artwork brings into focus the ways in which technologies shape our contact with each other and regulate our ability to create communities.

Section 19 – How My Practice and Research Evolved

The ways in which my artistic practice evolved during the fourth year of my research (2020-2021) are best understood against the backdrop of the Bromley by Bow project. In *Community in the Making* I worked far from home with people from a neighbourhood that I had not previously known, giving me the role of a clear outsider in relation to the project participants. Furthermore, as an art and health commission, *Community in the Making* unfolded in a clearly defined institutional context that allowed me to be paid, for the project to take place within a definite timeframe, and for the commissioner to receive clear inputs in the form of quantitative data included in the final report. Although our goal was to involve and empower the participants at a grassroots level, in hindsight, I need to acknowledge that our methods were not always clearly aligned with this goal. We fostered empowerment, yet we also produced exclusion. Hence, in some respects, the project reinforced the neoliberal logics of participatory art (PA) practice as I explained in [Sections 01](#) and [03](#).

Looking back at the evolution of my artistic practices, the distinction between *Community in the Making* and my fourth-year projects is apparent. To begin with, *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* came about in a more organic manner. When I returned to my moorings (Hall 1997) – Montreal, the city where I grew up, and its Guatemalan immigrant community – I began to navigate more deeply into my routes (Clifford 1997). I became more interested in the issue of immigration and the stories of the people I had known since my childhood. I returned to my community, yet I felt like – and was viewed by others – as an insider/outsider. There was no institutionalised art commission to produce, no fellow researchers; I was on my own and adopted multiple old and new roles: son, friend, second-generation immigrant, student, artist, professor, etc. Having previously travelled from London to Livingstone, I was now gravitating in my hometown towards the Guatemalans that I had met in my past. Without a clear objective in mind, I started slowly fostering relationships with them, thereby challenging neoliberal participation through my actions, words, thoughts, and feelings. These relationships were continuous and open-ended – they were communal friendships.

The discovery of the existence of El Club Social Tikal Guatemala was a turning point in my project. Through archival documents and interviews, I found a place of communality that the

people of my parents' generation had created. In fact, it was much more than a place; it was a space of resistance to the matrix of coloniality, a social scene that blended private and public space in a way that was beneficial to its founders and their community – without trying to romanticise, as this space was also filled with disappointments, tensions, losses, dislocations, despairs, angers, and frustrations. As described above, to a certain degree, the club allowed the Guatemalans to escape the oppressions that they experienced in their daily lives and to renew their mutual bonds of trust and solidarity. Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that my friends started imagining *La Casa de Guatemala*, hoping to extend their bonds and practices.

From the outset of the *Casa de Guatemala* project, I chose to engage with decolonial curatorial practices by including the silenced histories of El Club and challenging the so-called artistic category of the PA aesthetic. For example, while a neoliberal PA approach values qualities of independence, distance and transaction, my project uses strategies such as interdependence, connecting, networking, and sharing. My work also esteems values of mutual respect, reciprocity, and integrity by sharing power and resources. Still, I must be critical of what I have achieved as my status as an artist and professor offers me unequal resources compared to my communal friends. To address this issue I intend, for instance, to find ways to share the technological and financial resources offered to me. Also, my project is not about outputs, but rather it is about the process of (un)learning and, most importantly, about listening and (re)building. With this project, I am more intentional about letting others talk. I adopted oral history as a research method, conducting biographical interviews and informal conversations, for it allows me to push my dialogue and listening skills even further. As you have seen, I was informed by dialogic participative and critical pedagogy approaches (Boal 2014; Denzin 2003; Freire 2017; Puwar 2012). Most importantly, I wanted to take my decolonial praxis a step further. I did so by engaging with decolonial aesthetics through the stories of my communal friends. The existence of El Club Social Tikal Guatemala is not documented by the records of History, nor is it part of the official state archives. In recording and diffusing the voices of Guatemalan immigrants to Montreal, I am rendering their experiences visible and, hopefully, am repairing some of the injustices they experienced. In so doing, I am employing a concrete alternative to the neoliberal mode of production that is linked to the coloniality of power. I hope

this work will contribute to the individual and collective dignity of my friends and fellow Guatemalans in Quebec.

I also wish to note that my relationships with the people involved in the fourth-year projects is much more intimate than those developed during *Community in the Making*. Although I was able to develop strong relationships with my Bromley by Bow collaborators and participants, specifically as the initial project was followed by a podcast (see, [Project 04](#) above), in retrospect those relationships never had this intimacy I formed with René, Ismael, Santiago and José. The snowball method that I employed led to a better distribution of power between the participants and me – but as I mentioned in [Section 14](#), I can not escape the power dynamics at play in our relationships. Indeed, I did not view them as a *group* of ‘participants’, but rather as fascinating individuals – friends! – with life-stories that deserved to be heard. Hence, my relationship with them is much more singular and emotional, it is linked to fictive kinship (Ebaugh and Curry 2000) that immigrant communities often generate. I hope that I have done their subjective voices and experiences justice. Although it is difficult to totally escape the hierarchies that society imposes on us, *La Casa de Guatemala* allowed me to move a bit closer towards to a decolonial praxis, while bringing with it a set of difficult and sometimes conflicting emotions (debt, guilt, shame, joy, pride, etc.).

During the fourth year, my artistic projects evolved in tandem with the research, both intertwined and contributing to each other. The amount of dialogue on *La Casa de Guatemala* allowed me to add the approach of oral history to my research and to combine it with PA. From a methodological viewpoint, I learnt new techniques (for example, related to interviews) and gained a deeper understanding of my own, multiple positionalities. I came to view the creative process as one of coconstructing hybrid and experiential knowledge about art, resistance, communality, and immigrant realities. As mentioned, my relationships with my friends are not devoid of friction or inequalities. The balance of power remains unequal, whether due to age, education, or gender. Yet, I hope to have shown that there is a way to move forward with and in spite of these dynamics, towards a decolonial praxis that I have defined as a reflexive practice of communal friendship.

CONCLUSION: AWAKENING FROM THE DREAM (2022)

Note to the reader: I did not see it coming. The disruptions that I experienced in my academic research from the abrupt change of supervisors to the COVID-19 pandemic finally crystallised in the aftermath of my doctoral defence. Six months have passed since completing my Viva voce in July 2021. I was granted a pass subject to minor amendments, but the requested changes appeared major. The written component that you have in your hands (or on your screen) is substantially different from the version I initially submitted. It demonstrates how two examiners can affect the writing process at the final stage, as if the four years of research had been reshuffled like cards in a deck. The researcher is expected to comply with the examiners' requests to (hopefully) get a PhD degree. I am aware that this is not a unique case in the history of PhDs. I am revealing this multi-layered 'T', as I did in the previous sections, because the power relations that shape the lines of my written diary are at the core of my work examining the impact of coloniality on participation.

Relations Between Each Project

I did not know where my doctoral research would lead me when I started; my destination became gradually apparent as I advanced. When I started at Goldsmiths in September 2017, I was initiating the workshops *Community in the Making* (2016-2018) that I explored in the first part of my doctoral research. At that time, I was interested in the tension between the artistic and community spheres while I was making participatory art (PA) and thinking about the politics of participation (in art). In the 1st year (2017-2018), I examined the negative effects of the service paradigm on the practice of participation in art. My findings included identifying the detrimental effects of neoliberal PA. Inspired by my family's experience of immigration from Guatemala to Canada, I began to develop an alternative approach to PA that for a limited of time I named communal friendship. This phase of the 2nd year (2018-2019) nourished me with decolonial theories that challenged not only my ways of making PA, but also my life narrative. In the third year (2019-2020), I started to challenge my position as a neoliberal participatory artist and to open up spaces of dialogue through more discursive projects. This

step allowed me to grasp the intertwined dynamics of neoliberalism, (racialised) participation in art and coloniality.

Four years later, I am finishing my PhD in the middle of another long-term project, *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* (2020-ongoing). I went from being an outsider in an art and health commission in London (UK) to an insider/outsider within the current artwork in my hometown (Montreal, CA). In between these two moments, a series of events and experiences helped me develop my doctoral research into an investigation on how to decolonise the concept of participant and the practice of participation in PA. This journey gave me tools to explore alternative options to the hegemonic assumptions of thinking, doing, producing, exhibiting, and feeling PA.

Direction of Future Work

My PhD process has shown that engaging in a reflexive practice of communal friendship requires the willingness to go back and forth between reflection and action, and to (un)learn. Writing in 2022, I plan to continue this open-ended approach in my praxis. As a next step, I hope to examine the elastic concept of *communal* further, particularly as it relates to the notions of reflexivity and plurality. While communality was easy to establish with my Guatemalan friends in *La Casa de Guatemala en Montreal* thanks to our pre-existing bond, such cases seem to be exceptions in the world of PA. For instance, there was no communal relationship between the participants of *Community in the Making*, which probably partly explains how we delved into neoliberal participation. Could a communal friendship approach unite people despite their differences and offer an alternative to neoliberal participation in such a context? Do my PA projects constitute communal friendships? I will be exploring these open questions in my next projects.

To further my decolonial praxis and to deepen my inquiry into communal friendship, I recently created the Arts Research Laboratory in Decoloniality, a multidisciplinary group of artists and researchers at UQAM and abroad committed to working with decolonial approaches in the artistic, cultural, and educational fields. We have already created a series of events

conceptualising *Decoloniality as an Artistic Practice*⁵⁴ and *Imagining (De)Colonialism at the University*⁵⁵. The activities in this group will allow me to keep exploring the challenges that I faced in my practice-led doctoral research, this time within/with a community of international researchers.

Another key issue for the future is my participation as a racialised professor in the fight against racism within my institution, Université du Québec à Montréal. The extended revision of my PhD forced me to reduce my involvement in the anti-racist advocacy that I have carried on since 2020. Discussions between our advocacy group and the administration ended up in a dead end, making institutionalised anti-racist co-operation unlikely in the near future. As for the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee that I lead in my department, the implementation of our recommendations is proceeding with delays, which reveals the effects of institutional racism. The institutional resistance and that of some of my colleagues have been very effective in blocking radical change in my university and department. However, I will persevere in my commitment towards achieving structural transformations.

Contributions of my Thesis to the Participatory Art Field

My research reveals that in the field of PA, there is a lack of critical theory on the politics of participation, especially from the standpoint of racialised artists or academics. Too few academic studies acknowledge the power dynamics involved in being from a culturally diverse background and working with culturally diverse populations. In addition, even fewer aim to shed light on the different colonial undertones of the relationship between the participatory artist and the participant.

To fill this gap, my doctoral research contributes to the field of PA by analysing the terms and conditions of participation in art from a decolonial perspective. Specifically, my work contributes to the wider discussion around participation in art, systemic racism, the institutional

⁵⁴ You can see to some of these events by clicking this link: <https://cardcarccd.wixsite.com/cardc/blog>

⁵⁵ You can see this event by clicking this link: https://evenements.uqam.ca/evenements/imaginer-le-de-colonialisme-a-l-universite-1/17979?date=2021-11-25_12-30-00

status quo, and structural inequalities. My research demonstrates that personal stories involving not only our ‘rational’ thinking, but also our affect and subjectivity (such as mine and other racialised artists’ before me) are essential to decolonising the wider discourse around theory and practice involving participation and cultural diversity. By sharing my personal experience as a racialised artist directly involved with tokenism and systemic racism, my research offers another perspective on the discourses around the politics of participation and racialised representation. My reflexive diary highlights the importance of critically reflecting on these discourses that actively shape and regulate our work and identity. In sharing our stories, we move towards the decolonisation of the ways in which we experience, produce, and evaluate (participatory) art. My research affirms that we, non-White and White persons, must together take an active part in tackling questions of (colonial) power and its relationship with art, participation, and race in the West.

A Path (Rather than a Term) for Decolonising Neoliberal Participatory Art

How do we change a participant into a communal friend with a vocabulary that is specific to decoloniality? Through my different practices and reflections, I delved into this crucial question by employing a Freirean approach of action learning, a praxis where I (we) reflect and I (we) change. Yet my work has demonstrated that there is no straightforward answer to the question.

After four years of exploring communal friendship as participation, issues related to neoliberal participation such as power dynamics or instrumentalisation are still emerging in and around my practices. Thus, I was prompted to revisit different discursive frames that operate within communal friendship and to broaden my understanding of it in relation to other concepts, such as partnership, comradeship, fictive kinship, sisterhood, and pluralist friendship. None of these terms are unproblematic.

Changing participant into a friend and then into a communal friend is difficult. Mainly because doing so, and decolonising participation in general, requires asking questions that unsettle the participants’ status quo. My results show that moving away from tokenism and colonial behaviour requires a distribution of power and agency through self-criticality and an ongoing examination of one’s various positions of power as an artist. Thus, one of the main lessons that

my research offers for participatory artists is explaining the decolonising potential of the willingness to go back and forth between reflection and action, and to (un)learn. Yet my research also demonstrates that there exists no magical tool or technique to combat the neoliberalisation of PA. *A new term is not a solution; what matters is the process.* Hence, we need to develop processes that offer alternatives to the neoliberalism that inhabits PA as well as academia, the artworld, and human relationships. Thus, my reflections and practices demonstrate the need for an awareness of the structural problems of PA and the desire to change that system by questioning its founding principles.

My doctoral research *Awaken Dreams: Decolonising Participatory Art through Communal Friendship* was a collective opportunity to imagine other ways of collaborating, being in contact, and forming relationships. As the future now lays before me, I ask myself how to change the (participatory) artist into a communal friend. Decolonising our image of the artist requires acknowledging its colonial legacy and the ways in which it continues to be enacted.

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