Imagining the City: Ritual and Conflict in the Urban Art Democracy

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Abstract

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IMAGINING THE CITY:
RITUAL AND CONFLICT IN THE URBAN ART DEMOCRACY

Carolyn Chernoff

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Carolyn Chernoff
For Richard and Raven, always and forever
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Throughout my fieldwork, I have found that the myth of the lone ethnographer is just that: a myth. Time and again, I have been helped tremendously by people with no reason to be generous to a social scientist, and yet generous indeed have been the people I worked with at Rainbow Tornado, Picture This, Art Works, other community-based organizations, and the University of Pennsylvania. All reasonable attempts at anonymity keep me from mentioning you by name, but please know that though your contributions and friendship may not always show up in these pages, I could not research or write without you. Though my dissertation looks like criticism, it is a loving criticism, and one I write because of what you have taught me about life in the Urban Art Democracy.

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ABSTRACT

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Based on fieldwork, interviews, and archival research conducted at three Philadelphia nonprofit organizations over the course of eight years, I ask how progressive community arts organizations function as learning spaces, mediate and reproduce social difference, and enable new relationships with the city. Community arts play a unique role in the organization of the city, and in service of progressive urban transformation;
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CHAPTER ONE:

PHILADELPHIA STORIES

Philadelphia is one of America’s best/worst cities, and the lines of division are stark. It tops too many “worst-of” lists, including America’s Fattest\(^1\), Poorest, Dirtiest\(^2\), Most Violent, Most Dangerous\(^3\), and Most Segregated. In 2012 the city was ranked #1 for bedbugs and in sweatpants consumption. Nicknames and attitudes abound here in “Phithadelphia” (or “Killadelphia”), where “Philly Realness” takes the second-city chip on the shoulder to a whole new level, including throwing batteries at Santa Claus, booing its own sports team\(^4\), and other acts of “horizontal hostility” (Kennedy, 1970) beyond the pervasive willingness to get in the face of anyone who tries to step to you.

And this is a wonderful city, a cradle of American democracy, full of universities\(^5\) and museums and other national treasures. In 2011, Philadelphia was ranked among the best American cities for culture, for college graduates, for singles looking to find love\(^6\), and as a favorite travel destination. It’s relatively safe from natural disasters\(^7\), easily walkable\(^8\), the fourth most-bikeable major city in the country\(^9\), and is home to more

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\(^1\) In 2013 *Women’s Health Magazine* declared Philly the #2 least healthy city in America, and *Men’s Fitness* recently named it the 14th fattest.

\(^2\) #3 in 2013 according to Forbes

\(^3\) 331 murders in 2012, although down 15% from 2007 (http://www.phillypolice.com/about/crime-statistics/)

\(^4\) The original Lincoln Field (football stadium) had four jail cells built into it.

\(^5\) 17 four-year colleges and universities

\(^6\) *Kiplinger* rated Philly as #6 in 2013

\(^7\) 2008 SustainLane score: Philly was #8 on the list of top 10 safest cities in re: natural disasters.

\(^8\) #5 most walkable U.S. large city according to WalkScore.com
public art than any other city in the U.S. Whether best or worst, according to Census data or popular opinion, Philadelphia is an amazing place to study social inequality and culture as they are lived.

This is a terrible city. This is a wonderful city. This is a fraught city, and one where art plays any number of roles. This city is many things, but chief among them is an ideal space to study urban social problems on the level of social interaction. I root the “urban interaction problem” (Duneier & Molotch, 1999) in urban ethnographic literature (Anderson, [1976]2003, 1990, 1999, 2004, 2011; Duneier, 1999; Goffman, 1959, 1971, 1983; Jackson, 2001; Jacobs, 1961; Joseph, 2002; Lloyd, 2005; Lofland, 1973; Sampson, 2013; Suttles, 1968; Whyte, [1943] 1993; Zorbaugh, 1929), looking at face relations among strangers, life in "public," and strategies urban dwellers use to manage risk and construct "community."

The problem, and indeed, what is still unique about urban life, is a city of strangers, friends, and enemies in a context of entrenched social inequality. Do people like racism, poverty, and violence? Not overtly, although it privileges many in ways they would rather not face. But for people looking to create "progressive social change," the city, with its fault lines and flaws, is an ideal place to experiment. Some of these experiments in social interactions use art as an intervention into urban problems of anomie, alienation, and segregation.

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9 According to *Bicycling Magazine*, Philadelphia has the most bicycle commuters per capita of the ten largest U.S. cities, and one of the highest percentage of female cyclists nationwide.

10 Smithsonian survey
So: from the bottom up, how are people using art to re-make the horrible city into something more humane? The city is an interactive context, city as space of strangers and friends, navigating strangers and managing perceived risk, and the tension between "community" and the goal of an "unoppressive city." How do progressive community arts organizations function as learning spaces, mediate and reproduce social difference, and enable new relationships with the city for progressive or radical white people with class privilege?

My definition of “art” is porous and expansive. In my research, “art” includes giant puppets, protest signs, murals and mosaics spanning multiple stories on the sides of row houses; it also includes Shakespeare, gardening, and fine dining. My interest in art is an interest in collective representations, those you can see and those you imagine, and the way conflict plays out in, around, and through those collective representations.

In this dissertation, I examine the social life of community art, or art primarily concerned with community process, in majority-white, politically progressive organizations with a strong ideology linking arts participation to urban transformation. This is a vision of culture that can’t keep away from puns and word play, particularly around notions of p/art/icipatory democracy. The organizations and people I study and analyze here emphasize the process of collaborative art making and experience over any particular final product. Across multiple sites, the goal of all this arts participation is transformed social relationships and an unoppressive city. But the paradox of urban diversity interferes with this goal. Though cities are demographically diverse, they are also increasingly segregated by race, class, consumption, and ideology (Massey &
Denton, 1993; Bishop, 2009). An example of urban art engaged in community identity claims across this paradox of urban diversity is a recent sticker campaign along Baltimore Avenue.

STICKER WAR

A few years after 2000, a series of bumper stickers began to appear on telephone poles and other public locations along the Baltimore Avenue corridor: “This is West Philly,” the stickers read, in black text on a white background. “University City is a marketing scheme.” Soon these stickers receive a response. In similar simple black text on white background, near a small circle divided into red, yellow, black, and white quadrants, the new stickers retort, “It is Lenapehoking. ‘West Philadelphia’ is colonialism.”

Illustration 1.1: “This is West Philly”
These stickers are a curious form of democratic urban art. The first sticker is text only, and a plain text at that. The second sticker uses a four-color Four Directions graphic, a visual reminder of indigenous presence and culture. How are they art? What does democracy have to do with it? One argument is pragmatic: street-level art is accessible. It’s everywhere. The artist is anonymous, but voices common sentiments, and can present individual and collective challenges to prevailing discourses. Graffiti and stickers have long been part of the urban experience. Not everyone agrees graffiti and stickers are “art,” but I offer this example of West Philly stickers to reinforce the ways street-level art uses images and text to articulate dreams, fantasies, and challenges, and the connection of informal and non-traditional art forms to urban identity and struggles. Art, broadly defined, exists in social context, particularly in the context of interaction and conflict.
Both stickers react to the re-branding of part of West Philly as “University City” (official motto: “Left of Center,” playing off the location, which is left, or west, of Center City, but also the real and imagined liberal, radical, or Leftist politics of an urban Ivy League university-centered neighborhood). The University of Pennsylvania’s internal newsletter explains that the name and slogan are the results of a year-long marketing strategic plan […] [University City District Executive Director Eric] Goldstein explains that, "University City District was founded in 1997 to reinvigorate University City, the 2.2 square-mile neighborhood on the west side of downtown Philadelphia, by combating the issues of cleanliness and safety which threatened the community and to help change negative perceptions of the area."

(Almanac, 7/13/04, 51[1])

It is not unusual in contemporary American cities for one distinct geographical region to have several competing names and identities, but the semiotic argument that unfolds here, from street banners to stickers, draws attention to the multiplicity of urban identity and the role of art and culture in creating real and imagined cities. The sticker campaigns ask, which is the real place? Whose place is it? The sticker campaigns, or sticker wars, illustrate how art and culture create place, assert authority and identity, and challenge ongoing discourses—in this case, about an area of the city long divided between those with class privilege and those without (among other differences), and a hotbed of political radicalism. So the reminder that “West Philly” is a fiction as much as “University City” not only reminds residents of the mythological aspects of city life, but also highlights how race, class, power, and history become invisible or overlooked.

Attention to race, class, tenure, and residency matter in the example of the stickers. It matters, too, that these are stickers: street art, immediate and simple. They
draw attention not only to the underlying issues of social difference and inclusion, but to the role that art and culture play. Tensions around identity and the multiple, simultaneous, and contradictory nature of the city play out in and through art, particularly self-consciously political (direct democracy) and participatory projects done solo, in collectives, and through community-based organizations.

As briefly illustrated in these West Philly sticker campaigns, I argue that visions of an unoppressive multiracial city are created in community-based arts participation (among other places). The production of urban vision and the stories “seen” illustrate white people’s desire for (and conflict around) urban diversity. Community-based arts play a unique role in the organization of the city, and in service of progressive urban transformation.

Community-based arts participation operates at a symbolic level. Community-based arts participation is a process of co-creation. Organizations and individuals together make a dream of a multiracial city of difference visible. What is unarticulated but present is the reality of social inequality and racialized conflict. Through their involvement, participants envision and enact, if only fleetingly, an imagined and unoppressive city. The disconnect between the imagined and lived city, however, illustrates the impact of urban inequality, particularly as white people understand “urban inequality” as “poor people of color.” In enacting diversity through moments of imagination—as seen in street theater, parades, and public art as well as mainstream consumption of art and culture—competing discourses of diversity are created. These are the discourses of visible diversity and diversity of experience, and they “speak” within
the context of multiracial community amidst urban difference. And so community-based arts organizations are sites of urban imagination. They are useful places to think with, and to “see” urban problems and potential solutions as they are lived through everyday social interaction.

Recent scholarship and public policy ask arts to drive economic growth for urban revitalization; this perspective takes positive social interaction as a given within the larger project of arts-based urban economic development. However, the social life of community-based art and related democratic practices provide another lens to explore the role of art and arts organizations within the contemporary city. Within the fractured context of American cities (racial and ideological segregation), community arts provide a testing ground for social interaction across demographic difference: a place where “culture builds community” (Stern & Siefert, 2002), albeit not unproblematically. This dissertation explores democratic practices around diversity within majority-white urban community arts organizations devoted to progressive social change.

Community arts organizations articulate particular visions of urban diversity. In the case of majority-white, politically progressive community arts organizations ostensibly working for urban transformation, the vision of urban diversity articulated in public is often at odds with the ways in which diversity is understood and lived within the organizations themselves. Rather than simply a failure, hypocrisy, or contradictory reproduction of white privilege, however, the visions of urban diversity advanced by different community arts organizations also point to the powerful relationships between
culture and place, as well as the importance of the symbolic aspects of community and the use of art.

The conceptual framework for this project combines overarching concepts of art as social intervention in urban problems, the potential for diverse social interactions within community-based arts organizations, and elaborating the assumed connection among cities, arts, and social change that theorists and practitioners rely on when considering the larger role of community-based arts organizations within the contemporary American city. Based on ethnographic research at three Philadelphia community arts organizations over the span of eight years, this is an investigation of social interaction around diversity in progressive arts spaces, and examines where those interactions, ideologies, and organizations fit within the larger project of an unoppressive city.

White people often experience the tension between urban diversity as it is lived—in isolation—and as it is imagined—in egalitarian interaction—as racialized conflict, even in cultural projects devoted to multiracial community across social difference. And yet this tension also highlights the importance of the imagination for urban transformation, and the role of culture in a diverse democracy. This dissertation explores the ways that culture influences understanding of urban diversity, addresses the simultaneous reproduction of social inequality alongside social transformation, and offers a comparative analysis of the use of community art in service of a more egalitarian and less oppressive city.
Culture may be the thing that cities do best (Zukin, 1995), but the production of urban culture involves face-to-face relationships, and they are not simple or uncontested (Kramer, 1994; Wolff 1981). Many scholars address this issue (ethnographic analysis of urban culture production), but most focus on aspects of consumption, economics, or authenticity (Grazian, 2003; Lloyd, 2005). What about the decidedly non-profit urban cultural sphere? Community arts organizations have gained renewed attention and funding in the community-hungry era of the late 90s and burgeoning 2000s. While culture certainly builds community (Stern & Siefert, 2002), from public safety to health, I argue that it is important to trouble the notion of "community" in community-based art. Rather than community, in fact, it is rituals and other acts of engagement that may accomplish the personal relationships and experiences across categories of identity that “community” intends but rarely accomplishes. In looking at notions of diversity enacted in three politically progressive, majority white, Philadelphia community arts sites, we can learn more about the fault lines of face relationships at a micro level as well as better understand the promise and pitfalls of community arts as hopeful site of urban social change.

IDENTITY LESSONS AND THE UNBEARABLE WHITENESS OF BEING

This dissertation focuses specifically on white people’s understanding of diversity, race, and difference within the space of community arts organizations. It is reasonable to question that focus, particularly if a focus on race creates its own observer effect. First of all, this focus emerges from the data: sustained participant-observation,
interviews, and archival materials collected over the space of eight years. It is not an accidental or myopic focus. Diversity, race, and difference matter at community arts sites and in the narrative of progressive urban transformation.

Second, this focus is an ethical one as well as a scholarly one. Social science still does very little studying “up” (Nader, 1972) in terms of social problems, particularly those associated with urban poverty and segregation. It is imperative to understand the perspectives of those with race and class privilege and very real economic and social power; these are the people who impact policy, represent social movements, and otherwise help make large changes that impact the daily lives of urban residents. For example, the South Side of Chicago, where the University of Chicago is located, is possibly the most-studied urban area in all of social science. This makes sense—but the vast majority of the Chicago School and its descendants look at racialized poverty from the perspective of people of color living in concentrated poverty. Again, this emic focus is necessary.

But it is not the whole story. In order to understand urban problems, we also need to understand the perspective of those who benefit from them, tacitly as well as directly, and those with the power to shape or transform urban problems. It is not that white people or people with class privilege are never subjects of social science—although as a graduate school colleague of mine warned me, “These people don’t like to be studied,” which was an interesting warning from a straight white man who worked at a very

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11 White towns (Binzen, 1971) studied are working class or not-working class—economic struggle. Class privileged white communities are more typically studied at school (Cookson & Persell, 1987).
expensive independent secondary school, and one that perhaps presumes some things about my own identity and position. I expand on this in Chapter Three, but I was raised in an enclave of white privilege and wealth myself, in Chicago, and attended prestigious private schools for the entirety of my education. I grew up in a white bubble. The type of wealthy, vaguely liberal bubble where the rejoinder to questions about my private school being mostly white would be to start listing the couple of kids of color in each grade. I am one of “these people,” and that is part of why it is important to research white people’s attitudes about race.

**DISSERTATION STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENTS**

Throughout this dissertation, I analyze ethnographic data to look at art-related experiences and interventions with the contemporary diverse, divided city. I focus on hopes and realities of white people working for urban transformation through community arts organizations, and the racialized conflict that seems to paradoxically result from attempts to build multiracial community. My research questions address the role of culture in reproducing and transforming social inequality. I look at community arts organizations to better understand face interactions and other practices of urban transformation in the context of arts-based civic engagement. What is being produced, reproduced, or transformed, and how? What is the impact of social difference? What notions of diversity are being enacted?

In Chapter Two, In Search of Experience, I review literature about contemporary American cities, calls for community, and sites of interaction across social difference. I
problematize current models of face interaction (Sidewalk, Canopy, Marketplace) and investigate the uses of participatory art. The urban setting, face relations, and interactions across social difference provide the context for the analysis of interaction in diverse but divided cities.

In Chapter Three, Midwest Manners Meet Philly Realness, I explain my research methods, with an overview of the project, research questions, description of sites, and some background into who I am to study these particular participatory urban art worlds. I conducted participant-research at three community arts organizations over the course of eight years, including public parades and performances, behind-the-scenes work, conference organizing, art-making, program evaluation, teaching children and adults, and endless meetings, which are the foundation of participatory democracy (see Polletta, 2002).

In Chapter Four, When Rituals Fail, I examine racialized conflict through the lens of interaction ritual chains and racial microaggressions. This chapter explores how social reproduction happens through a framework of failed rituals. I combine Collins’ interactional ritual chains (2004) with Sue et al.’s racial microaggression framework (2007, 2009) to explain how organizations explicitly devoted to social transformation can reproduce the very social inequalities they seek to change—namely, the reproduction of white power and privilege. Daily disrespects snowball, and interactional ritual chains cohere and calcify, making other alternates harder and harder to picture, much less enact.

Chapter Five, We’re All White Here, explores the discursive and practical construction of diversity in majority white, progressive settings. Diversity emerges as a
set of dual categories: visible diversity versus diversity of experience, with particular impact for group behavior and individual conceptions of diversity for white people looking to interact across social difference.

The data chapters so far have outlined how progressive white people reproduce social inequality and white privilege through community arts. And yet against the odds and against the data, people “see” and experience the city through arts and culture. In Chapter Six, Imagining the City, I explore exactly that. Community arts create particular representations of urban diversity in public—ones they may not be able to live and yet in brief moments can at least “see.” This is one of the more important aspects of urban art—its symbolic power and the way urban/arts/democracy are braided together in theory even if not possible (yet) in practice.

I conclude the dissertation by examining formal and informal educational reverberations to the use of art as an urban intervention, consider alternative interpretations, and make policy and practical recommendations for majority-white community arts organizations looking to transform urban inequality. I detail some of my next research projects and address themes of diversity, conflict, and the uses of art. Overall, even with the visible production of racialized conflict at all three sites, my research highlights the centrality of rituals and the importance of coalition work for organizational and personal engagement with art, with the city, and certainly with the Urban Art Democracy.
CHAPTER TWO

IN SEARCH OF EXPERIENCE:

ART AND THE DIVERSE/DIVIDED CITY

The problem of urban interaction in diverse, divided cities has long guided sociological research. How do strangers from wildly divergent backgrounds manage to coexist in urban publics, and in private spaces too? Cities are dense and anonymous; while they are divided into stratified or segregated zones, one of the key characteristics of the city is the possibility for interaction across social difference, even fleetingly. Questions of social order and disorder rest on interaction, impression management, and negotiations of social relationships among people who share no common culture of ethnic ties or kinship (Anderson 1990; Bearman 2005: 18; Duneier 1994; Duneier and Molotch 1999; Jacobs 1961; Park et al. 1925; Rieder 1985; Simmel 1971; Suttles 1968; Wilson and Taub 2007; Wirth 1938; and Zorbaugh 1929). The nongeographic community, the urban neighborhood, and the sense of the city as a space of encounter across social difference account for much of the promise and problems of the American city.

The concepts of diversity and experience are both central to thinking about the city. The notion of urban community, in particular, draws on the imagined city as a web of relationships; that these relationships are experiences of social interaction is a given. Community has long had an uneasy relationship with difference, however, and “indeed, the question of community might be rephrased as how to live with difference” (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, 256). Community is a construction that helps create oases of sameness of similarity in a sea of social difference. Putnam discusses the urge to “hunker down” or
“pull in like a turtle” in the presence of racial and ethnic diversity, saying that “diversity, in the short run, seems to bring out the turtle in all of us” (2007, 151). Fraught as social interaction in diverse urban environments may be, it is still held as a public good, and indeed, a crucial component of what defines a city.

In addressing questions or problems of the experience of urban diversity, art and culture provide a unique focus. Though much of the prominent research over the past decades has focused on the economic impact of urban arts and culture activity (mostly based on Florida, 2003), the social impact of the arts has been understudied, particularly with regard to arts and culture activity as a nongeographic community or “cosmopolitan canopy” (Anderson 2004, 2011) that shelters nascent relationships across social difference. While social scientists and mass media alike rediscover the decline of American community every few years, rumors of the death of community are greatly exaggerated. Indeed, communities continue to matter—and to shape lives. The neighborhood effect influences all manner of social forces, from crime to civic engagement, home ownership to health outcomes, and beyond, making the impact of place often more important than the vagaries of national economic and social phenomena (Sampson, 2013). Community and anomie matter, in terms of individual lives and cities. Reactions to neighborhood difference shape behaviors, which in turn shape other social processes and the city as a whole. Sampson reminds us of the importance of social lives lived in relationships, and communities, neighborhoods, and cities as spheres which nurture relationships. Along with relationships, culture is produced in interaction (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003, 741).
Social interaction produces relationships and culture; both also help reproduce social inequality. Individual actions are linked to social structures through processes like “emotion work” (Hochschild, 1983) and “habitus,” “practice, and “field” (Bourdieu, 1977), but these processes are rarely studied in group interactions. Eliasoph & Lichterman (2003) argue that analysis of collective representations and habitual styles of group interaction strengthen existing understanding of the social reproduction of inequality as seen through culture. Politically progressive urban community-based arts organizations provide a unique lens for examining group interaction, collective representation, and individual reactions to neighborhood difference and urban inequality. As contradictory spaces of difference and isolation, cities have long been central to art-based intervention: the use of art as Brecht’s hammer for social change.

Urban arts and culture spheres function as a critical social imaginary, a literal and metaphorical space where social orders are enacted, transformed, and reproduced. Community-based arts organizations, in particular, serve as a microcosm of social conflict around "community"—race, class, and other identity-based experiences. Within the context of the diverse, divided city, community-based arts organizations are a place to examine what is enacted when art is used as a social intervention into "urban" problems.

As the art world turns to "relational aesthetics" and "social practice," it echoes community-based arts' longstanding concern with process (Bishop, 2006; Cockroft et al., 1998; Crehan, 2011; Gude, 1989; Joseph, 2002; Kramer, 1994). The social process of community, facilitated by arts participation, is also a concern of some branches of education research, both inside and outside classrooms (Americans for the Arts, 2007;
Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999; Gould, 2005; Galligan, 2001; Nelson, 2008; Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2008), as well as in specific art worlds (Becker, 1974, 1982; Kramer, 1994; Wolff, 1984). And the social production of community, of course, is another way of talking about sociology.

In this chapter, I explore a theoretical framework for the Urban Arts Democracy. It is an awkward phrase, to be sure, but I have not yet found a better one. This is in part because it is a name given by a leader in the field; as an ethnographer, I am partial to emic concepts. But Urban Art Democracy also highlights the linkages among several scholarly fields, and shelters my research concern with the use of art as intervention in urban problems by majority-white, politically progressive community arts organizations.

A community garden is not simply a way to grow food or flowers. A food coop is not just a grocery store. Likewise, community arts organizations are not solely (or even primarily) concerned with the art they produce. Community arts organizations exist within a larger framework of social change, and are themselves contradictory canopies where social inequality is reproduced, elided, and transformed. In looking at community arts organizations, we see the problems and promise of the modern diverse, divided city.

URBAN PROBLEMS: DIVERSE/DIVIDED CITIES

Urban renewal policy provides a prism for seeing the development of the unequal American city, particularly in the North. While many see the urban crisis of the 1970s and subsequent white flight and economic collapse as the direct result of 1960s public policy, Sugrue places the economic and social challenges of American cities in a broader
historical context (1996). Economic changes, he argues, are exacerbated by racism and segregation, and have deeper root causes beyond mid-20th century urban renewal policy. But the larger impact of historical economic shifts, though more difficult to “see,” must be acknowledged, as Sugrue (1996) and Anderson ([1976] 2003, 1990, 1999) argue. Still, recent history provides a compelling framework for understanding how increasingly multiracial cities become increasingly stratified.

After World War II, African Americans continued to migrate North in search of seemingly plentiful although increasingly scarce jobs (Wilkerson, 2011). Northern cities simply had more African Americans than before—more visible people of color, perhaps, but people still clustered into separate neighborhoods and particular types of jobs. The labor and lives of people of color remained to some extent invisible.

Then urban renewal policy destroyed existing poor and working-class African American neighborhoods for new infrastructure, particularly highways. Poor and working-class African Americans, previously living in underresourced but economically and socially diverse neighborhoods, were displaced to public housing, often physically isolated from the rest of the city by the new highways, creating a “geographic concentration of poverty that was previously unimaginable” (Massey & Denton, 1993, 57). While earlier models of diverse cities were inherently unequal, they did not necessarily create the hyperconcentrated and racialized poverty that is another stop in the carcereal continuum (Waquant, 2002). At the same time as cities were being remade and urban removal was bitingly referred to as “Negro removal” (in the words of James Baldwin, Clark, 1989), federal policies aided (or abetted) the mass suburban migration of
large numbers of working-class and middle-class white families, who were able to take advantage of newly-created federal policies like low-interest home mortgages, redlining and racial criteria in lending, and highway construction that enable a quick, direct commute from the new suburbs into the old city (Jackson, 1985).

By the late 1980s, economic and policy conditions created isolated and highly concentrated racialized urban poverty: Wilson’s “truly disadvantaged” (1987). Even low-income African Americans living in gentrifying neighborhoods or in close proximity to class-privileged and largely white people remained isolated from the social, economic, and cultural capital present in more “mixed” neighborhoods; physical co-presence often ironically reinforced literal and symbolic social distance and negative stereotypes (see Anderson’s discussion of “street orientation,” 1990, 1999) about African Americans held by those with race and class privilege (Anderson, 1990, 1999, 2004, 2011). The move from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, along with the attendant expansion of educational attainment, created a credential society (Collins, 1974) that further reinforced the myth of meritocracy (Bell, 1977), or of individual success as the result of individual merit rather than larger structural forces. While “success” was attributed to individual characteristics, structural changes enabled certain kinds of success, as urban revitalization focused on gentrifying neighborhoods and developing downtown business districts for corporations, hospitality, and entertainment sectors (Zukin, 1995; Grazian, 2003). Again low-income neighborhoods populated by people of color were either literally razed or otherwise redeveloped to attract new (white, class-privileged) settlers,
and to “transform both the image and reality of the city from avoidance to desire” (Newman, 2004, 35).

But the city of desire and the city of avoidance have long co-existed, uneasily and often explosively. Like other aspects of contemporary social life, groups are increasingly polarized, seemingly by choice (Bishop, 2009), but also as a result of historical structures clearly seen in increasingly stratified employment and income (Sassen, 1994). The post-industrial service-economy city supports highly-paid professionals—Florida’s creative class (2003), bourgeois bohemians (Brooks, 2000) and yuppies, and the upper-middle class—as well as those marginalized and excluded alongside poorly-paid service workers without job security or transferable labor skills. While many developers argue that a rising tide lifts all boats (see Florida et al.), low-income urban residents rarely benefit from revitalization campaigns. Not only are the high-paying jobs geared towards professionals and out of reach, but as tax incentives for corporations and the upper-middle class generally heavily subsidize urban development, there is little left to trickle down. The argument for casino developments in Philadelphia, for example, includes job creation—large new facilities will need unskilled labor. But a casino can employ only so many hourly-paid custodians, and hourly-paid jobs do not provide a livable wage or health benefits. This is just one example of what Judd & Swanstrom refer to as “divided cities split between the affluent and the poor” (366, 1994), while Mollenkopf & Castells name the increasing polarization and resulting new patterns of inequality the dual city (1991). Economic development is not the trickle-down panacea Florida and others want
to claim; if anything, it often serves to reinforce economic inequality and the separation of those living in a city of choice and one of consignment (Stern & Siefert, 2008).

Diverse and divided, the dynamics of the dual city Moellenkopf & Castells describe persist (1991). Harvey paints New York as a paradise for the rich and prison for the poor (2006), and the disappearing middle class and increased economic polarity reinforce this current vision of the Kerner Report’s 1968 “two Americas, separate and unequal.” It is not that urban American life is entirely split between categories of rich and poor, but these two poles are increasingly visible. The advent of the Occupy movement capitalizes on this, with their rallying cry of “We are the 99%.” Other distinctions and heterogeneous types of identity certainly matter, not only to those individuals themselves but also to the experience of urban social life. But the middle is disappearing, symbolically and literally. The gyre widens, and the stark divide between haves and have-nots is now a constitutive characteristic of cities. Rich and poor occupy different spheres, for the most part, and interactions among them are scarce. Yet neither is completely out of sight by one another, particularly when the same block contains multiple social worlds (Anderson, 1990, 1999). How and where does social change happen, given these divided cities? Where and how do people talk with one another? I now look at experience, participation across social difference, and the places focused on the experience of diversity within divided cities.
DIS/CONNECTION

There are several models of a (more) just city, one that includes both privacy and interaction. Young proposes

an ideal of city life as a vision of social relations affirming group difference. As a normative ideal, city life instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion. Different groups dwell in the city alongside one another, of necessity interacting in city spaces. If city politics is to be democratic and not dominated by the point of view of one group, it must be a politics that takes account of and provides voice for the difference groups that dwell together in the city without forming a community. (1990, 227)

A democratic city is a polity of difference, not a “community,” which necessarily inscribes borders and silences dissent. For those interested in living in an “unoppressive city” (Young, 1990; Green, 1999), face to face conversation across social difference is a crucial way to move past historical and current oppression, residential and ideological segregation, and other ways that urban spaces can easily fracture along lines of identity. Moreover, face-to-face conversation—particularly public deliberation—is seen as a hallmark of social change. But the tension between the necessity of collaboration and the silencing of community is difficult to navigate. In the past 50 years, in particular, the “small groups” of the women’s movement, the training and organizing groups of the civil rights movement, and various cells and collectives (among other clusters) of the student movement (SDS, SNCC) and of groups like the Black Panthers have shown that conversation and collaboration are central to a particular vision of social change (Evans & Boyte, 1986). In attempting to navigate collaboration and community, organizations attempting social change try to practice prefigurative politics. Groups wishing to transform society need to transform their own internal social dynamics.
But what happens in these groups? If “free spaces” are the site and source of democratic change (Evans & Boyte, 1986), even the most “free” of “free spaces” have been shown to reproduce inequalities along race, gender, and class lines, among other social divisions. Stokely Carmichael’s widely-repeated “joke” about the position of women in SNCC (“prone”) is one of the more notable examples of this sort of social reproduction of mainstream roles in an ostensibly “free space” of social change. But this tendency for even self-consciously democratic or radical groups to reproduce the status quo in terms of leadership (particularly privileging men over women and white people over people of color in groups that strive to be multiracial or work across gender differences) is a pitfall of nearly all known social change movements or small groups. DuBois’ 20th century problem of the color line (1903/1989) bleeds over into this century and reminds us that for “free spaces” and other potential sites of change, the problems of difference and the difference difference makes continue to baffle us and too often stymie progressive possibilities.

“Free space” is an attractive notion for activists. It suggests direct democracy or liberation from hierarchy (although egalitarianism is neither a given nor unproblematic—see Freeman, 1972, for her critique of the “tyranny of structurelessness”). Social transformation occurs through culture, encounter, interaction, practice, and free spaces are places where transformational relationships, ideas, practices, and identities are forged alongside movements (Evans 1979, Evans & Boyte 1986, Fantasia & Hirsch 1995, Futrell & Simi 2004, Polletta 1999, Staggenborg 2001). Free spaces of various stripes often consciously draw on the U.S. tradition of the town hall meeting, a nostalgic vision
of direct democracy (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs 2004, Chambers 2003, Mansbridge 1980, Ryfe 2005). The nostalgia and emphasis on relationships connects free spaces to utopian projects, and indeed, free spaces and the community arts organizations I study are a type of utopian proving ground.

And utopia is easily challenged from all sides, not the least of which is from the inside. Schisms, factions, and internal hierarchies (acknowledged and otherwise) can reproduce the social inequalities seen in mainstream culture (Freeman 1972, Polletta 2002). Social interactions—daily, habituated, unconscious—are the lifeblood of community arts organizations, accomplishing or sinking the work they strive to do. Kanter reminds us that communal utopias are formed around ideals of harmony, “yet these notions must be recognized as idealizations, not truths. They describe the ways in which members of communes wish to conceive of communal life, rather than the realities of building such a group” (1972, 54). The three organizations I study were all impacted by the social movements of the 60s (and earlier), so while they are not communes, Kanter is instructive. I am interested in where ideals and practices meet, which is at the level of interaction. This is the “how” of direct democracy scholars agree we need to explore. While it is generally agreed that the process of participatory and direct democracy is important, it is underresearched (see political science literature reviews on deliberative democracy trends in the US: Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs 2004, Chambers 2003, Ryfe 2005). My research is positioned with the larger need for empirical studies, and focuses on the experience of diversity in a divided city.
The possibility of experiencing diversity is distinctly urban, even in such desperately divided cities. What do people like about cities? Diversity. Arts and culture. And luckily, “diverse” “arts and culture” “experiences” are everywhere. UNESCO frames “cultural diversity” as “one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence” (2001). The lens of diversity, arts, and culture provide a way of exploring Lefevbre’s right to the city on the level of individual experience (that is to say, the experience of individuals in social interaction) (1996). Though Brooks reminds us that “we do not hug the Mona Lisa” (1968), art is a type of direct, unmediated experience (Dewey, 1959), and in the urban context, it is also conflated with positive aspects of diversity and difference. Engaging with art and culture, from cuisine to the daily backdrop of graffiti, murals, and public art, is an urban experience that revolves around the experience of the city. The city is not a backdrop, but an interactional context, a place of experience and of social change.

Addressing the city as place of social transformation, Harvey argues,

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (2008, 23)

Urban spaces are intimately connected to democracy. The Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1996, Harvey, 2008) meets the “unoppressive city” (Young, 1990; Greene, 1999) at the level of experience (Dewey, 1934) and social interaction (Goffman, 1971; Collins, 2004).
Sennett describes the city as a narrative space (1990), where the unexpected can happen, and where change is possible. Bruner explains experience as personal, active, and self-referential: "we can have an experience but we cannot have a behavior" (p. 5, 1986), which extends the notion that experience is something lived through (Turner, 1982). The experiences possible in a narrative space are those of symbolic and real change.

While cities may be demographically diverse, and assumed to be spaces of diverse social interaction (interaction across social difference), American cities remain starkly segregated, with isolation across race and class and also spheres of “choice” or ideology (Massey & Denton 1993; Bishop, 2009). Segregation and sorting matter here, because poverty and inequality tend to inhere around race and class. Searching for the experience of urban diversity or “community” across social boundaries is one way of trying to remake cities to meet real needs.

So where do urbanites go to exercise their Right to the City? Where are diverse urban spaces waiting to be experienced? Scholars explain the experience of urban diversity in public spaces through interactional contexts including free spaces of social movements, but also in public, in the temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) of seemingly-spontaneous “happenings” (Bey, 1985), in Third Spaces of cafes or clubs (Oldenberg, 1989), on the Sidewalk (Jacobs, 1961; Duneier, 1999), and under the Cosmopolitan Canopy of marketplaces and parks (Anderson 2004, 2011).

Examining spaces of social interaction, fleeting and longer-term, enables an understanding of what type of relationships are possible, and how they come to be, which

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12 Places waiting for people to “experience” them in the sense that it is every day which will have its dog (See Goffman, Collins)
is particularly useful in understanding the urban experience of diversity. Within divided cities, the commercial havens of the Sidewalk, the Cosmopolitan Canopy, and the Third Space—places of necessary or pleasurable commerce (necessary in the sense of groceries or other supplies that sustain life)—and the political Free Space and anarchist TAZ all suggest that the longing to connect with others is also an urban reality. The Sidewalk, Cosmopolitan Canopy, and Third Space are marketplaces, and illustrate the tendency of “community” or “public” gathering spaces in U.S. cities to be commercial or pay-to-play. Whether spaces of interaction in a capitalist system can ever be noncommercial is an open question, one that guides my research and site selection. Overall, these models attempt to interrogate possibilities for social interaction given the paradox of urban diversity (demographically diverse, not interactionally diverse).

The models and theories available that explain how, where, and why people living in racial and economic urban ghettos may be able to interact with those outside their limited milieu are not sufficient. My dissertation takes a critical stance towards existing theory. While these perspectives allow closer investigation into the potential role of arts and culture in progressive urban social change, much of what exists is overly idealistic to the point of naïveté (particularly that derived from Dewey). The Sidewalk has cracks, the Canopy is tattered, the Free Space is pay to play.

But the Sidewalk and the Cosmopolitan Canopy are urban spaces of encounter—specifically, of encountering difference. They are public, commercial, and transitory in terms of time. Relationships are voluntary and usually fleeting. Still, they present interesting insights into the realities of a diverse city (where, when, how, to what end,
etc.). The Sidewalk and Canopy promise experience; but the promise is the same as the pitfalls. The fault lines are race and class. Anderson reminds us that the “N—moment” is always with us (2011).

The Sidewalk and Canopy are examples of urban “meet-markets,” public spaces of commerce, certainly, but also places to meet and greet neighbors, strangers, and the symbolic Other. In segregated urban America, the Other is tantalizing, and racialized to some degree. The market aspect is not accidental. Urban culture and diversity may be linked to capitalism and consumption. Yet the value of culture and diversity are not only economic, and the relations they engender are not often civil.

COMMUNITY ARTS: MARGINS, INTERVENTIONS, EXPERIENCE

Community arts are a key to a parallel city--in the case of progressive white people, the parallel city conflates poverty, people of color, and authenticity. Representations of this "beloved community" can simply be propaganda, feeding into harmful ideologies and reproducing white privilege and social inequality. At the same time, fraught but deeply-felt representations of multiracial community signal the promise of the city, and of transformed social relations. The paradox of urban diversity also reflects a desire for a city of diverse experience. Of course culture can and does happen everywhere, but “culture is what cities do best.” Still, whose culture, and how? (Kramer, 1994; Zukin, 1995)

Culture may build community, boosting health indicators along with public safety, among other benefits (Stern & Siefert, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2008), but what role do
majority-white community arts organizations play in diverse, divided cities? How do cultural projects focused on “urban diversity” grapple with the realities of demographic diversity in segregated cities? Too often, well-intentioned privileged people simply reproduce social inequality, performing cultural work or collaboration as missionary work, and a salve for white guilt. But these attempts also represent visions of an unoppressive city. Art and culture are linked to urban life and to democratic or progressive change in several ways. The community arts “experiment” (Baldry, 1981: 147) from the 1960s through the current day provides a way to examine these linkages.

In the U.S., there was a rise in middle-class white people’s participation in self-consciously "community-based" art around the 60s, especially in the "people's art" of the contemporary US mural movement. The mural movement in particular has deep international roots and history, of course, and even in the U.S. arts and culture have long been used to create community—but for a particular category of community arts organization, the participatory democracy and visual sensibility of the 1960s impact work we still see today. As Kate Crehan comments in her discussion of British community arts, "what defined community arts was more of a shared ethos than specific aesthetic practices" (2011: 80). The shared ethos is collaboration, and simply a focus on mysterious and somewhat fetishized community “process”. There is no shared definition of community arts, but most attempts point to the ways in which art can “effect social change and affect social policies” (Kelly, 1983:2)

In the words of Harold Baldry, “community arts must still be regarded as an experiment--an experiment in 'cultural democracy' of great importance, not only for the
immediate stimulus and enjoyment it can provide, but because its long-term results--or lack of results--will throw light on the question 'arts for whom?' which is vital for the future of our society" (1981: 147). I would add to this "arts for what?" and answer with "arts for social transformation," but I echo his caution many decades into the community arts "experiment." Overall, however, community arts organizations generally focus on democracy, social change, process over product, an egalitarian mythos, and shared work.

Community arts are certainly not invited to the contemporary art world’s gallery openings or cocktail parties. Relational aesthetics and social practice focus on human interaction and social context, but attempt to focus on the “art.” This is often challenging, since a classic example of relational aesthetics is when "Rikrit Tiravanja organises a dinner in a collector's home, and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup." (Bourriaud, 2002:7). Nicolas Bourriaud writes that relational art is "an taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space" (2002: 14), and above all, based on "interactive, user-friendly, and relational concepts" (Bourriard, 2002: 8). Relational art is concerned with participatory models and asks questions about engagement: "Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue?" (2002:109). Social practice similarly focuses on dialogue, participation, and engagement, but critiques Bourriaud and has its own MFA programs (Mills, Portland State University, Otis) and conference (Open Engagement). Both relational aesthetics and social practice critique community arts even as they benefit from theory and practice of community cultural work. But relational aesthetics and social practice are high art, and invested in
maintaining their status (Bourdieu, 1984; Gans, 1974). Community arts, however, have participation and engagement as the forefront of the "work." So relational aesthetics and social practice may describe what the contemporary art world may be thinking about, but community arts are self-consciously outside the "contemporary art world." In particular, they are more akin to social service agencies and activist cells than the typical gallery, art school, or museum.

The long-standing question of whether something is art is almost irrelevant here; "art" and "culture," like "community," are taken as a given—or rather, are organizing principles of activist and occasionally missionary work around social change and the experience of urban diversity. Bishop writes that in participatory art there is "an authored tradition that seeks to provoke participants, and a de-authored lineage that aims to embrace collective creativity; one is disruptive and interventionist, the other constructive and ameliorative" but in both, "the issue of participation becomes increasingly inextricable from the questions of political commitment" (2006, 11). Crehan comments that community is an appealing concept across the political spectrum, in no small part because of "the way it fuses together an enormously powerful and positive emotional charge with a useful vagueness as to precisely what social relations constitute 'community,'" and that "we need to be careful, however, not to confuse commonsense understandings of community, with their comforting fantasies of authentic belonging, with empirical social realities. The specific tangle of social relations to be found in what we might call 'actually existing communities' can never be assumed. The precise nature of this tangle is always an empirical question, answerable only for a given context. And,
even then, the answer depends on how the question has been framed, from where the 'community' is being seen, and who is doing the looking." (2011:193). This describes the tension among community arts and the contemporary art world as well as community arts and other urban activist movements.

Community arts are often dismissed as hopelessly naïve attempts at smoothing over urban conflict with the archetypical project of a mural, ideally a black hand holding a white hand (see The Simpsons episode Maudland, and also Philly’s own Peace Wall). Just because it is lampooned does not mean it does not have meaning, however. Social Impact of the Arts Project researchers Mark Stern and Susan Siefert have found that while public murals may indeed represent what a leading public art advocate calls “art as a human right” (private conversation), many city residents interpret public murals as indexing a neighborhood’s marginal status (2003), conflating murals, race, socioeconomic class, and neighborhood blight. Regardless of mural content, some people maintain a NIMBY stance towards murals, acknowledging their beauty and their hopeful messages while firmly advocating that their neighborhood should not be marked by what they see as indicators of urban poverty so often conflated with people of color.

Tensions around race and class are not absent from the self-consciously populist “people’s art” (Cockroft, Weber, & Cockroft, 1998) of murals, an art form so often associated with struggles for social justice and equality. Stern and Siefert point out that residents of economically oppressed neighborhoods are, like their peers in more privileged neighborhoods, also likely to be suspicious of the unifying messages of local murals and other “uplifting” public art (2003). Stern and Siefert look at what they call
the social impact of the arts as well as economic impact—real estate prices and other aspects of the market, a perspective similar in approach to that of Richard Florida (2002), attempting to quantify aspects of the urban creative experience.

Community art indexes nostalgia for community but "urban arts programs are generally focused on the high-status arts or tourist fare, vehicles for bringing white people back into the city center." Moreover, "the vital culture that is produced in community settings is very rarely supported through these urban renewal exercises. When it is supported, the impetus is economic, not cultural development" (Graves, 97, 2005). This is a reminder that community art operates in a fraught context of diverse, divided cities; very real issues of social isolation, alienation, and inequality; and racialized conflict over the Right to the City itself.

DIVERSITY AND CONFLICT: WHAT TO DO WITH DIFFERENCE?

Questions of urban diversity and social interaction have been particularly well theorized by sociologists addressing the LGBTQ movements. Parallel to the LGBTQ movement, though we presume that the presence of diversity leads to unity (Armstrong 2002), it is well documented that diversity is more often experienced as detrimental to social and political organizing (Adam 1995; Engel 2001; Gamson 1995; Gamson 1997; Kirsch 2000; Seidman 1993; Warner 1993). The divisiveness associated with diversity within a social movement or group is also typical of U.S. politics in general (Polletta 2002). This seems to be a longstanding social fact, that “people who have many common features often do one another worse or ‘worser’ wrong than complete strangers do”
(Simmel, 1955, 44). With that in mind, diversity is framed as a problem for community arts organizations that can ultimately sink their organization and social or political projects.

But diversity and social difference themselves are social facts—and may be far from a problem to be managed. It is the attempt to smooth over conflict and difference in the name of “community,” Young points out, that leads to some of the most brutal consequences (1990). She suggests another ideal-type for urban social organization: the unoppressive city. Rather than the small, cozy, face-to-face community fetishized by many activists as a counter to the perceived alienation of the modern city, Young echoes Lofland (1973) in envisioning a city of strangers. Here, diversity exists, and may well exist in small or inconsequential interactions as part of daily life (see Canopy, Sidewalk), but a plurality of experiences are expected and encouraged, rather than the suppression of dissent Young associates with the ideal-type of “community” (1990; Freeman, 1974).

And while “community” may be a symbol of unity, it is created in and through conflict. Arts are a surprising and useful space to explore conflict, and not only the well-publicized conflict over content (obscenity, funding, etc.) from those outside the art world, though that is important for understanding what art does (Tepper, 2011). But the social life of creative work and the possibilities of urban transformation—that is a special opportunity that community arts organizations, perhaps the least successful in terms of both “art” and “organizing,” offer participants. Community arts organizations are spaces where broader social conflicts are enacted, reproduced, and sometimes transformed.
CONCLUSION

To reiterate, cities are places of great inequality; this inequality is reproduced in the cultural sphere. Paradoxically, the cultural sphere (in the form of community arts and process-focused social change groups) can be a place of social transformation. I seek to understand the social life of community-based art, particularly repertoires of democratic practices around diversity (primarily race and class). More specifically, I investigate democratic dilemmas (Minow, 1990) of race and class as seen in practices of civic engagement for progressive social change. Democratic dilemmas in Philadelphia community-based arts organization include the ironies and contradictions of unintentional social reproduction, where noticing race is seen as racist just as not-noticing race (or being “colorblind”) is also seen as racist. Even in community-based arts organizations devoted to egalitarian practices and creating an “unoppressive city” (Young, 1990; Green, 1999), hierarchies of power and privilege are often ironically reinscribed by activists looking to transform social inequality. These processes are embedded in the context of diverse, divided cities. Paradoxes of urban diversity serve to focus attention on the places where and the ways in which social interaction across social difference happens, and to what ends. Transformed relations have the potential to transform organizations, institutions, and structures, and a focus on social interaction illuminates challenges and opportunities for urban change.
CHAPTER THREE
MIDWEST MANNERS MEET PHILLY REALNESS:

METHODS

I got involved in Philadelphia community arts for the money: twelve dollars an hour, subsidized by work-study grants. I came to work at Rainbow Tornado about a month after I moved to Philadelphia to begin a master’s program. I didn’t know anyone in town when I moved here, needed something to do and a way to meet people, so I took advantage of the high-speed wireless Internet at my shared house to see what the radical kids and political artists were up to. On a portal for local anarchists as well as on the work-study site for my school, I saw that Rainbow Tornado was looking for part-time workers. I emailed the director and we set up an interview. Initially I was slotted to do development and grant writing work, but when Jojo heard about my teaching and direct service work in violence prevention (and, as he laughs, when he saw me), we agreed that a teaching support position would be a better fit. The fact that I was eligible for federal funds for my work also helped, perhaps as much or more than my participation in a similar milieu of punk rock and radical politics. I worked at Rainbow Tornado throughout my first year in Philadelphia, leaving the organization for full-time

My interview outfit consisted of striped tube socks, a knee-length A-line flower patterned skirt circa 1970 purchased for a dollar at a Baltimore thrift shop, a black and white striped T-shirt, facial piercings, and an unusual spiky haircut. Had I been interviewing at a mainstream theater on the Avenue of the Arts for a similar job posting (development and grantwriting work), I would have dressed differently, although my penchant for visual chaos probably would have been visible even in more staid work drag.
employment directing a community arts partnership program at a private research university.

After I had begun my doctorate several years later, I was looking for field sites where I could explore the relationship among cities, arts, and social transformation. Through my work with Rainbow Tornado, as the director of a university-community arts partnership following the completion of my master’s degree, from various arts organizing, and from other arts and culture leaders, I had heard a lot about Picture This and their “community process” of public art making. I was particularly interested in learning about how participants understood Picture This’s community process. Since Picture This artists offered a course in community-based arts through a local university, I took the class with an eye towards getting more involved in the organization. Towards the end of the course, in conversation with the Picture This executive director, Alice, at our mural site, she asked whether I did program evaluation. I told her about evaluation projects I had undertaken with women’s development organizations in the US and Mexico. Over several years, we collaborated on several paid projects. Most of these were program evaluation, but I ran focus groups, conducted interviews, and observed programs at the organization’s headquarters and in prisons in addition to designing and analyzing surveys for school- and community-based programs with youth and adults.

I got involved with Art Works when the Democracy Project was looking for research support, and I was looking for part-time paid work. They had several public conversation projects at the time, including one on local budgets, and another on arts. Coincidentally, I was able to find another, somewhat atypical site to study the actual and
symbolic uses of arts and culture in urban transformation. Outside of the arts and culture focus of the forums, I was also very interested in their moderator training program and process. Moderator training provided a concrete parallel to the more general discussions of “community process” of the community-based arts world.

Community arts has buttered my bread, worked my nerves, expanded my social circle, filled my calendar, and otherwise shaped my life for many years now. I study contemporary American community and the loose confederation of networks that make up the Urban Art Democracy (as one local arts leader calls this particular demimonde). My ethnographic research in the use of arts and culture as an intervention in urban problems is rooted in the larger issues of the reproduction and transformation of social inequality in contemporary American cities. Inequality and transformation are enacted and reproduced through lived practices, often in ironic and contradictory ways. This is equally true for progressive organizations working for social change as it may be for large multinational corporations or local and regional government. One of many advantages or warrants (Katz 1997) of participant observation is that it “studies what people do, think, and believe, and in their own groups, whereas survey data comes from what people say they do, think, and believe” (Gans, 1982, 415-416). In this chapter I detail my framework for studying what it is people do, think, and believe in their own groups—specifically, what progressive white people seem to do, think, and believe about urban diversity within the context of community arts.
PROJECT OVERVIEW

What types of interactions and conversations across social difference do process-oriented progressive arts organizations allow? What happens to social difference in service of egalitarian ideals of diversity? These questions guided my fieldwork as a participant-observer at three different Philadelphia community-based arts organizations over a period of eight years. As a student, teacher, consultant, researcher, and volunteer, I participated and took field notes at staff meetings, moderator trainings, artist trainings, public forums, class meetings, outdoor mural sites, parades, public park pageants, late night papier-mâché sessions, neighborhood walks, political actions, and other settings of the everyday world of the Urban Art Democracy. My data include roughly a thousand hours of participant-observation, 60 recorded hours of 35 formal interviews with 32 people and many more informal interviews and in-depth conversations, a trove of media clippings (paper and electronic), and other site documents and objects, from T-shirts to programs to newsletters and works of art.

14 While there are advantages to naming the specific city where I did my research, I am aware that providing a place name makes unmasking the three organizations I describe more likely. Nevertheless, the benefit of discussing local context, concerns, and quirks of the Philadelphia arts and culture scene seems to easily outweigh the benefit of masking research done in “a major Mid-Atlantic city,” particularly because my CV and conference presentations so clearly point to any “major Mid-Atlantic city” being Philadelphia. All organizations and people named in this chapter are pseudonyms with the exception of myself, and details may have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

15 While Art Works is part of an umbrella organization (the Democracy Project) focused on town hall meetings, voter forums, and other sorts of public conversation, I include it as a “community-based arts organization” because of its focus on the experience of arts and culture in the Philadelphia region.
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The three organizations I study represent a small grassroots organization (Rainbow Tornado street theater), a larger citywide public arts organization with government funding (Picture This), and a public conversation project exploring the use of arts and culture in the 5-county region (Art Works, a program of the Democracy Project). These three organizations provide a vertical analysis of progressive community-based arts organizations working in Philadelphia, from ground up to top down. Taken as a whole, the multi-site approach allows for investigation of progressive white people’s search for diversity and community through art in the larger context of a post-industrial city and its social problems.

Culture is a semiotic concept, where people and their meanings are lived (and therefore studied) in the contexts they create (Geertz, 1973, 5). What people say alone is not enough to understand public conversation here, nor to interpret acts of culture. The nuance, deep understanding of contexts, and ability to see pattern and variation across multiple stages of community process so integral to work at my field sites underscore the need for a rigorous but interpretive research framework. In order to find out how culture happens, we have to be there to engage in it and watch it carefully (Erickson, 1992; Goffman, 1959). Culture is ethnography’s object, and its instruments are the careful observation, participation, field notes, interviews, and document analysis of the ethnographer.

Watching and participating in culture are one major way of studying it. Other documents of culture are the wealth of materials available online, in mainstream and
marginal journalism, in meeting notes and other documents generated by organizers, participants, and a variety of reporters. As Burgess argues (1984), this documentary evidence outside of participant observation provides another realm of data for analysis, and another level of data to connect with field notes and interview data. While ethnography is critiqued for its weakness for generalizability, Hammersley (1995) argues that while ethnographers need to make rational choices about that which their research can generalize, a rational ethnography can provide local contexts and the thick description that provide the data of everyday life. I draw on the notion of research as praxis (Lather, 1993)—research is not neutral, but an important tool in social change particularly relevant for my topic, the dynamics of democracy.

Ethnography is not just a set of methods, but also a process of uncovering meanings in context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). It is pragmatic, and I am well aware of the pitfalls of ethnography and the ethnographer. Still, I echo Bosk’s wry comment, “Of field methods, I feel as others may feel about democracy—it is a terrible method; it is just better (for the kinds of questions that intrigue me) than all the alternatives” (2000, 209). With this in mind I draw on various aspects of critical and traditional ethnography as ways to study lived social practices: in context, with nuance and rigor applied throughout fieldwork, analysis, and writing.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research questions generally address the role of culture in reproducing and transforming existing social inequality, particularly in terms of what social scientists term
the urban interaction problem. More specifically, within a context of arts based civic engagement in diverse, divided cities, how do majority-white mission-driven organizations try to create multiracial community? What are the practices and unintentional consequences of a coded focus on “diversity” in majority-white organizations?

I explore progressive white people’s search for diversity and community through art in the larger context of a post-industrial city and its social problems. I began my research with this puzzle: in working for multiracial and cross-class community, mainstream hierarchies are reproduced. Organizations using art for urban transformation and social change, particularly around the experience of the diverse, divided city, wind up reinforcing the social divides they seek to bridge. How does this happen, and what can we learn from these contradictions of community change?

I focus on the micro-level and bottom-up vision of social change and social reproduction, though clearly within context of structural inequalities. I do not deny the importance of social structures, but I make an argument about the often-unwitting importance of social interaction in reproducing social inequality through failed rituals (or inversely successful rituals?) and racial microaggressions. I focus on white people and majority white organizations because progressive white people have been understudied when it comes to racialized conflict, social inequality, and urban transformation, and because these are people with access to power, privilege, and resources.
SETTINGS AND SITES

In addition to researching specific questions, my dissertation project captures the world of the Urban Art Democracy, a setting and site of its own as well as a world comprised of the three organizations in Philadelphia where I conducted my fieldwork. In Table 1 (below) and the following paragraphs, I address each of the three sites and consider my role in and access to these organizations.

Table 3.1: Site Details and Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rainbow Tornado</th>
<th>Picture This</th>
<th>Art Works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visible product(s)</td>
<td>Parades, large-scale puppets, cardboard and paper-mâché objects</td>
<td>Public art: murals and mosaics</td>
<td>Website, reports, media pieces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical sites</td>
<td>Sidewalks and parks (parades, citywide), social service agencies (classes and workshops), public schools (classes and workshops), residential health centers (classes and workshops), headquarters (activist builds)</td>
<td>Abandoned lots, sides of buildings (citywide), university classroom (course), headquarters (other painting and art instruction), various public schools (K-12), regional jails and prisons</td>
<td>University (offices), forums: other universities, colleges, museums, theaters, community centers, newspaper plant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>Parades, classes and workshops, activist &quot;builds&quot;</td>
<td>K-12 classes, college class, at-risk youth, ex-offender, incarcerated</td>
<td>Forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headquarters</td>
<td>Unheated 2nd floor warehouse</td>
<td>Historic row house</td>
<td>University administrative building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to programs</td>
<td>Liberation</td>
<td>Social service</td>
<td>Urban planning and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General political affiliation</td>
<td>Anarchist</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other affiliation</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>City government (funding, site)</td>
<td>University (funding, site)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Setting and Sites

Philadelphia is one of America’s most segregated, stratified cities, full of poverty, pockets of extreme wealth, public art, and radical politics. It is a city uniquely American
in historical importance and ongoing social struggle. It is also an ideal city in which to study the use of art as an intervention in the urban problems of isolation and anomie. Demographically and socially, Philadelphia is a city starkly divided between African Americans and whites, with each racial group roughly equivalent to forty-some percent of the city’s population during the time of my research (2011 Census). I conducted research at three majority-white, politically progressive community arts organizations (or in the case of the Democracy Project/Art Works, a public conversation and civic engagement project looking at the role of arts and culture in urban transformation); all were explicitly concerned with diversity and the Philadelphia experience, with questions of how best to use art to engage the city in progressive social transformation, albeit to different political ends. Taken as a whole, Rainbow Tornado, Picture This, and The Democracy Project/Art Works prove a vertical slice of majority-white community art organizations addressing civic engagement through arts and culture interventions; the three organizations provide a look at social interaction and urban change from grassroots, citywide, and regional perspectives, from margin to mainstream.

1. **Rainbow Tornado street theater**

Rainbow Tornado street theater is a self-identified radical activist organization; while it has grown in scope and funding since the early 2000s, it is a small, grassroots-style organization. It has survived federal and local raids and investigation, and rose to prominence during some of the large protests and demonstrations of the early part of this new century. The theater itself has a warehouse space on the periphery of a rapidly gentrified neighborhood home to several colleges and universities; the city blocks most
closely surrounding the warehouse are home almost exclusively to low-income people of color and social welfare agencies. Rainbow Tornado holds parties, workshops, and semi-public “builds” onsite, but does much of its paid work offsite, at schools and community centers throughout the city. Again, these sites are almost exclusively in institutions serving historically marginalized populations. Seven of the ten paid full- and part-time staff at the time of major inquiry were white; in the years since, staff hover between two and ten at any given time, and is largely, if not almost exclusively, white and female\(^{16}\).

With its activist ethos and rhetoric of direct action for social justice, Rainbow Tornado is a prime site to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of a white radical culture’s search for diversity at the interactional level.

I worked on and off with Rainbow Tornado from 2002 until 2008, as a teaching artist, program evaluator, and other short- and long-term support roles. At the time of employment and research, Rainbow Tornado staff were aware of my research project and focus; staff members gave full consent to participate in the project. Then as now, my interest was more in exploring the attitudes and behaviors of those at the organization than their constituents. Original data includes approximately nine months participant-observation of workshop sites (throughout the city), ten formal interviews, documents, archival research, and later participant observation spanning five years.

\(^{16}\) Though race and gender are not necessarily concrete or “visible” identities, especially with growing awareness of gender expression and trans* identities, the people to whom I refer here would be most likely to be described by people across the political and age spectrum as white women. They also self-identify as such.
2. Picture This public art company

Like Rainbow Tornado, Picture This is a progressive arts organization dedicated to social justice, particularly crime prevention and alternatives to youth delinquency. It has a main headquarters where painting, mosaic, and other workshops are held (particularly with adult re-entry workers and adjudicated youth in separate, paid programs); the organization also holds classes at various schools and community centers throughout the city. Unlike Rainbow Tornado, Picture This is a much more established and intentionally mainstream organization. Affiliated with city government from the time of its founding more than 20 years ago, Picture This is now a funded branch of the city government, although the organization also raises a great deal of grant money from public and private sources. While paid staff represent a wide range of age, experience, gender, and race, staff and participants at the particular program I explore in depth were almost all white, while the “community” in which the project was mounted were exclusively African American, largely living in highly concentrated urban poverty.

I worked with Picture This as a student and volunteer in a college class, and then for pay as a consultant, mostly doing program evaluation, from 2005 through 2009. The ethnographic data I use in this dissertation draws on approximately nine months participant-observation of a college class and associated mural site, ten interviews (including follow-up), documents, archival research, and later participant observation spanning three years. During the semester-long dual-enrollment undergraduate/graduate level painting course, we met several times a week in the art studio to meet various Philly arts and culture leaders and to do visual art projects, including critiques. We had several
“community meetings,” with interested members of the geographic area where the mural was to be painted, including the owner of the house on whose side the mural was painted, her children, and her grandchildren; several area block captains; and other people with a personal or social stake in the neighborhood, including mural artists and other staff members of Picture This. Once spring came and the weather warmed up, the class met at the mural site several times a week. Student were asked to go paint after hours as well, and there were times when we gathered in small groups or as a whole to climb scaffolding, open paint cans, and fill in the outlines on a giant grid that made up the mural. In addition to these course-related activities, there were several class meetings where we met with middle school and high-school students participating in an adjudicated alternative education program, Changing Tracks. We visited an art class at their school, hosted them for a visit to Penn, and met a few times on site to paint. We were asked to be role models to young artists, but as with much of the course, the relationships never jelled, or perhaps the goals were never clear.

3. The Democracy Project/Art Works

Art Works is part of a university- and print media-sponsored partnership in regional conversation and civic engagement. The umbrella organization (the Democracy Project) convenes public conversation on a variety of topics related to civic engagement and city government, and is aligned with deliberative democratic practice and the Kettering Foundation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. Guiding Kettering’s research are three hypotheses. Kettering’s research
deliberation. Art Works arose from public conversations the Democracy Project convened related to a mayoral race; the elected mayor asked the project principals to begin further work on issues city voters identified as key to the region. In public forums and surveys, city voters said that what they like about the city is the wealth of things to do, particularly arts and culture offerings. Art Works explores citizen-identified issues of the role of arts and culture in regional development. The ultimate goal of the project, besides civil dialog and civic engagement, is to share *citizen-identified needs and strengths* in the areas of arts and culture with the mayor and other regional leaders.

Art Works is a series of public conversations held over 16 months in the 5-county area surrounding Philadelphia. After the final forum, Art Works convened a People’s Conference to share the “citizen voices” and policy recommendations based on forum data. The fourteen forums led up to a conference that included a public presentation of results (recommendations for local arts policy) with guest speakers from state and city government, arts leaders, and journalists, as well as breakout discussion groups to discuss the findings. This conference included a chartered trolley from Philadelphia to the suburban conference center. With a storyteller hired to entertain on the 90-minute ride there, this was an example of the art bus or “Van Go” that came up at several early forums as an idea for special arts and culture programs Philadelphia could develop.

suggests that democracy requires: Responsible citizens who can make sound choices about their future; Communities of citizens acting together to address common problems; and Institutions with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening society.”

(http://kettering.org/who-we-are/our-focus/)
At the People’s Conference and forums, break-out conversations are led by teams of moderators trained by the Democracy Project; the use of moderators and that of the training itself makes the Democracy Project and Art Works particularly interesting. While public, democratic, and civil conversation is assumed to be hallmarks of the cosmopolitan canopy, progressive social change, etc., it is rare to find explicit training around how to stimulate these conversations.

I worked as a research assistant, volunteer, and moderator for Art Works forums. I collaborated with the small team of paid staff to bring in arts and culture leaders as partners, creating an advisory board; did some of the grunt work for forums, from publicity to setting up chairs; developed surveys; and attended staff meetings and meetings with funders. I also went through moderator training and facilitated several Democracy Project forums unrelated to Art Works. Existing data includes approximately 16 months participant-observation of public conversations about the role of arts and culture in regional development, 12 interviews with conversation participants, documents (including over 100 written evaluations from conversation participants), and archival research. Art Works is a multi-site project, with 14 public forums held in 2008-2009 in the five counties of the Philadelphia region that are in Pennsylvania (New Jersey sites were excluded from Art Works because of the differences in state and local funding for initiatives). Sites for forums, advisory board meetings, planning meetings, and other Art Works front- and backstage work include but are not limited to: office spaces at a research university, local newspaper, regional radio and TV station; several colleges and universities in the 5-county region; museums; schools; community centers; restaurants;
coffee shops. The Internet and project webpage, where forum notes are publicly posted, is another important “site.”

ACCESS, ROLE, AND ETHICS

Who I am in the context of my fieldwork—simultaneously an insider, an outsider, and an anomaly—matters quite a bit here. Not in self-aggrandizement or out of narcissism, but because “fieldwork has always been a fairly personal method, highly dependent for its findings on the intellectual curiosity, social sensitivity, and data-gathering skills of the researcher. In that sense it is an art as well as a science” (Gans, 1962/1982, 414). So: who am I to do the work as an artist and scientist?

Across the three sites, my access was facilitated by my background in community-based art, progressive politics, and direct-services work. I am a teacher, an artist, and an activist, by training, avocation, and vocation. Since graduating college, where I spent an inordinate amount of time at the radio station, writing for the paper and literary magazines, and booking punk rock shows, I have worked for peace and against violence primarily through arts and culture initiatives: at a community radio project teaching production skills to Latinas in alternative high schools; at a peace museum, teaching conflict resolution skills to K-8 students through art; at a domestic violence agency, doing education and training around teen dating violence; and with multiple women’s art and culture festivals and collectives (including Ladyfest Midwest and Ladyfest Philly, music and art festivals with roots in the 90s riot grrrl punk scene; the Black Lily Film and Music festival; and the Girls DJ Collective, an organization
dedicated to teaching girls and women DJ skills, of which I was co-founder). These various efforts ranged from being majority-white and punk-focused to consciously multiracial or majority people of color.

At the three sites and more generally in my research, there is an uncomfortable aspect of telling tales, airing dirty laundry, or borrowing sugar from a neighbor in order to throw it into their gas tank: the “inevitable betrayal” of ethnography (Bosk, 2000). I do not do covert research; I obtain formal consent from participants; and I consciously focus on the actions of class-privileged white people in public and semi-public settings to counteract ethnography’s long history of callously using the lives of historically excluded people as data. Data from the three sites has been granted IRB exemption, since the work is public in nature, does not focus on IRB-defined vulnerable groups, and takes place during the course of organizational activities.

Still, my research is fraught. There are contradictory elements and relationships that inform my data collection. My shifting roles of expert and novice at each organization enabled me build relationships and become deeply involved with programs. My multiple roles and experiences also served to keep me somewhat distant. Does an ethnographer have friends, or just informants? A decade into my work in Philadelphia, that question has yet to be resolved, although certainly many of the people I have worked with have been to my house, call me on the phone, invite me to parties and ritual observances, ask me for advice and help and recipes and are otherwise part of my social world. Other aspects of reciprocity and exchange are certainly at play, but I acknowledge my own pragmatic worldview and inability to put a happy face on things certainly
influences the way I interact with others. I think of my attitude as one profoundly shaped by my social contexts, particularly those of Chicago, where I grew up, and Philadelphia, where I have now lived for almost 11 years. It’s a blend of Midwest manners and Philly realness. The Midwest part explains some of both my friendliness and my tendency towards remove, while the Philly realness is to blame for my bluntness, my unwillingness to sugarcoat facts, and my sincere desire to tell it like it is.

I did attempt to play the classic role of ethnographer as an outsider, as a peripheral character, and as relatively uninformed. This sometimes seemed disingenuous, and my accomplishments were sometimes a source of tension. I was often naïve when it would have behooved me to trumpet my expertise, and vice versa. In a conversation with Jojo, who talked about dropping out of high school and continuing his education much later in his life\(^\text{18}\), he commented in a hard voice about the elite private college and graduate school I have attended, “You’ve always been a smarty, huh.” At one point in the early years of my research, I was featured multiple times in both free alternative weekly papers, one of the major mainstream newspapers, several documentaries, and a glossy monthly magazine within the space of 18 months. In some ways this bolstered my credibility, but in other ways it raised hackles or distanced me from more radical participants, who saw mainstream media attention as insufficiently radical.

And perhaps I am not the typical researcher, although the graduate student/artist/politico is not an unusual combination. Jojo’s favorite title for me was “crazy lady;” although I find this offensive for multiple reasons, perhaps this is indicative

\(^{18}\) Jojo has since earned an undergraduate and graduate degree.
of my inability to blend, even in a radical, weird, or “crazy” subculture. Another example is when a summer intern at Rainbow Tornado mentioned calling the organization before beginning work to inquire about a dress code, but commented “the first people I saw when I walked through the door were Ramirez [a genderqueer artist who did not bathe that summer] and Carolyn, so I wasn’t too worried about wearing jeans.” I can only assume by her tone and in context that she was saying that I dress funny. It is a valid assumption. With the exception of giant plastic rings, most of the jewelry I wear are plain silver hoops and studs in my nose and ears.

Though my hair is now beginning to grey, at first glance I sometimes pass for a teenager, and my informal and atypical appearance extends beyond my clothing to my posture and attitude. During an early Picture This class meeting, I pulled out some knitting. Astrid and Leila asked me about learning to knit; I said I would teach them, and that I myself had learned to knit as an adult. Maria broke in to ask skeptically, “How old are you?” When I answered “28,” she widened her eyes and pulled her head back, visibly shocked. She exhaled through her mouth and said, “Wow,” having thought I was in my late teens. At the same time, one of the Picture This instructors enlisted me as an ally and fellow teacher, pulling me aside to ask me not to let “the girls,” the college students, go to the painting site alone, with the understanding that they were young and conventionally attractive (and visibly class-privileged, almost exclusively white, and certainly not from the block where we were painting), and I—well, let’s just say I hoped the instructor was commenting on my age and street smarts.
While some people seemed to see me as a threat, as the same instructor did with regard to my teaching experience (as did several of the Rainbow Tornado teaching artists, none of whom had any formal teaching experience or training), to others, I was somehow knowledgeable and sympathetic. I have a tremor, and people would sometimes notice this solicitously, responding to my vulnerabilities with kindness. When meeting volunteer interviewees for the Art Works project, people mentioned knowing or remembering me from forums. For some, that may have influenced their decision to participate in further interviews and conversation; one participant in particular said, “I’m so glad it’s you [who came to interview me],” and tried to buy me lunch. My sincerity and blunt honesty, both components of Midwest manners and Philly realness, were often commented on and appreciated by those with whom I worked. Others commented on my passion, my knowledge, my creativity, and treated me with great generosity. Participants across the three sites befriended me, contacted me for help or support, and otherwise reached out to me with warmth.

Some ethnographers are successful because of their ability to project charisma, empathy, and friendliness, genuine or otherwise. This is the group of ethnographers people tend to think of—those who use their knowledge of social conventions, emotions, and relationships as a methodological tool. Then there are those of us who may be curmudgeons, socially awkward, abrasive, or otherwise uncomfortable with people. Erving Goffman is a fabled example of that second category. Even for those of us who are not geniuses, the second category offers unique advantages, for who better to study social life than those who are not entirely comfortable with it? We may miss some social
cues, but perhaps attend more closely to the process, since it is not second nature. Ethnomethodologists take this perspective and elevate it to a guiding principle in many ways, of looking for unwritten social rules and conventions by breaking them (Garfinkel, 1967).

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

In order to study the social life of community arts organizations, I had to live in that world. I conducted formal and informal interviews, looked through organizational archives and media coverage, made art, stacked chairs, taught and learned and lectured and listened and mostly just hung out over a period of eight years. Table 3.2 provides an overview of my formal data collection and methods, and Table 3.3 provides a description of the staff at the three sites during my participant-observation.

While my research is comparative, and looks at various activities, experiences, and people across three sites, I do not draw equally on all sites and participants in this dissertation. This is partly for strategic reasons: I have too much data, too many stories, too many people. As is conventional for ethnographic research, I present representative data, and ask that my readers trust that I have sufficient evidence for my claims. I also draw selectively on places and their people to protect them. While this dissertation is critical in the sense of critique, some of the data I have is damning without any larger point than “look at what these people are doing wrong.” And too, the stories that

As will be true throughout this dissertation, Art Works is a bit of an anomaly. While I have data that focuses explicitly on the staff and their perceptions of our shared work, I primarily rely on observations of public forums and interviews with participants. This is mostly because that is the data that talks about and illustrates the uses of art and culture for participants, which is one of the main contributions the Art Works site makes for my research.
characterize some groups or interactions are simply a too-common story of massive dysfunction. Some is personal: at several sites, the number of behavioral and physical health challenges faced by employees made analyzing inter-staff interaction feel exploitative, particularly since the findings didn’t argue anything new or unknown which would justify the ethical risks. But mostly the reason why I focus more on some organizations and less on others is to focus on answering my research questions. True to ethnographic convention, these were and are iterative, arising out of the data and changing as my insights and experiences changed.
**Table 3.2: Data Collection Overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Rainbow Tornado</th>
<th>Picture This</th>
<th>Art Works/ Democracy Project</th>
<th>Total Across Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approximate hours of participant observation</strong></td>
<td>350 hours (original 9 months), approximately 600 hours in years to follow</td>
<td>250 hours (spring 2006: painting, meetings, class); approximately 300 hours in years to follow (site visits: headquarters, workshops, prison, jail, meetings, exhibits)</td>
<td>Approximately 300 (over 16 months, at headquarters and throughout 5-county region, moderator trainings)</td>
<td>Approximately 1000-1800+ hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of formal interviews, people, hours</strong></td>
<td>10 formal interviews (10 people), 25 hours</td>
<td>13 formal interviews with 10 people (3 follow-up), 15 hours</td>
<td>12 formal interviews, 20 hours</td>
<td>32 people, 35 interviews, 60 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview recruitment strategy</strong></td>
<td>Direct: interview all paid staff</td>
<td>Direct: interview students in class and instructor</td>
<td>Volunteer: put option to be interviewed on forum evaluation instrument (names/contact info kept separate from data), then contacted those interested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Document sources</strong></td>
<td>Rainbow Tornado website, local media (free weekly papers, major newspapers), New York Times, Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Picture This website, local media (free weekly newspapers, major newspapers)</td>
<td>Art Works website, blogs, local media (major newspapers), over 100 evaluation surveys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role(s)</strong></td>
<td>Teaching artist, program evaluation consultant (paid)</td>
<td>Student artist, program evaluation consultant (paid)</td>
<td>Research assistant, part-time staff (paid)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Primary Role</td>
<td>General description/self-identification at the time</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainbow Tornado</td>
<td>Jojo</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>White gay man, queer-identified, early 30s, raised upper-middle class</td>
<td>Went on to earn MSEd at low-residency/alternative graduate school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flash</td>
<td>Lead teaching artist</td>
<td>White straight woman, late 20s, raised upper-middle class</td>
<td>Went on to earn MSEd at low-residency/alternative graduate school</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Teaching artist</td>
<td>White straight woman, partnered, late 20s, raised middle-class</td>
<td>Went on to earn MSEd at low-residency/alternative graduate school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Education manager</td>
<td>African American straight man, partnered, early 30s, raised working-class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>Business manager</td>
<td>African American lesbian, partnered, late 50s, raised middle-class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis</td>
<td>Part-time museum manager</td>
<td>White straight man, partnered, late 20s, raised working-class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Part-time assistant teaching artist</td>
<td>Jewish straight man, late 20s, raised working-class</td>
<td>Went on to earn MAT and teaching certification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramirez</td>
<td>Teaching artist</td>
<td>Bi-racial (Filipina and white) queer woman (later genderqueer), early 20s, raised working-class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture This</td>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Organization director, co-teacher of record</td>
<td>White straight woman, married, mid-50s</td>
<td>Rarely present in class or on-site, generally beloved by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White straight man, married, late-30s</td>
<td>No longer teaches the course at the university</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Student (junior)</td>
<td>White, raised in progressive gay-friendly multiracial middle-class urban enclave</td>
<td>Transfer student, Philadelphia-raised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Student (first year)</td>
<td>White, raised in “a black neighborhood” and attended “a black school”</td>
<td>Went on to earn MSEd</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Student (first year)</td>
<td>Multiracial: black Latina with one white parent, prep school graduate</td>
<td>Works as education manager of a nonprofit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruchel</td>
<td>Student (senior)</td>
<td>Orthodox Jew</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astrid</td>
<td>Student (first year)</td>
<td>“rich girl,” “preppy white person”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leila</td>
<td>Student (senior)</td>
<td>Orthodox Jew</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Primary Role</td>
<td>General description/self-identification at the time</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Works/Democracy Project</td>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>Co-director/Researcher</td>
<td>Jew; married straight man in early 50s, parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>Co-director/Journalist</td>
<td>Christian; married straight white man in early 50s, parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lois</td>
<td>Administrative support/Community engagement liaison</td>
<td>Jew; married, straight women in later 50s, parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Administrative support/Community engagement liaison</td>
<td>Southern, white Christian; married, straight woman in late 20s</td>
<td>Not retained after conclusion of Art Works</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DATA ANALYSIS**

One of the opportunities and challenges of multi-site ethnography over the course of eight years is the enormous amount of data participant-observation, formal and informal interviews, documents, and archival materials yields. This is a blessing and a curse, of course; how to make sense of all the data? For the purpose of my dissertation and in the spirit of microsociological ritual interaction, I chose to focus on themes that had the most emotional energy and participant focus of attention. I employed a critical incident framework for analysis, which focuses on the narrative structure of participant experiences. A narrative approach enables focus on emotions, and also on the use of a seemingly small or insignificant interaction to shed light on larger patterns of behavior and meanings.

My understanding of “critical incident” overlaps with longstanding methods like the Critical Incident Techniques (Flanagan, 1954), although I am less interested in psychological aspects of encounters and more interested in social dynamics, and define
“critical” as it takes shape in the telling (as opposed to the “world-shaking events” Kirby uses in her definition, 2010). Simply put, I look for stories. What stories stand out in field notes and interview transcripts? What stories are told, re-told, and remembered? While fiction is a slippery slope for even the most rigorous qualitative social scientist (who is vulnerable to concerns about falsified data or conclusions reached without sufficient evidence, among other questions of validity and reliability in data collection), fiction often illustrates actual social life in rich and nuanced ways that support social research (see Goffman’s analysis of Preedy, 1954).

At the beginning of my research process, I was a dedicated P.C. user. In the intervening years, I have switched allegiances. I now use a Mac, in part because over those eight years of research and analysis I have experienced almost every type of computer failure save for outright theft. Dell has drilled through my hard drive, several other laptops have crashed or worn out—and Zach Nachsin, IT Support Specialist at Penn’s Graduate School of Education, has saved my files every time. Now I back up files as a matter of course, on several external hard drives, through Google.docs, and Dropbox.com, all of which provide ways to save and access data that were not possible when I began this research.

As technology changes, research changes. I have benefited from this even before the availability of the iPhone and other smartphones, which put the tools of the documentarian in almost everyone’s hand.20 My earliest interviews for this project were

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20 I am one of the few who still has not yet succumbed, although I eagerly anticipate my next phone purchase so I can take pictures, record audio, video, and notes to myself, all in one small device.
recorded on audiocassette, and laboriously transcribed with the aide of giant over-the-ear headphones and a small tape recorder that had a pitch-shift feature so I could slow down playback. The time and tedium involved in this method of transcription had the benefit of making sure I was intimately acquainted with each interview. In later years, I switched to digital recorders and a transcription pedal, although both free and paid software broke my computers. For my final round of interviews, recorded on a small handheld digital recorder with a USB port, I was able to simply send the audio files via web upload to VerbalInk. This transcription company was recommended to me by a friend who works in an academic library, and paid for out of a small inheritance I received from my grandmother. In terms of ease, fast turnaround, accuracy, and cost, I am nothing but pleased with this option, and my aching wrists also benefit. Since I make it a practice to never use interview subjects’ names on tape, I was less concerned about breeches in confidentiality than I would otherwise be when using a transcription service, although I also only sent interviews on relatively benign topics, for the protection of my interview subjects and my research.

Thanks to a small technology grant from Penn’s Graduate and Professional Students Association, I was able to use the qualitative software program Atlas.ti to

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21 I call this the Ruth Marver Radewagen Newmann Fund for the Study of Social Life, because my grandmother was an inveterate people-watcher and storyteller. She always had a “study” going, and while she joked about this, she was a self-taught ethnographer and folklorist.

22 In January 2011, the CAE listserv (Council on Anthropology and Education, see http://archives.binhost.com/pipermail/aaasec_cae/2011-January/thread.html#373) hosted an impromptu conversation on the benefits and constraints of qualitative coding software. Following the comments of elders in the field, including Frederick Erickson and Margaret LeCompte, I do not propose software itself as a strategy for data analysis, but a
assist with finding and tracking emerging patterns in some of my data, particularly that from Art Works, since it was the final field site for me, and my computer problems had lessened considerably by this time. I began my data analysis with deductive coding, looking for direct talk about race, class, and “diversity,” all of which were salient categories across sites. From there I coded for types of conflict, opportunities and experiences with arts, details of the Art Works forums, and related themes. This “loose count” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, 46) was the first step of creating a framework that was then informed by the deep meaning inductive coding and inductive arguments allow. Using software allows me to systematically categorize data and compare across categories (Maxwell 1996) though I mostly employed old-fashioned hand coding and analysis to allow for inductive leaps that are beyond the capacity of the computer system.

Hand-coding allows for inductive leaps, although I check for counterfactuals and alternate explanations. Reading interview transcripts and reviewing field notes and other documents regularly over the many years of data collection and analysis enable useful inductive leaps grounded in the data. Ongoing document review enables me to see larger patterns across sites, and generate new frameworks for analysis.

Multiple rounds of coding and multiple analyses of data, in groups and alone, provided a framework for initial drafts of analysis. With drafts of data chapters, I involved organizers and other participants in member checks to see how my analysis relates to their views. Other cultural workers with experience at my various field sites and similar organizations have attended formal and informal public talks I have given, useful tool in finding patterns across large sets of data. The hands-on, inductive work of coding and analysis are human skills; Atlas.ti is only a tool to search systematically.
from national conferences to workshops hosted by the Penn Sociology department; I have invited many colleagues and allies to these venues, and their public questions and further private conversation and feedback have challenged and enriched my data analysis.

What emerges, though, are the limits of community. And the limits of community so often fall along the color line (DuBois, 1903/1989). Participants talk about racial difference—or rather, around racial difference—as something to experience, as something drawing them to participate in community arts, even as racial difference crystallizes into racialized conflict time and time again. In interviews and in field notes, something about racial difference and failure lurk. Race is not separate from class and gender, and yet it emerges again and again as a preoccupation and problem at sites and for participants.

Ethnography is difficult and ethically problematic, but I am not convinced we have other options to understand some aspects of social life. Surveys and math are nice, but they don’t show us patterns, reveal contradictions, or tug at emotions the way ethnography can. It is ugly that in some ways my research may be understood as telling stories (a euphemism for lying), or reporting on the ill manners and contradictory behavior of others—but I can see no other way to address the dynamics and motivations behind individual and group ideology. Rather than justify how scientific and ethical ethnography is, I prefer to recognize its failings. This also keeps me out of reach of the Kool-Aide, even though I do believe in the radical possibilities of community-based arts. My belief in the power of art to transform inequality is based on lived experience as well as social theory. We have ample evidence that art works. And yet art does not magically
transform social inequality as a matter of course. Theory and data highlight the fraught nature of projects of art for social change. And so though my unwillingness or inability to follow a party line\textsuperscript{23} has certain drawbacks (limiting my group membership in the eyes of others and in my own sense of belonging), as Swidler argues, “our ability to describe a cultural perspective, or to see it at all, comes only from our skepticism about it” (2001, 19). Insider, outsider, both and neither—the Buddhist four cornered logic\textsuperscript{24} I studied as an undergraduate religion major resonates with the various roles an ethnographer plays, and gladly so. My own story matters quite a bit in how I make sense of the data, although the conclusions I draw in my analysis emerge from the data itself. Based on themes emerging from my data, research questions, and my own scholarly interests (in that order), the data I present in this dissertation addresses several areas of social interaction: ritual, racialized conflict and social theory (Chapter Four); diversity and whiteness (Chapter Five); and the role of community art in urban transformation and visions of the city (Chapter Six).

\textsuperscript{23} When I first moved to Philly and began hanging out with activists, artists, anarchists, and other political white people, I was roundly criticized for my many cultural blunders. For example, I was told at a sewing circle in a squat that it is cool to go to Temple, but not Penn. When it circulated that I was then and am now monogamous, I was told that I was “the enemy.” These are the mistakes and concerns of youth, I think, of people eager to create their own world with their own rules, but I have countless stories of how I belong \textit{but not really} to any number of spheres.

\textsuperscript{24} The tetralemma, or fourfold negation, proposes that for any argument, there are four options: affirmation, negation, both affirmation and negation, and neither affirmation nor negation. (Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1995.)
CHAPTER FOUR
WHEN RITUALS FAIL: INTERACTION RITUALS, RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION, AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Successful rituals are the amino acids of the social world. They are building blocks of social cohesion. And we know to a large extent how they happen and where they can get derailed (Collins, 2004). But what happens when rituals fail? In the case of progressive, majority-white community arts organizations, how is it that projects devoted to transformed social relations not only fail, but also reproduce existing hierarchies? In this chapter, I argue that when interaction ritual chains meet racial microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007, 2009), they reproduce inequality and privilege, particularly across racial lines (or “visible diversity”—see Chapter 5).

One characteristic of social reproduction is that it is social, and that it operates at the level of the unconscious, or of ideology (Althusser, 1984). It is Boal’s “cops in our heads” (1990). Racial microaggression and critical race theory overwhelmingly focus on microaggression from the viewpoint of people of color, and rightly so, in that people of color experience “daily disrespect” that white people rarely even notice (Sue et al., 2007, 2009). But in settings like majority-white community arts organizations, organizations with a strong ideology and vision of multiracial community, what white people do in the name of diversity bears a closer analysis. In this chapter, I examine how white people unintentionally reproduce white privilege in small moments (microaggressions) that generate enough negative emotion to derail their larger goals.
While community arts literature and participants highlight the “community process” and “art of community” (Cockroft et al., 1998; Gude, 1989), saying doesn’t make it so. The art itself promotes multiracial community. The education programs, the literature, and folk wisdom all do too. But the process itself bleaches. In majority-white progressive community arts organizations concerned with creating multiracial community, the community process itself self-selects and reinforces existing hierarchies even among radical and liberal whites. In analyzing critical moments, certain microaggressions expand to characterize the larger enterprise, and to leave participants with a sense of failure.

It is a trope among many social activists that segregation breeds fear, and that face to face interactions with social Others leads to better understanding, reduction of stereotypes and fear, and ultimately, a truly diverse, egalitarian social sphere. Putnam suggests that while this happens in the long term, but in the short term, we “turtle” in the face of racial, ethnic, and economic difference: we pull into our shells, revert to homogenous social worlds, and avoid interactions (2007).

In this chapter, I challenge commonsense notions that interracial interaction erodes racism. In spaces devoted to enacting diversity, ironic social reproduction can and does happen (along with the potential for transformed relationships). Boundaries are policed, and “us,” “them,” and “community” differ sharply in concepts and in actions. The fault lines or boundaries of community participation remain race, class, and gender, particularly white people’s perceptions of low-income people of color or people of color in general.
It is not news that people often act contradictorily, or that their professed beliefs and actions fail to match up (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991). What is news are the ways in which these contradictions come into being. What gets constructed as a consequential category of difference? What are the mechanisms and implications of failed rituals around “diversity”? What are some of the ways that race and class impact a community-based arts organization expressly dedicated to bridging difference?

In this chapter, I present representative examples from each site of what I term ritual failures: moments where group solidarity could have been built, but instead came to symbolize larger failures. These failures are racialized. Across three sites, patterns emerge:

1. Democratic dilemmas of diversity and difference
2. Social reproduction (and potential transformation) through microaggression and microinteraction
3. Racialized conflict, polarization, and marginalization

After the examples and some analysis, I address the theoretical implications of looking at social reproduction of inequality through a merged interaction ritual chain and racial microaggression framework.

RAINBOW TORNADO: HOLDING THE BANNER

To enter the space, you have to climb a narrow, rickety staircase. The walls recently got a fresh coat of light blue paint, and photographs of public events sponsored by the organization hang in frames in the dimly lit stairwell. If you know that the space is there, you might feel the thrill of entering a semi-secret clubhouse, a building-place for
art. If you have never visited before, you are unlikely to stumble upon the space, and first-time visitors often comment on the “spooky” entrance.

While the organization is open to visitors, the bulk of their self-identified “community” collaboration is done through teaching art workshops at a variety of other sites: public schools, neighborhood organizations, local colleges and universities, residential treatment centers, etc. This spring, Jared, Laneia, C.C., Gordon, and a few of their friends have decided to join the club. This small group of neighborhood kids, all African American, live in the cluster of tiny row homes just around the corner. They range in age from seven to fourteen or so, and they usually announce their presence to their entire office by coming into the staff area and asking for paint or other art supplies. The organization’s director, Jojo, has said that he doesn’t want the kids unsupervised in the studio area. It can be a dangerous place—a warren of extension cords, secondhand power tools, unstable shelves.

Several teaching artists on the staff, all white women in their twenties with middle-class background and radical activist affiliations\(^{25}\), tend to become animated when they hear the kids arrive. They widen their eyes, use louder voices that usual and expressive body language. Sometimes Daisy or Flash will cook up a project for the kids to work on, but the kids mostly follow Gordon’s example and say that the project is boring and they won’t do it. If Jared shows up alone, he will help with whatever artwork needs finishing in the studio.

\(^{25}\) In Daisy’s words, a group of “raised middlle-class not currently living middle-class radical anti-capitalist warriors.”
Jojo mentions how glad he is that the kids feel comfortable using the studio. “We’re part of the community,” he says. “The kids know it.” If the kids show up during staff meeting or a project of Jojo’s taking place in the studio, however, he uses a tight voice and an exaggerated smile to tell them, not now, come back later.

Deneice, the business manager and one of two African American staff members in an otherwise white organization, rolls her eyes when she hears Daisy or Flash cheering the kids on in the studio. She says that she doesn’t think it’s right that Jared, Laneia, C.C. and Gordon show up all the time when “there’s nothing for them to do here but cause trouble.” A few days ago, Flash found that Laneia had been stealing markers and fabric from the supply closet, and the kids tend to play tag in the studio, violating the many posted “No Running” signs.

Deneice resents that staff members are interrupted at their jobs to “make jolly time” for the kids. Robert, another African American staff member agrees. He says,

To me, community means mutual accountability. [This organization] may be a good friend or a good ally to black people, but it sure as hell isn’t part of the black community. Jojo likes having those kids here to show that there are more black faces up in here, but he doesn’t stick around and have to deal with them interrupting his day.

Deneice likens Jojo’s reaction to the visits of the kids to what tends to happen when the media show up at the organization:

He calls me out there to get in the photo. I don’t make art, I’m the business manager. I paint at home, but that’s not what I do here. I don’t want to go out there to be the black face in the photo.

She is there to work, to help the organization run, not to be a public face. Neither is she “a babysitter. Those kids get away with murder here.” The rhetoric of Rainbow Tornado
is community, but a particular kind of community, one which prioritizes and erases the same aspects of identity as needed. Robert and Deneice are critics of the “community” stance embraced by Jojo and the white artists, even as they continue to work for and with the organization. The contrary stances towards the presence of one small group of neighborhood kids by Jojo, Daisy, and Flash, on one hand, and Robert and Deneice, on the other hand, illustrates larger internal tensions about race, class, participation, and belonging. As Robert suggests, community is more than just who shows up, and kids’ presence in the studio may not be the happy act of engagement Jojo, Daisy, and Flash would like it to be.

Deneice also disagrees with Jojo’s interpretation of the language the kids use. Jojo and Deneice have each been out as gay and lesbian, respectively, for decades. Jojo’s public persona, in particular, is heavily influenced by his involvement with ACT-UP and confrontational gay street theater. The kids call the staff of the organization “Mr. Robert,” “Miss Flash,” “Miss Daisy,” and “Miss Deneice.” They call Jojo “Miss Jojo.” Jojo laughs when he hears that, and says, “See? They get it. They get it.” He sees the kids as having fun with gender presentation and challenging heteronormative social roles. This is something that Rainbow Tornado explicitly honors, this sense of inversion and the value of “the queer” and “the unwanted.”

But Deneice shakes her head, and says “That’s disrespectful, and those kids know it.” She would like to hold the kids

26 “The queer” and “the unwanted” are both named as part of the organization’s raison d’etre in a self-published curriculum guide: Rainbow Tornado “is queer, it’s the unwanted, it’s the better-left-invisible, it’s the disgusting, the ones that shouldn’t be heard from. The ones that should be kept down. It’s the poor people’s theater; it’s very accessible. […] It’s a form of personal justice.” (Rainbow Tornado, n.d.)
accountable; in this way, they might actually become members of the Rainbow Tornado community. In their current show of disrespect, referring to Jojo by a feminine title, Jojo hears echoes of his own social milieu’s preference for inversion and play. Deneice reads this act as disrespect. While the terms might match up with chosen titles and pronouns within the organization and the radical queer scene out of which it came, the kids’ gender inversions mark them as outsiders, disrespecting the values and struggles of the organization, just as the organization continues to overtly value them while keeping them outside, too.

So there is conflict over the kids and their place at the organization. Is it a clubhouse to them? A playground, as Deneice and Robert suggest? A meaningful moment of community, as Jojo, Daisy, and Flash hope? The conflict comes to a head one spring evening, as the staff and some volunteers (again, all white except for Deneice and Robert) are practicing a last-minute play they will be performing the next night at a party for all the places they’ve worked with over the past year. The group is practicing a song Daisy wrote about their “community involvement” when Gordon strides around the corner. “What you doing here, a play?” he asks. The other three kids look at the painted cloth backdrops suspended from a long narrow piece of wood and the props (a large cardboard pointer in the shape of a hand, some drums made from buckets, and a few colorful hats), and immediately volunteer to be in the play. Jojo announces, “Yes! And you’ll be the most important part!” The kids are talking about which props they want to use; C.C. is practicing a few dance moves in front of the group. Jared asks if he can use
the pointer. Jojo says no. “I need you to hold the scenery,” he says. “It’s really important. And you can sing the song with us on the chorus.”

The faces of the kids fall, and Gordon and Laneia complain that “this is corny.” Laneia leaves, tossing her long braids behind her as she leaves the room. C.C. and Jared step up on chairs to hold the heavy wood piece that the painted-cloth scenery dangles from. Jared gets a splinter. When he asks for a Band-Aid, Flash tells him that the organization doesn’t have any27.

The next afternoon, Jojo realizes that if the kids are going to be in the performance, someone should probably call their parents. At the last quick rehearsal of the play, before the kids arrive, Jojo laughs when he says, “C.C. and Laneia’s mother, when I told her? I said we had a party—she said to make sure someone fixes her a plate.” Just as it may be a mark of membership in Jojo’s post-ACT UP radical queer world to call him “Miss,” fixing your mother a plate when you go to a party may also have meaning to C.C. and Laneia. Jojo laughs at this, just as they laugh at him. This could simply be mutual misunderstanding or mutual disrespect, but since Jojo runs an organization on C.C. and Laneia’s block, one that holds parties, is stocked with art supplies and weird puppets, and otherwise presents tantalizing opportunities for young people to look and touch and run around, the power differential and stated organizational stance on community don’t add up.

27 This is particularly ironic because of the giant Band-Aid “puppet” made out of corrugated cardboard that occupies a very public place in the studio at the time, leaning under the main light switch in the museum space. The Band-Aid comes up several times in interviews with staff. It was made for an ACT-UP demonstration for global health care by a man who came in saying “Oh, I can’t do anything, I can’t make art,” Flash remembers. It symbolizes the futility of “putting a Band-Aid” on the global AIDS crisis.
In the work of this organization, perceived differences particularly of race and class have different consequences at different moments. Deneice suggests that her medium-brown skin and dreadlocks are seen by Jojo as an asset when it comes to media representation of the organization and its staff, but Robert scoffs at the idea that the organization is in any way a part of the black community, “or any other community except white radical artists.” There’s nothing wrong with that, he says, but he wants the organization to “hold itself accountable” and not have “happy jolly story time” about equal partnerships across race and class.

Clearly, it matters to Jojo, the director, and other staff members that the organization be seen as a welcoming place for anyone who wants to use it. But a concern with public representations of diversity (getting African American staff members into photos that show the creation of a piece of art that those staffers have no involvement with) does not equal the practices of transracial collaboration or multiracial community. Having intentions to collaborate across social cleavages does not equal having practices of collaboration across social cleavage.

In the staff’s interaction with the kids, notions of what is appropriate behavior differ across racial lines. Granted, this is not a large sample; questions of statistical significance are not relevant here. But the white women staffers, Daisy and Flash, encourage the kids to come play, even when the kids do not want to participate in activities offered, and even when the chosen play of the kids irks or enrages Daisy and Flash. Deneice and Robert both suggest that the kids are behaving inappropriately at the organization. Jojo claims to welcome the kids, but rarely interacts with them. When they
show up at a practice for an event, Jojo agrees to include them—but leaves the kids holding the banner, getting splinters but no Band-Aids, doing the work but not the fun.

What makes these moments where race and class—as well as age, norms of behavior, chosen community, and other perceived differences—so particularly poignant are the ways that the white staff members seem to truly believe that they are engaged in cross-racial, cross-class community-building rather than delivery of services. This speaks to the legacy of inequality and oppression around race and class characteristics in the United States. Even among a group of people self-consciously dedicated to bridging social cleavages and working for social change, moments that can be understood as racist, classist, sexist, and other prejudicial categories are constructed through interactions.

These moments of interaction that reveal the difficulties in attempting to transcend difference are also connected to the hiring practices, assumptions, promotion, and partnership strategies of the organization. Over more than a decade and under several different white executive directors, the organization’s goals may be to work collaboratively across race and class, but unchecked white middle-class privilege and a bias towards a particular white radical arts sensibility²⁸ seem to be associated with the recurring conflicts within the organization as well as with the communities with which they partner (almost entirely low-income groups of people of color, except for the organization’s work with radical white activists and artists).

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²⁸ A carnivalesque refutation of middle-class values (Bakhtin, 1984), where using garbage to create art is a source of pride, conflict is mediated through a particular style of lengthy debate that presumes time, interest, and elements associated with higher education
But back to the moment where the neighborhood kids go from being “the most important part” of a play to being furniture, holding the banner without even a Band-Aid to put over their splintered fingers. This is where a potentially successful ritual fails. While the kids may not reasonably expect to go from outsiders to stars of the show, their history at Rainbow Tornado is more complicated. Staff claim them as “community” when it is convenient, and as a nuisance otherwise. Whether the kids are trying to belong or join in the fun or take advantage of art supplies and a relatively unsupervised space, this was a moment for the kids to become legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wegner, 1991) at Rainbow Tornado: apprentices learning the ropes. Instead, Jojo made it clear to them that they were literally in the background of the organization.

PICTURE THIS: “YOU UNIVERSITY STUDENTS”

In a mural course focused on the community process of mural making, several moments interrupted the framework of community and collaboration. At the time and in interviews a year later, a seemingly offhand comment about “university students” acts a catalyst for student dissatisfaction with the course, one of the instructors, and one another. In recalling this moment in a class meeting, a chain reaction about the meaning of social difference ensures that future attempts at solidarity and social cohesion are doomed to failure. This is a small moment of how a course fails.

White student artist Charlotte says, at a community meeting where student artists met with neighborhood residents to discuss mural plans, local block captain Katherine said something to me like ‘Oh, [the university is] in all the neighborhoods,’ or something along those lines. I forget exactly what she
said. And it was like, Yeah. And I don’t know what we’re doing. Do we have more authority to be in this neighborhood than anyone else does because we’re from [a university]? I just feel like it’s a responsibility to not be this kind of [negative stereotype of university students]—at the same time, as a [university] student, I feel kind of like I’m being put into this savior role at the same time I’m, as a [university] student, kind of destroying the [geographic] community.

She continues,

when I brought it up in class that one day, I didn’t feel like anyone really responded to me, and that anyone really wanted to engage, just in this being like, an educable moment. Like, saying, “Okay. I’m a really privileged person. What does that mean?” How does that translate to, like, working in like, an underprivileged community? What are the power dynamics, whatever. I just didn’t feel like anyone wanted to talk about that […] Maria was shooting down my thing, my interpretation. [Maria] was just like ‘Lorraine didn’t mean it that way.’

Tina, another white student, remembers,

It was the worst class. Me and Maria were talking about this after class for like an hour. Charlotte was offended because some lady was like, ‘Thanks to you [university] students.’ [Charlotte] was offended because she was like, ‘Are they thinking we’re like some do-gooders coming into their neighborhood?’ But I thought that was the stupidest thing ever. [and] then David was trying to give us his intellectual thing about dealing with racism. I was pretty pissed at that. We took an hour out of class to discuss that this lady said ‘you [university] students.’ I wasn’t even there [at the community meeting], but Maria said she didn’t even say it in any negative context. The boundaries are drawn, and remain consequential for the rest of the course.

Tina and Maria are a unit opposed to Charlotte, whom they dismiss as naïve and racist; Charlotte feels isolated and persecuted for wanting to discuss the dynamics of race and class that undergird the course; other students withdraw from conversation; David reinforces the party line; and all the students turn against David. This is a moment of fracture.
There are at least two critical moments here: the interaction between Charlotte and Katherine, and the remembered interaction shared in the classroom setting. Each set off a different chain reaction. In Charlotte’s view, an offhand comment from a neighborhood resident and official community leader (block captain) reminded her of the complex web of relationships we as a group of students enter into by dint of participating in a university course. This could potentially be part of an interaction chain focused on sustained interaction among students and neighborhood residents, or among students enrolled in the class considering issues of social status, each of which could generate the emotional energy and group solidarity that characterize successful rituals. Instead, in the remembered moment, Charlotte is misunderstood, vulnerable, and positioned as a problem; David is positioned as a (faulty) authority and also a problem; discussion, difference, and dissent are all denied; and the course loses emotional energy and the chance of group solidarity or “community” which originally attracted students to the course. Perceived racial microaggressions are at play in these ritual interaction chains. Tina interprets the whole story, even up to a year afterwards, as being “about dealing with racism.” She outlines her theory of racial authenticity or sincerity (Jackson, 2001), positions Maria as an authority, and dismissed the rest of the group. But Maria and Tina remain marginal, as does everyone in the small class, divided by boundaries crystallized in these two telling moments of experience and memory.

29 I suspect Charlotte interpreted Katherine’s use of “you university students” as a variant on the coded, hostile phrase you people.
ART WORKS: SPELLING IT OUT

At the first public forum in 2008, none of the Art Works leadership team was sure what to expect. While the team leaders and many of the moderators had years of experience holding public conversation, the arts and culture focus of this project loomed large on the horizon. Would arts and culture conversations be somehow different to moderate than conversations about local government or municipal budgets? What would the Art Works team uncover in these first public forums?

This forum took place in a large lecture hall of a suburban art school, a beautiful space with original art, many windows, and a view of a formal garden in the peak of bloom. The plan for this forum was to pilot the Democracy Project method of public conversation addressing citizen thoughts about arts, culture, and regional development. The methods of conversation were not new to the leadership team nor to the assembled moderators, trained by the project leaders, although the topic of arts and culture was a departure from the organization’s historical focus on budget and governmental issues. The overall plan was to introduce Art Works to the assembled group of citizen participants, then break up into groups where moderators would lead investigation into how these particular participants perceived the value of arts and culture in the region.

According to plan, the group of about 50 mostly white, middle class, college educated suburban residents in later middle age broke up into 4 groups, each with a Democracy Project-trained moderator and a note taker also trained as a moderator. In small groups, forum participants gathered in a circle of chairs by an easel with chart paper (for notes); while the note taker recorded notes in forum-approved colors of brown,
black, and blue[^30], the moderator would move around the circle to facilitate conversation along Democracy Project guidelines, trying to ensure that group participants deliberated rather than debated[^31], and above all listened[^32] to one another.

The group facilitated by Lauren with notes taken by John got off to a typical start: the 10 participants went around the circle to say their names, where they were from, and why they came to the forum that evening. The other groups at this forum were doing the same thing at other spots in the large room. All broke into groups and initiate conversation along the lines of the outline and agenda presented to them by Democracy Project leaders at a recent moderators’ training. While Lauren, John, and other moderators and note takers in the room certainly had some freedom to guide the discussion according to the experiences in their particular small group as well as their own individual personalities, the overall mission of the small group experience was for facilitators to stimulate brainstorming and discussion among the small group, with the facilitator speaking only to move participants through various scenarios about arts and regional development. The note taker was meant to take notes and post the sheets of

[^30]: Red markers, in particular, are to be avoided according to Democracy Project/Art Works leadership, because of the association of red with danger and with unpleasant school grades and paper comments.

[^31]: Democracy Project/Art Works conversations are not meant to be debates or arguments between one faction or another; they are meant to be places where citizens share thoughts about regional opportunities and options and try to learn from different points of view. In this way, Democracy Project/Art Works forums are very much a space of public learning; the compiled results of these various forums are also used as an instructional guide of sorts for local politicians and policy-makers.

[^32]: What could be termed *critical listening* is an important component of Democracy Project/Art Works conversation; forum participants are reminded multiple times to try to listen more than they speak in order to have a particular kind of democratic experience.
notes around the small group’s area, recording points of conversation in participants’ words as much as possible.

But early in the small group conversation, as talk moved from participant introductions to the uses of arts and culture, the moderator and note taker began to talk with one another in front of the assembled group. John, with a warm smile and a friendly nod as he wrote down various participant comments, paused with marker in hand. He wrote the word “expression” on chart paper spelled with one “s” and caught himself—but before either adding the missing letter or moving on to capture another comment, Lauren looked at the chart paper positioned at the focal point of the circle and said, “Expression is spelled with 2 “s”s.” Her tone was friendly and light; John nodded again and added the second “s.”

The purpose of the group notes according to the Art Works leaders, who outlined the group’s work at the begin of the event, was simply to keep track of what was said for the benefit of the group, to share with other groups in the room at the end of the evening, and to use as a record of citizen voices in the larger conversation about arts and culture in the region. Notes would eventually be typed and posted on-line. None of these stated uses required perfect spelling; even if they did, many eyes would see the notes before any public sharing outside the room. Either a sharp-eyed editor or a computer’s spell-check function would undoubtedly catch and correct any spelling errors.

But this one break in the frame (Goffman, [1974] 1986) of the small group work seemed to engender a rupture in the discussion (Garfinkel, 1967). While John tried to smooth this small correction over by saying that he is a terrible speller and laughing it
off, Lauren began to pay closer attention to what John wrote. This increased attention seemed to make John more self-conscious, and highlighted a shift in roles. John went from a background, “helper” role recording the conversation to being a focus of collective attention and correction.

While it would be possible for the small group to move past this moment with or without Lauren’s guidance, this instead became a critical moment in the life of this small group. Following one of the Democracy Project/Art Works leaders’ belief that “in every group, the moderator sets the tone,” Lauren set the tone for the rest of the conversation. John’s spelling errors compounded, Lauren continued to correct him by spelling out loud, and eventually other group members joined the spelling conversation, correcting John’s spelling or simply spelling aloud words they thought might be “challenging” to John. John began to pause before writing a word to hear someone spell it first. Lauren noticed that spelling had taken over the group’s conversation. “I was a [librarian] for many years,” Lauren said sweetly, nodding her head and crinkling up her face, using what children confused by the Dewey decimal system might find a reassuring tone.

Lauren is a white woman well over 60; John is an African American man in earlier middle age. Both are experienced facilitators indeed chosen for this first Art Works forum because of their longtime relationship with the Democracy Project, the team leaders, and their work on other similar public conversation. Participants in the small group reflected the racial and age demographic of the larger forum at the art school: white, middle-aged and older arts patrons, educators, businesspeople, and local organizers. This Art Works group, like the ones at the rest of the 13 forums that
followed, was overwhelmingly affluent, well-educated, and espoused the value of “diversity.” Sometimes “diversity” was named as racial diversity and the specific need for more people of color to be involved in the Art Works conversation so the process could be “representative.” Sometimes racial difference was implied as a source of tension.

In this small group, there were moments of robust conversation involving many participants sharing their responses to Lauren’s questions, questions being asked by the other facilitators in the other small groups about the users of arts and culture, the uses and benefits of arts and culture in the region, and other related probes geared and hearing the ways that participants understood the value of arts and culture in the larger urban region. But as more and more airtime became devoted to correcting John’s spelling, the conversation lost focus and energy. There were many moments where seated participants displayed classic gestures of discomfort and hostility, including several moments where every single one of the 10 group participants had both their arms and legs crossed at once. These uncomfortable gestures became more pronounced as more and more words were spelled out loud.

The final public notes that Lauren and John were responsible for typing up do not reflect this palpable tension. In fact, the final report listed bullet points from the conversation, mostly responses to the Art Works-orchestrated list of questions that guided all small group discussion, and comments that “the group was opinionated and vocal. The

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33 There is a fair amount of demographic data about participants at the 14 Art Works forums; however, that data comes from anonymous surveys. While generalizations can be made about participants as a whole, none of that survey data can be connected with individuals observed in this particular moment.
evening was a success. The group worked hard and was productive in framing arts and culture in the region. They enjoyed the process and are looking forward to the follow-up in September” (official public notes). Both facilitator and note taker in this group and the other groups were officially responsible for typing the notes; perhaps Lauren completed this task alone, or perhaps John did, or perhaps they worked together. Most of the notes from this small group and others came directly from the chart paper at the forum.

The larger notes listed the small group’s concern about regional issues such as “Homelessness; Open space and preservation; Transportation and infrastructure; Schools” among other concerns, and among other considerations of the role of arts and culture in the life of the region (official public notes, online). The purpose of the conversation was to discuss these issues and record the group’s thoughts, not attend to the microsociological interactions among group members, moderator, and note taker.

But it is telling that the experience of the conversation, so fraught with tension, was not reflected in the notes. Again, the group conversation and notes reflect the larger stated goals of the Democracy Project/Art Works and many other attempts at public conversation or deliberative democracy, which is to talk through certain topics, recording what is said that is on point. For example, there are no public notes about which pastries participants enjoyed eating as they worked in small groups, although there were delicious pastries at this forum, and participants did make some small talk about them as they moved into small groups.

But since these public conversations do not happen in a vacuum, and because the interactions among the moderator and note taker set the tone for group conversation, the
ways in which conversation happens, including the moments of discomfort and of
ostensible “off topic” discussion, actually help to shape the larger conversation. These
moments also remind us that the cosmopolitan canopy is both a place that enables
conversation across difference and limits it, particularly the expression of disagreement.
Pleasant, civil conversation on a surface level tends to be the characteristic “talk” under
the cosmopolitan canopy. What the Democracy Project/Art Works forums attempt to do
is difficult. They invite disagreement and difference, albeit in “civil” and
nonconfrontational discussion.

Without this data about how one misspelled word changed the focus of small
group conversation, it is easy to sidestep tension, whether a critical moment is seen as a
simple misunderstanding, a moment of racial microaggression, or a larger comment on
the challenges of inclusive public conversation in a nation scarred by race and class
segregation. The official notes include one comment saying, “Note: There wasn’t
enough time for the group to address more regional concerns” (official public notes).
This may be an allusion to the time that so much spelling allowed took up; but again,
since time was always an issue at Democracy Project/Art Works forums full of people
who chose to spend their evening engaged in public conversation, this may simply be a
fact with no hidden meaning.

And yet this particular moment, where the sole visible person of color\textsuperscript{34} in a group
of twelve\textsuperscript{35} is endlessly corrected by not only the white moderator of the group but by

\textsuperscript{34} It is certainly not the case that race is always a “visible” fact. But these forums were
overwhelmingly organized and attended by people who appeared to be white, and people
who appeared to be anything other than white were a visible minority in these groups.
Some demographic data is available from surveys, but this anonymous data is not
many other group participants, provides a gruesome but useful illustration of ways in which democratic conversation must attend to social facts, social categories, social cleavages. Is this moment of public spelling simply a microsociological ritual interaction gone horribly wrong—that perhaps once this sort of interaction begins we cannot get back on the right footing? Is it an example of racial microaggression, where small, ostensibly innocuous acts are meant and interpreted as covert racialized conflict (Solorzano et al., 2000)? What would happen if moderator and note taker shared other visible social characteristics (race, gender)—what if they had an ongoing relationship (romantic partners, siblings, etc.)? How are we to interpret what happened in this moment? There are many possible answers. One of these answers has to do with patterns of violence. In isolating John and making him the target of group judgment, Lauren and the group of participants are demonstrating classic elements of bullying: the pile-on. This is not an individual conflict, but rather, many against one, escalating over time. Outside of individual behavior, however, it is the situation that is rife with conflict.

When John and I chat over cubes of cheese at a later forum and again at a training, John says that these forums are “always fun” and “always a pleasure,” and that he loves to do this work. Neither of us mentions the first forum. Months later, when I run into Lauren at a performance, she asks me whether the leadership team has chosen moderators for future forums. She comments that she feels that the project leaders prefer certain moderators—she has not been among those favored.

attached to particular people as they participated in the forum. This will be another layer of data to use when addressing issues of race, particularly of whiteness, and its place in the cosmopolitan canopy of conversation.

35 10 participants, 2 moderator/note takers
John makes no public mention of the awkwardness of that early forum where his spelling was criticized by Lauren and finally the entire group. Perhaps he does not see that moment as exceptional. Perhaps he chooses to ignore this experience in favor of his enthusiasm for and participation in the larger project. Perhaps this is just one of many microaggressions John experiences in a series of daily disrespects. There is no end to the list of possibilities. But the moment where spelling took center stage at an Art Works forum tells us something, especially as the interaction disappeared from public record even as participant body language flagged its impact on the group process.

To my knowledge, there were no other instances of public spelling or moments where a moderator corrected or chastised her or his note taker. At forum after forum, however, in small group conversation, race continued to emerge as a topic of importance. Most notable was the way that at least one visibly white participant at every forum took an opportunity to publicly comment on the “whiteness” of the assembled group, on the “lack of diversity” (meaning racial diversity) or the “need for more diversity” at the forum (see Chapter 5).

In light of consistent larger group interest in visible racial difference and the “necessity” of having racially “diverse” group present at all public meetings, this moment between John and Lauren is a critical one to explore the ways in which race becomes a “democratic dilemma” (Minow, 1990). This democratic dilemma of difference suggests that to ignore group difference (such as race) often perpetuates inequality, and that focusing on group difference risks reinscribing inequality. It is not that race is a static fact, or that it is always visible or unitary—but while “race” may indeed be an illusion, a
fiction, a social construct, the lived consequences of race are real. The history of racial
difference and of racialized conflict is with us in modern America and her cities, and
while change too is a historical fact, so is that of separate black and white America,
although race is far more complicated and nuanced than a black/white binary. (Omi &
Winant, 1993)

But to Art Works participants, this black/white binary, couched in careful terms
like “diversity” and what can be “seen” at a glance in a public forum, continues to
emerge as a site of conflict and concern. Again, the explicit naming of the lack of visible
diversity in the fourteen Art Works forums can be interpreted several ways, all of which
may be interesting ways to learn more about the understudied area of white American
cultural practices, particularly along the axis of racial difference and how white people
construct this axis.

What happened between John and Lauren was not typical of Democracy
Project/Art Works forums, perhaps partly because there are very few moderators of color
who regularly work at these forums; Art Works moderators and forum participants were
overwhelmingly white. While people of color did participate on multiple levels, from
attending forums to moderating or note taking at forums to participating on the advisory
board, it is still notable that this project appears to be largely white, as participant after
participant publicly noted at each forum. Naming whiteness in some ways effectively
erases the presence and labor of people of color even as it attempts to problematize group
composition.
This public recognition of whiteness leads to several other notable aspects of the Art Works forum, particularly the way that white participants tend to see “diversity” as a racial issue and black white/binary—and the contradictory finding, which is that white participants often mention that the forum was a space of discovery about “diversity,” moving past notions of visible racial diversity to larger thoughts about diversity of experience.

While many moments where visibly white participants raise the public question of why the Democracy Project forums look so white (particularly notable in a city and 5-county area that are far from majority-white) could be dismissed as moments of white privilege and white guilt, where white people raise the specter of race and racial difference in order to exempt themselves from the painful history of American racism, it is white people’s understanding of whiteness as race that may be developing in these moments alongside a possible exorcism of guilty consciousnesses. One translation of visibly white participants’ public Art Works comments for everyone to notice that “there are a lot of white people here” is a cynical one: yet again, people with white privilege are shirking responsibility to talk and act on racial inequality by assuming that discussion about race can only happen with people of color in the room. This argument also goes further to suggest that perhaps white people prefer for black and brown faces and other faces of people of color to be in the room to do the hard work of talking about race. And indeed discussions of race and racial inequality are hard work—but one of the principles of Democracy Project/Art Works forums is that talk is the work of democracy.
Democracy is hard work, it is true, but work that citizens of all colors could be called upon to perform regardless of the racial composition of the room.

ANALYSIS

Each of these moments are rituals derailed by racial microaggression. Each produces different notions of belonging and borders. Assumptions, underlying beliefs, and unconscious actions derail potentially successful rituals, contributing to conflict and other “failures.” The following diagram illustrates the dual feedback loop microaggression chains can take, illustrated within the general theory of arts-based community engagement predominant at each site:
At each site, conflicts are racialized, and boundaries are drawn. In preparing for an annual party at the Rainbow Tornado, local children are used to illustrate underlying tensions around diversity as something visible. The children are used as props, and illustrate a larger schism among staff over race, class, inclusion, and accountability. Here the key dilemma of diversity is visibility: visible diversity in black and white. In the Picture This university class on public art that relies on relationship-building for the final group project (mural), a critical moment derails course goals and relationships. A misunderstanding about a student’s concern with race, class, and privilege turns into a fracture, where students and teacher are pitted against one another. The key dilemma of
diversity here is isolation: by talking (or not) about race, class, and privilege, students are marginalized or positioned as authorities. At Art Works, a town hall style meeting on role of arts and culture in regional development sees a small group conversation come to stasis and hostility following a break in the frame by the moderator. “Diversity” is a focus of large group conversation, but looks very different in small group process. The dilemma of diversity here has to do with group relationships and bullying: assumptions are made about the sole visible person of color that derail the conversation and marginalize a key participant.

In each of these examples and countless others at the three sites, class-privileged white people benefit from selected understanding of “diversity,” or disengage altogether. In turn, they may go on to impact change, but in some ways at the expense of people already marginalized. This is not the only option, but it presents opportunities for intervention. Boundaries and barriers to access are illustrated in each example, and issues of authority and authenticity are guiding forces behind each division. At the Rainbow Tornado, the “real” community is the white staff (Illustration 4.2). In the Picture This course, students are pitted against peers and students are pitted against the teacher (Illustration 4.3). At Art Works, the moderator and then the group “pile on” in classic bullying style (Collins, 2008) against the note taker (Illustration 4.4):
Illustration 4.2: Rainbow Tornado: inner and outer circles of “community”

Rainbow Tornado
Segmented “Diverse” Community:
Inner circle Rainbow Tornado is mostly white radical activists and artists
– Mutual accountability
– Ongoing interaction over time
Outer circle “Rainbow Tornado” is mostly people of color, including staff members
– Used for visual representations of diverse community and to advance the inner circle RT agenda
– Limited, one-time, or instrumental interaction

Illustration 4.3: Picture This polarization: students vs. instructor, but also students separated by conflict

Maria, Tina

Students

Charlotte

Instructor
Concern with whiteness and the dangers of being majority-white spaces discussing diversity and democracy lead to contrary notions of diversity: that it is visible, and that it is invisible. The desire to not be “all white here” can reinforce a vision of “diversity” as visible, racial, and a black/white schism and burdens people of color as authorities. The other option, diversity of experience, ignores race and social difference in favor of experience, which can simply salves white guilt. While the democratic processes of community-based arts can transform relationships across social cleavages, the can also reproduce the social inequality they seek to interrupt. And across three sites, failed rituals are producing racialized conflict, polarization within the group, and the reproduction of white privilege and class privilege, with the group marginalizing people who are already somewhat vulnerable within each group, particularly those from historically excluded populations. And those from historically excluded populations are
the ones that the majority-white groups are looking so desperately to include, to
demonstrate that their group process is egalitarian, democratic, and visibly diverse or
multiracial.

Interaction ritual chains and racial microaggression theories offer a lens into
critical moments, where we see how inequality is (re)produced through social interaction,
and how daily disrespects themselves pile on and overtake situations. In the name of
multiracial community or diversity, the three organizations I study actually crystallize
racialized conflict. Racialized conflict punctures the happy fiction of multiracial
community and egalitarian experience through shared art-making. Each moment or story
highlights the centrality of race in participant understanding of community. At the same
time, it’s not just one moment or story, either; but individual moments and stories
illuminate the way that majority white politically progressive groups working for social
transformation unwittingly get in their own way: pay attention to the color of markers,
say, but not dynamics among participants. Using interaction ritual chains and racial
microaggression theories to analyze critical moments enables a focus on dynamics.
Racial microaggression, in particular, helps us understand how social inequality is
reproduced unwittingly though culture and daily interactions, which do take a ritual/chain
form. The two frameworks merge to show how patterns of interaction can lead to failures
and successes—and this goes on to impact the functioning and goals of the organizations.
CHAPTER FIVE

ALL WHITE HERE:

WHITENESS AND (IN)VISIBLE DIVERSITY

There are many reasons why white people participate in community arts, but at Rainbow Tornado, Picture This, and Art Works, the hope of experiencing multiracial community, or of interaction across race and class boundaries, is at the top of the list. Yet the majority of the participants at all three sites are white, and are ill at ease about being in majority-white spaces. There is a conceptual clash between their ideal type and real experience of community arts. The ways participants experience the gap between ideal and actual racial composition enables a look at tacit assumptions about diversity, and about whiteness. In interactions where white artists “collaborate” with largely African American students or neighbors, and in discussion forums that are overwhelmingly comprised of white people, progressive white people reinforce notions of race as a static binary (black/white), and uneasily contrast visible diversity (where diversity is assumed to be visible and is reduced to that black/white race binary) with diversity of experience.

White people generally turn to people of color to discuss issues of race when in multiracial groups (Sue et al., 2007, 2009; Tatum, 1997; Pollock, 2005). In majority-white situations, white people cannot rely on people of color to educate them about diversity; although white people can work on issues of racism among themselves, racial

36 Nor should they, from a moral, ethical, and social justice perspective. But in raising the spectre of whiteness, in announcing “we’re all white here,” which happened countless times in 14 public Democracy Project forums, the assumption was clear: in order to be
stereotypes are also reinforced in much of their attempts to “build community” with people of color, particularly when the stakes vary so widely for the white artists and those they hope to “serve.” In sites attempting direct democratic practices, or arts-based intervention in urban problems, the democratic dilemma of race (Minow, 1990) is self-reinforcing. Noticing race and not-noticing race are both seen as racist—and the overt focus on whiteness and white people’s desire for multiracial community helps reproduce white privilege (see Chapter Four). This chapter focuses on the meaning of self-conscious whiteness and paradigms of (in)visible diversity.

WE’RE ALL WHITE HERE: DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC?

At one of the Art Works public forums at a Catholic college in an inner-ring suburb, we have split off into small groups by number indicated on nametags. Our group sits in a classroom with individual chair-desks, clean linoleum floors, and poster projects about Catholic identity and social justice on the walls. The religion in the room this evening, however, is participatory democracy. We are assembled to listen and to talk about the role of arts and culture in regional development. After the group assembles and the moderators explain our “task,” a white woman holds up her arm, hand cocked at an angle as if hailing a taxi. She looks to be in her early forties, in casual preppy sportswear from the L.L. Bean catalog: white button-down three-quarter-length sleeve shirt, khaki “diverse,” people of color need to be present. The onus, of course, is on people of color—well-intentioned white people showed up, so why didn’t people of color? This is diversity dilemma in a nutshell of progressive majority-white community arts organizations working for social transformation: white people ask people of color to come participate and educate, and yet also behave and organize in ways that are alienating (at minimum) to those from outside a closed world of white privilege and class privilege.
pants, expensive but subtle gold jewelry. “I just want to point out that we’re all white here,” she says, with a warning tone.

This is a typical experience in the Art Works forums. Participants look around the room and assume everyone—or almost everyone—is white, because people appear to be white. Race is a more complicated identity and cannot be reduced to phenotypic characteristics; even from a social constructionist viewpoint, “race” may be a fiction but its impact is real. But in majority white groups, especially those charged with democratic conversation (as at the Democracy Project/Art Works forums) or engaged in community art, racial diversity is first of all visible, and assumed to be a public good. A lack of visible diversity is interpreted by participants as a deficit, and one so serious that it may impede the work altogether. It seemed important to participants at each forum to note that the group was white, so that lack of visible racial diversity was on the table. But after that, race and class were often conflated, and people of color were discussed in vague terms of alienation and non-participation.

In an interview, Art Works participant Ronald, an older retired white man with prominent hearing aids, discussed the use of art to connect communities, saying,

If we’re facing a large group of – I wouldn’t call them immigrants but non-native Philadelphians, they have to be brought into the picture, the Hispanics, especially. The African culture has to be brought in and we’re getting more people from other countries, a lot of Russian immigrants. They’re not immigrants, anymore. I think the ethnic groups need to be brought into it.
Ronald may be acknowledging literal and symbolic segregation, but he is speaking about arts and culture and Philadelphia as something white and middle-class, something that can acclimate people of color somehow to the American melting pot. The idea, too, of how “they have to be brought into the picture” assumes that the existing picture of majority-white institutions, funding, and power, is well and good. “They” (non-native Philadelphians or people of color, largely) need to come to “us” (middle-class white people, mostly). This assumption that the community arts world is basically fine but for the lack of visible participants of color, runs throughout Rainbow Tornado, Picture This, and Art Works sites, much to their detriment.

After attending two Art Works forums, Melissa, a staff member at a Puerto Rican arts organization located in a majority-Puerto Rican neighborhood, commented,

Overall, I noticed that there were a lot of white people and very few blacks, Asians or Latinos anywhere at these forums, so one of the reasons I had gone was I thought the Latino voice needed to be represented. And then the second reason I went is my own really personal reason, which we discussed a little bit before you turned on the tape recorder, and that is I have a big interest in the community arts in Philadelphia and what’s going on in the culture arts and culture scene in general and I wanted to see what other people are doing, talking about, thinking about. It’s always very good as an organization to make sure you’re not sticking in the box and that you get out of your box you’re building and go see what other people are doing. So, those were the two reasons that I went.

Melissa mentions wanting to make sure that the “Latino voice” would be represented at the forum, revealing an assumption that it would not be. This is connected to her other stated reason for attending: to see what other arts organizations are “doing, talking about, thinking about.” This highlights one of
the reasons why it may be problematic for community arts spaces and public forums to be perceived as “all white:” because networks are forged, and public awareness is raised for organizations, programs, and people, and because this connects to organizational profile, reputation, status, and funding. If your organization’s not at the table for the conversation, they may not make it into the newspaper article, the photograph, the short list for funding, and more.

Multiracial community is not just a moral issue, but also a strategic one. In a city stratified by race and class, organizations also tend to follow suit. Cultural organizations serving particular racial and ethnic groups, like Melissa’s organization, are aware of the “boxes” they are put in—and the funding opportunities they may be missing out on.

Other Art Works participants acknowledged attending partly out of their own interests, and partly to represent their arts and culture or related organization. Chelle, a mid-forties white woman, talked about what brought her to the forum:

I worked as a dramaturge in Philadelphia for four years and I’m from Philadelphia, outside of Philadelphia, New Jersey, and I found that when I left the theater company and started teaching full-time I was losing my arts connection, just because of the movement from Philadelphia to Maryland back and forth, back and forth and not being immersed in it full time. And so I was really irritated with myself at losing that connection I was having to a city that I really loved. And I read an article or something about it in the paper and I thought, “Well this might be a compelling way to looking at work that I care about in sort of a larger scale and a bigger picture,” and thinking about ways one might impact or adjust regional thinking about the arts.

I was also kind of irritated with John Street and found that the city’s perspective on the arts dropped during those eight years and I had such high hopes from Ed Rendell because of the work that he did specifically
with the Arden, but I guess other theater companies and arts organizations. So I was interested in reclaiming that back from Mayor Street.

The Art Works forums promised attendees that their “citizen voices” on “the role of arts and culture in regional development” would be brought to the Mayor along with the leadership’s recommendations. Many people read between the lines, and connected participation with a closer connection to city strategy, politics, and funding. Lori, a public relations director at a tourism and marketing company and a white woman in her early thirties, says,

I think the arts are very important, especially since Philadelphia is kind of trying to reinvent itself a little bit. I interned on Mayor Nutter's campaign. Before I started working for the [tourism and marketing group], I was unemployed for about five months which was interesting, but during that time I was an intern with them.

And so I think that the way city government interacts with community is very important, and I think that a lot of times people thinks of arts and culture as an end not a means, and I think that people can realize that you can actually use arts and culture to achieve the different goals that you have for the city, I think we'll get where we wanna go a lot faster.

Arts and culture are not the sole property of white people. In Philadelphia, there are many cultural organizations doing community art work by and for people of color. Some organizations are somewhat multiracial, but overall there is a schism: community arts run by white people in search of multiracial community, and cultural organizations run by and for particular racial and ethnic groups. But participant after participant commented, as did dramaturge Chelle,

I’m a little disappointed that it's just so white. I don't know what to do about that. I mean clearly poverty is the issue in our city and so how do we lift people out of poverty? Maybe we can do it through the arts; we're just not thinking that way yet. But I don't think white people should be imposing their -- you know what I mean?
Even in a starkly divided cultural landscape, well-intentioned white people want to believe that multiracial community is possible, and that community arts can be an incubator for that possibility. But rather than acknowledging that some spaces are majority-white, and for particular reasons, people keep echoing Ronald’s strategy of “bringing them in.” Cultural worker Avi, a man in his early fifties with a dark brown beard, says,

There was a lack of people of color in the first conversation in my group. Although as I recall from the larger group, it seemed that way as well, but definitely my group. And I think that from what I recall, yeah, people weren't necessary in tune with communities where resources were lacking and access was level.

Melissa continues,

Overall, I noticed that there were a lot of white people and very few blacks, Asians or Latinos anywhere at these forums, so one of the reasons I had gone was I thought the Latino voice needed to be represented.

Chelle elaborates on the whiteness of the forums, saying,

They're just white. I hate to keep harping on that but it's totally true. You don't want to feel paternalistic, you don't want to feel like, "You know, this art's good for you. Here, have a little bit of art." I don't know -- yeah, you can't impose art upon a society; you just can't do it. And so we just need to figure out a better way of articulating it and generating it ourselves.

Nobody wants to be politically incorrect and so I think it was touched upon in sort of an elliptical kind of way. I didn't really hear it in a way, and I didn't say it. But I think upon reflection as I'm -- now that I'm thinking about, "Wow, that room was really white."

No one intends to be paternalistic or impose art on anyone. Overall, Art Works participants, like those at Rainbow Tornado and Picture This!, are committed to sharing the richness of art and culture with the city, and to using art and culture to connect with
others. But whether street theater, murals, or other forms, majority-white community arts are saying “this art’s good for you. Here, have a little bit of art,” reinforcing the schism between majority-white organizations and those primarily by and for people of color.

At the same time, some of the homogeneity or assumed overlap among participants was helpful. Lori from the tourism and marketing organization says,

It was neat to get together with people and kind of come up with some ideas that would be really useful and really helpful and see how your views are similar to people or different to people. I was definitely the youngest person in my group, probably by like 10 or 15 years, and so that was an interesting experience for me.

It was a very arts-heavy group which I thought was interesting. Well, a lot of teachers, but then a lot of people who kind of are in the arts field, and so I wondered if it was more of a sampling of the city, if are kind of like, "Yeah, we should spend all this money on these different things," would've been supported.

The groups I was with both times were fairly diverse, somewhat – definitely talkative. It seemed to be a little bit more diverse in the first session in age. There were more people there that were closer to my age, which is around 30, and there were definitely one or two people in the session who were in there 20s.

A lot of women, maybe in their 40s, 50s, 60s, kind of that. Maybe 50s, 60s were definitely the predominate group, which I think is maybe not surprising. I know of lot of arts activists there. From working in the field, I understand that there are a lot of arts leaders who kinda fall into that category.

Lori is talking about diversity of experience. This is the element of the Art Works forums that pleasantly surprised participants, even those unnerved by the pervasive whiteness. Even among mainstream arts and culture leaders and patrons, conversations about the use of arts and culture in regional development yielded exposure to new thoughts and ideas. Movers and shakers in the art scene obviously have to protect their
own interests and those of their organizations. There is never enough money. But at the
same time the room is “all white,” people are learning positive things from one another.
This is an overlooked aspect of diversity, and an aspect rendered invisible when the focus
is on “authentic” visible diversity and the failures of a majority-white room.

As Lori points out, the arts leaders present are representative of many mainstream
and community-based arts organizations in Philadelphia: middle-aged white women. But
in a city roughly divided between black and white residents, there is a longstanding
African American cultural and political tradition, and multiple strong immigrant
communities (particularly Mexican, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Chinese, Ethiopian,
Eritrean, and West African37). It seems that there is a whole separate community arts
sphere run by and for people of color and more recent immigrants. Like most institutions
in a stratified city, white community arts groups are one separate world, although one
often consciously attempting to connect with community arts groups of color.

Beyond the conflation of race and class (or rather, people of color and poverty),
white participants talk around their unease with being aligned with the powerful. The
notion that arts and culture work as a form of social justice and urban transformation
from below is underneath many participant comments. Joel leads a community
development project in a divided neighborhood, largely white, historically working class,
now increasingly divided between wealth and poverty. He says,

I sometimes feel like, did I really envision myself like serving dual-
income professional couples that are a part of this neighborhood? Part of
me just has to get over me and say, "Well, they have issues, and they want
things for their neighborhood too as much as a poorer person much further

37 West Africa is a region, not a country, but in terms of media, social services, and
community organizing, “West Africa” is often used as an umbrella term.
north, you know.” But it sometimes just – when I feel like I’m working long hours, I’m like, “All right, who am I really serving here and why am I really doing this?”

Art and culture become a way of “doing something” about urban inequality. But in rooms like at the Rainbow Tornado, Picture This mural class, or Art Works forums, urban inequality becomes calcified as binaries: black and white, rich and poor, with different moral authority or authenticity in different contexts. And arts are a way to connect, even in small moments. As Lucia, a retired white librarian from a Main Line suburb, mentions,

I felt welcome just signing in, and then I was early because it’s very nearby, so I sat and waited and was looking around and chatted with a woman who had very short gray hair, and I sat of her and went up and said, "I'm going to get my haircut short and I wanted to know is there a downside?" So we chatted. And it turned out later she happened to be randomly assigned to my discussion group.

These forums are social spaces, fleeting or more long-term. People are forging personal and professional connections, and arts administrators are strengthening networks. That is one reason why it matters whether everyone really is “all white here.”

At the same time as “diversity” is understood to be something visible, phenotypic and recognizable, another definition of diversity is operationalized: that of diversity of experience. Chelle, so “disappointed” with the whiteness of the forums, also says, “The diversity of people was just sort of intriguing.” She continues, “it was all white people [but] just different perspectives, so where I came from, where one person came from, where another person came from, just age, varieties, points of view.” And in room after room, small group conversations might start out pointing out the whiteness and assumed homogeneity of the room, but would often conclude with appreciative
participant comments about the diversity of experience, and what a welcome “surprise” that was. This suggests white people assume diversity is visible; it also suggests that while diversity of experience may be a useful concept, it’s also a salve for white guilt.

It is interesting that among the people I interviewed at all three sites, they are certainly not all white. Melissa makes reference to being Latina; another woman is Japanese American and talks about the importance of Japanese cultural activities. Maria, in the mural class, identifies variously as “Caribbean” or “black,” and is identified as “black” or “half-black” by her peers. Robert and Deneice at Rainbow Tornado, both African American, have a lot to say about the organization, whiteness, and racial politics. But somehow they are not seen as full participants. Even in search of multiracial community, majority-white organizations are perhaps unconsciously invested in staying white, in seeing themselves as white, and this is a reminder that to understand diversity as “visible,” you have to be what Bill Clinton derisively called a “bean counter” (Locin, 1992) and certain in your judgment of who “counts.” There is conscious talk about majority white spaces as problematic. There is much talk about a desire for diversity—but white spaces stay white. Why and how? Perhaps because of how ideals translate into practice.

WHITE PEOPLE DO THIS, BLACK PEOPLE DO THAT

Robert, the African American education manager at Rainbow Tornado, recounts an early moment in his involvement with the organization. The group had been hired to appear at a Martin Luther King Jr. assembly at a local middle school. White puppeteers
Flash, Tina, and Jojo wore a giant puppet to weave through the crowd on folding chairs in the cafeteria space, with Jojo in the “backpack,” where the head of the puppet was mounted on a hiking backpack frame, with a giant dress stabilized by large coils of tubing cascading down to hide his body. Flash and Daisy each held a giant papier-mâché hand connected to the dress by a length of burgundy cloth. “They brought Sojourner Truth,” Robert said, shaking his head, referring to a puppet head roughly three feet in diameter, with rough red rosin paper wrinkles, exaggerated facial features, and a headscarf. “The kids were looking at it, asking me, ‘Is that a mammy?’” He mentions the “wide nose” and “broad lips” of the puppet, and the discomfort and confusion he saw on the faces of African American children “presented” with this cultural hero. This example is not explicitly about whiteness, but rather, white privilege, where white artists do not see it as problematic to represent a historical figure, a black woman, with stereotypical features. Robert comments, “Community is not defined by how often you cooperate with someone, but whether you and they both see each other as a part of a community.” After a staff meeting months after the King Day assembly, Robert says,

I think it was interesting for the staff of RT\textsuperscript{38} to realize that their community is not any of the poor neighborhoods or neighborhoods of color that they are part of—their community is other radical white people. And that’s fine. But I think at work they kind of operate under the assumption that they’re [part of poor communities of color]. So it was interesting to hear them, you know, when they were running down their list, it didn’t say [the low-income African American neighborhood where the theater is located].

The two black staff members, Robert and business manager Deneice, are the only two to explicitly talk about race on a regular basis. While Deneice casually refers to her skin

\textsuperscript{38} Pronounced “Arty,” and a common way staffers refer to the Rainbow Tornado.
tone when someone makes a coffee run, pointing to her face to illustrate she wants enough cream in her coffee to make it “like this,” the day to day discussion of race is more general, with white staff members talking for the most part about “diversity” and “people of color.”

White artist Daisy talks about the different people who might pop in at the Rainbow Tornado without mentioning race. She says,

It’s definitely a welcoming place, appreciative of a wide variety of ways of being. And that feels really good to me. When the dude from [a nearby halfway house] walks in and says, “Whoa, I’ve never been here before,” people don’t just say, “I’m sorry, we’re closed right now.” They talk to the person for a while. And then the kids from across the street come over. And then some woman from ACT-UP comes upstairs, and then a lady from the Brandywine Peace Community calls, and then some senior center woman wants to have a workshop, and the, you know, it feels like, very much like we’re part of something that’s aware that it’s part of something bigger.

The “dude from [a nearby halfway house]” and “the kids from across the street” are African American, and living in poverty. The “lady from the Brandywine Peace Community” and at least some who are from ACT-UP are middle-class whites. All certainly use the space, and they do in fact collaborate across race and class lines, but that does not make the Rainbow Tornado a diverse, egalitarian, multiracial space. And that would be fine—there’s no reason why an anarchist street theater needs to actually be a utopia—except that race and class are woven throughout the Rainbow Tornado’s understanding of itself. Director Jojo explains his view of politics:

Anytime you get poor people out on the street together, that’s political in our country. I think that crowds of poor folks and crowds of people of color, especially, is a threat to a racial paradigm and a power paradigm about who owns public space, and whose public space it is, and whose neighborhood it is.
Jojo’s vision of politics is powerful. Many young progressives and anarchists are drawn to Rainbow Tornado in order to overturn racial and power paradigms. But rarely are the artists who choose to affiliate with Rainbow Tornado poor by birth rather than by temporary circumstances or choice, and rarely are they people of color.

Certainly coalition politics are possible and transformative, but while the desire for coalition and multiracial community may be strong, the reality is, well, absent. Poor people and people of color “participate” at Rainbow Tornado mostly through programs offered at community centers and schools, paid for by grants and public funds. Deneice comments on “whose neighborhood” the theater may be in. Of a recent open house celebration where all the partner organizations are invited to show art, eat, and dance, she says,

If you got to that party at 8:30, you would be like, OK. You would think that the RT community is West Philadelphia anarchists. Had you been there earlier, you would have seen some neighborhood people, some children, even some of our [programming] partners.

While anarchists are certainly not white by definition, the West Philly anarchist scene is overwhelmingly white. The divide between the late-evening crew and those at the party earlier reflects the communities that arts organizations like Rainbow Tornado try to bridge. Some are able to do so, at least some of the time. But many of the practices enacted at majority-white community arts organizations reinforce social worlds separated by race, class, politics, and other facets of identity. Louis, a white graduate student employed part-time at the theater as museum manager, explains Rainbow Tornado as “a bit of a closed world.” He says of the artists and the white anarchist/political arts scene in West Philly, “They’re all friends and stuff,” but that “Jojo wanted to escape the insularity
of white upper-middle-class activism, so he made RT, which I think is the most commendable thing about it.” The desire to escape white class-privileged activism may be sincere, but the practices or processes continue to polarize.

For Robert, although the racial and class politics of the Rainbow Tornado leave much to be desired, he is not overly concerned with their identity. He marks a boundary between himself and the white staff, saying, “I think there’s a lot of good work that needs to be done, and Rainbow Tornado is doing good work in those neighborhoods. I don’t do it because it’s ‘community.’” He elaborates on the difference in point of view between the Rainbow Tornado staff and the mostly African American neighborhoods where they work, saying that at the Rainbow Tornado,

- They think that because people like them and give them compliments, that makes them part of the community. And that’s not the same thing. [laughs] You can do great work, and people can like you, and people can be glad you didn’t go to work in corporate America and you’re actually, like, a nice white person coming to work in a poor neighborhood, and they could be happy about that. That doesn’t mean they see you as part of their community.

And it is perhaps because people like them, and because there is “good work that needs to be done;” and the joy of building giant puppets, and the dearth of arts opportunities in public schools, that white artists seem to feel no self-consciousness about parading a giant version of “Sojourner Truth” around a cafeteria on King Day. But stark divides between white people and black people are only reinforced in these moments, at least in Robert’s retelling. This is another version of “white people do this/black people do
“that,” a trope that much mainstream comedy employs for easy laughs. White people, often unaware that other racial groups have unflattering stereotypes about their behavior, often take these facile binaries as gospel, as in this moment from the long-running televised satirical cartoon, The Simpsons:

Inside, Homer is on the couch watching TV and laughing. He watches a black stand-up comedian.

HOMER
Oh, oh, stop!

COMEDIAN
Yo, check this out: black guys drive a car like this! (Leans back, as though one hand is on the wheel and his elbow is resting on the windowsill, and sings a tune) Do, do, chh. Do be do, do be do-be-do. (audience laughs)
Yeah, but white guys, see, they drive a car like this! (Leans forward with both hands on the wheel) Dee-da-dee, a-dee-da-dee...

HOMER
(laughing hard) It's true, it's true! We're so lame!

The “joke” is that white people do everything wrong, are tragically uncool, and are generally clueless. In trying to bridge entrenched racial and economic segregation, white people often misstep, trying to prove themselves. We see this in what Picture This students came to call David’s “TV black voice.”

David provided our class with a common topic of conversation through student observation of his interactions with the class and the Mantua neighbors. Our class was

39 From Chappelle’s Show (Season 2, Episode 11, aired March 31, 2004). A critique of Def Comedy Jam, Chappelle’s skit (on his too-hot-for-TV “lost” episodes) boils down most public rumination on American diversity. Over conga drums and in a dashiki (referencing Afrocentrism and the socially conscious poetry of groups like the Last Poets), the poet slowly intones: WHITE PEOPLE DO THIS…BLACK PEOPLE DO THAT.

primarily united in opposition to some of David’s personal quirks and teaching behaviors. Conversation about David, both forgiving and mean-spirited, provided all seven of us with a temporary common enemy, target of frustration, and shared topic of conversation. Though it could be dismissed as trivial, student discussion about David points to some of the themes of differences of race, class, and struggles with engagement central to the course and the formation of social solidarity.

Around the middle of the semester, students began referring to David’s “black voice” to one another. David’s “black voice” is perhaps his version of code-switching or impression management, of tailoring his public persona to fit the imagined norms of his audience. In the case of community meetings, outside of student artists and muralists he already knows, David’s audience is primarily low-income African Americans. Charlotte describes her reaction to hearing David speak at a community meeting, saying, “I felt like almost enraged at him, sitting there and listening to him talk down to these people.”

Ruchel says that community meetings seem to involve

A lot of talking down, I think, on David’s part, a lot of ‘I’m going to talk in my black person voice when I’m with you because you’re obviously not intelligent enough to understand me when I talk in my white person voice.’

Speculating on why David chooses to speak publicly in a way that so many of his students find laughable and offensive, Ruchel theorizes,

I don’t know if it’s anything other than a reflection of what he thinks of the community. And if he thinks a certain way of the community, that might affect the designs he chooses to put forth in that community. I don’t think he means to do it. I think it’s entirely subconscious. And—I think he thinks that he’s just being friends with them, that he’s just trying to get in with them, and that if you talk like them then they have to like you, and he wants to be on that level with them where they like him.
Ruchel points out one of the most difficult things about working with many different people, which is how to genuinely and respectfully work across difference. Astrid mentions having felt initially uncomfortable about being perceived as a “rich white girl,” but goes on to say that now, when she’s painting,

I am myself. They’re their selves. I’m not going to be a different person [at the site]. Of course I’m going to be accommodating and realize what draws people in and work along those lines, but whatever, I am a preppy white person. And I can get over that.

But “getting over” our own often-painful awareness of the legacy of deep racial and economic divides can be crippling, and undermine some of the work that is done in the name of community collaboration. Saying that “it’s almost debilitating” to be, as she is, “über-aware of being a white student going into Mantua,” Charlotte shares advice that renowned muralist Alice gave her earlier in the semester. She says,

Alice said this a couple weeks ago and it just resonated with me. She said something like “Going into a different community is hard but you have to

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According to the 2000 Census, the Census tract where the mural was painted (tract 108) was home to residents who were 95.3% Black or African American, 41% with less than a high school education, 24.2% unemployed, and 44.3% below poverty level based on 1999 income. The median household income in 1999 was $17,310. (Source: www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/wphila/stats/soclexpl/soclexp12000/2000_108_stat.html) At the same time, average tuition, fees, room, and board for undergraduates at the university around the time the mural was painted totaled $39,358. (Source: www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/tuition/2000.html)

Outside of wanting to see Philadelphia beyond the university, students named Alice as a major reason for wanting to take the class. Alice is a prominent mural artist and community worker, and the public face of public art in Philadelphia. She has taught the Picture This course many times in the past; while she and David were supposed to co-teach the course during the time of my research, she was unavailable for much of the semester. She is a middle-aged white woman with an expensive private education, a deep sense of mission, charisma, and tenacity. Had Alice taught the majority of the course, students may have walked away with a very different “community” experience. That is not to say that David was necessarily the deciding factor in the fraught experience of the course, but students certainly perceived him as lacking, and then behaved in ways that constructed him and his leadership as a problem.
realize that you have, you’re putting a lot of that on yourself. You need to realize that you have your own assumptions and you need to let those go.”

But letting those assumptions go can be very difficult to do—and in some ways, both assumptions and resulting behavior are what help shape our sense of group cohesion and group purpose. David’s public behavior provides a point of convergence for the very different students in the mural class. Through mocking his “black voice,” we are saying that our racial politics are somehow more evolved, that we are more comfortable working in unfamiliar communities. As evident from other student comments, however, that is not necessarily true, and our perceptions of one another’s (lack of) comfort being a privileged student working in a poor community helps us create tension and division within our larger group.

White people attempting to speak in a black voice, or to and for black people, can be momentarily irritating or potentially ruinous, like when Jonathan, the professor who is co-director of the Democracy Project/Art Works, speaks about Tyler Perry in a meeting with a major funder. Out of 12 people in a very polished conference room at an important Philadelphia foundation, one program officer is African American (Patrick). Everyone else appears to be white, including the other eight foundation representatives, Jonathan, George (the journalist co-director of the Democracy Project), and me. We are there, Jonathan, George, and I, to see if there are possibilities for project funding. Again, a critical moment about race and racial stereotypes ruptures a larger meeting and discourse of partnership.

We are talking about theater audiences and the types of shows that draw big crowds to Philly’s Avenue of the Arts, where major mainstream theaters and concert halls
Patrick mentions “church groups” coming to see “Tyler Perry” a few years back, and Jonathan seizes this moment to talk about the need for broader audience participation at other Philadelphia performances. Tyler Perry is a divisive figure in popular culture. Most critics acknowledge that he has found an audience hungry for entertainment, and depicts a social milieu of working-class, mainstream, African Americans rarely addressed, but Perry is derided as low-brow, stereotypical, and deeply problematic by those outside his core audience, black and white alike. Jonathan alludes to this, to the “churches renting busses to come see Tyler Perry” but not to visit the African American museum, or the opera, or the orchestra, or the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He leans forward, locks eyes with Patrick and says, speaking to the vast audience of Tyler Perry fans, “come on, guys—whassup?” He squints his eyes, grimaces and spreads his hands, hunching his shoulders and speaking in a raspy voice not unlike David’s “TV black voice.”

How do I know this is Jonathan’s attempt to “keep it real,” as white people like to say when they hope to speak to black people? He never discusses it, but his vocal and postural shift, the Tyler Perry references, and the sudden break in conversation suggest that this is a racialized judgment, and another way of reinforcing the high art/low art binary (see Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Gans, 1974). Social conflicts play out in, around, and through art (Tepper, 2011Kramer, 1994). This is one of several ways that art reproduces social inequality: in distinction, taste, and notions of what is good and proper for people to enjoy. The fact that the foundation declines to fund the project may not be connected
to Jonathan’s comment, but it sticks out as an uncomfortable and critical misstep, and one of many.

While the floating ethos and thumbnail definition of community arts is process over product, artistic, racial, class-based, and other moral judgments about what people should do get in the way of the larger goals. As Robert comments,

The only way that RT could actually be community arts is if the community decided that they way they wanted to express themselves was through puppets. Not puppeteers coming in an saying “This is a way you can express yourself.” There’s a lot of talk about grassroots, but grassroots is the opposite of what this is. This is us taking our way of expressing ourselves and saying, “We want you to express yourself this way,” where grassroots says, “How do you express yourself?”

To continue in this vein, if a group enjoys Tyler Perry and mobilizes forces to support his work, should that be so easily dismissed by culture advocates? The issue is that in matters of “taste” or “choice,” racial and class divides are visible, and this is counter to the mission of organizations using art and culture to transform urban alienation and segregation, to connect people across race and class divides, and to trumpet the universal power of arts to build diverse community. Where Rainbow Tornado, Picture This, and Art Works may be most successful is when they drop the moralizing and simply make art, or amplify arts and culture opportunities across the board. However, when the people who “want to express themselves…through puppets” are largely white anarchists and activists, this is an unpleasant reminder to Rainbow Tornado staff that their world is largely white, and that visible whiteness is a proxy for ongoing social inequality. When Art Works staff and participants discuss art and culture with a mainstream, white,
traditional or high culture bias, this does impact the organizations funded and their impact in the larger region.

And again, participants are drawn to the dream of an unoppressive city, of egalitarian multiracial community. It is one chief reason why they come to organizations like Rainbow Tornado or Picture This, and when they are disillusioned or disabused of these notions, the sense of betrayal and anger lead them to dismiss progressive community arts entirely. A year after the mural class, Tina says bitterly,

they contradict themselves by saying that it’s all about community and the whole point is us putting their ideas and their souls onto the wall, and they contradicted all of that when they like—I feel like David immediately dissed the entire community when we had that 3-hour bullshit conversation about basically how to deal with black people.

Notions of whiteness and blackness are reified in some ways, she continues, suggesting the social reproduction of racial and economic inequality that the course came to represent:

Me and Maria walked away—I felt so bad for Maria, cuz she’s half black, and I was like, I went to an all-black school, and I grew up in like a predominantly black neighborhood, and so I like take huge offense—and I’m not even black, and I took so much offense, like…and I’m just lookin’ at Maria, like, I knew Maria grew up in a white neighborhood, but I’m like, please, Dear God, tell me that you walked away with like, you can’t believe what you just heard. And she did, so I was like, Thank God, like, I’m not the only one, like maybe I’m the racist in the classroom, but everyone’s sitting there talking about—and all I remember is Charlotte. I remember Charlotte. And that’s why I’m surprised, cuz she’s from Philly. So it’s not like [university students in general], like, everybody rich-ass white people all day…it’s like, real people—well, not real people, but like, it’s mixed. It’s not really mixed here, like even the black people that are here, they still have the same values as like all the rich people, so it’s like mixed-up. And it’s not just like all black people, it’s poor black people. We had a conversation about how to deal with poor black people.

Tina identifies with her “predominately black neighborhood,” which she refers to as
“Little Nigeria.” In her comments above and below, race and class are conflated, and notions of who has racial authority or authenticity (or perhaps, in Jackson’s terms, racial sincerity, 2005) shift between herself, Maria, and her expectations of Charlotte as a Philly kid.

Maria occupies an uncomfortable position in the space of the classroom and out in “the community.” She says, “They like me best,” speaking about the residents of the block where the mural is painted, particularly the family living in the house that is the site of the mural, and where students are allowed to use the bathroom. But although Tina in some ways suggest Maria has racial authenticity or sincerity, and Maria alludes to this in coded ways when talking about how “the community” likes her “best,” in part because “I’m used to pit bulls,” Maria occupies a liminal space socially and racially. Astrid first asks Maria if she is “Brazilian” in an early class; Maria responds tersely, “I’m Caribbean.” At the same time as students in the course look to Maria as an expert in race or blackness, Tina, the student closest to Maria in the course meetings, vacillates between affirming Maria’s “blackness” and talking about how Maria is “half white.” She emphasizes Maria’s white, European boyfriend, and how Maria grew up “in a white neighborhood;” at the same time, Tina talks about how she grew up “in Little Nigeria” in Philly, went to “an all-black school,” and her own black boyfriend.

Both in their first year of college, Tina and Maria connect, and mostly talk to one another when painting at the mural site (a setting that encourages self-directed conversation more than the space of the classroom). Both say that part of their connection is in their mutual interest in “talking about race” or “being funny about race,”
which they feel is missing from the larger group and the course. Some of that race talk, however, veers close to stereotype or microaggression, as in when Tina shares a long anecdote about being at a party and escaping the buffoonish but amorous attention of a classmate. She describes the young man’s social faux pas and general demeanor, and concludes with an exasperated sigh, “Dustin, why do you have to be so Asian?”

There are many assumptions about race, class, sexual identity, and other aspects impression managements on display and behind the scenes. All of the Picture This students have pigeonholed identities—the Orthodox Jew engaged to be married (Ruchel); the Orthodox Jew surgeon in training (Leila); the “preppy white person” (Astrid); the Philly kid from a progressive neighborhood (Charlotte); the scrappy white Philly girl from a black world (Tina); the “black,” “Caribbean,” and “half-white” prep student Maria; and the old lady grad student (me). There is not necessarily enough interaction with people outside the class to talk about others, but our own partial recognitions of one another perhaps point to the longing for a “real” or “authentic” Philadelphia experience that prompted most of our enrollment in the course. The conflation of race and class in particular is noteworthy; with limited information, it still seems that Maria is asked to be the “authentic” arbiter of blackness, a position uncomfortable for her, but one she also takes on in small moments.

Urban citizenship is racialized, in Tina’s view, and there is a correct perspective that she damns the course as a whole, her fellow students, and David as instructor for lacking. Although people of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds are all present and participating, again whiteness emerges as a totalizing force, and one that
ultimately sinks the utility and impact of the mural course.

So Charlotte—even if it wasn’t black people, she—she went to a public school in Philadelphia, so she had to know that there was poor other people, not, not even black or white. They were poor, though. But she was just like—and it killed me, too, that she went to a Philadelphia public school, and she said, uh, she said as she was leaving one of the community meetings, a lady said to her, “OK, goodbye, you [university] kids…” And she took o—and we sat there and talked for an hour and a half about what this lady’s hidden intentions were behind “you [university] kids.” And Charlotte said that she was hurt, that this lady was like um, like mocking us, because we go to Penn and her kids will never go to Penn, and we’re trying to, rich kids are trying to come in and help her little poor-ass community—and I’m like, all this lady said was ‘you [university] kids.’ Probably because we go to [a university]. Like, that’s what I, that’s what I got from it. I was like, have you never talked to a black slash poor person in your entire life that you have to feel that way like when someone says something to you, like, that’s such a simple conversation, you put so much meaning into it? I just—that’s—and David’s like, immediately agreed with Charlotte, like [raspy cowboy voice] “Yeah! You know, you got to be real careful around, like—“ (laughs) And I was like, holy—and Melissa’s like si—Melissa didn’t say anything the entire class, and I’m sitting there, I’m getting’ like, just like this [eyes bulge, roll, shakes head], like, I cannot believe what I’m hearing. I told my mom about it, and my mom was like, “That’s really sad.” And then even David’s saying “The whole point is to bring the community together and show that we’re on the same page, same team,” but then, soon as we get around the black people, like, like the kids from Changing Tracks, [whispers, hoarse, TV black voice] “Oh, sup guys, “ like, this deep like cool dude black voice, and I was—but then David in the classroom is totally like [“normal sensitive white guy voice:” nasal mid-register tone] “OK, guys, this is the project,” but then he’s like “Sup, dudes?” like, like, I don’t know. He just changes his whole attitude, and I’m like, I’m glad they never saw the difference [who says they didn’t?] because I think they—I would be offended if I see—I don’t know. It’s just like that killed me, that we did have that three hour—I don’t know if you were there, but [exhales big, laughs] I—and then everybody pipes in, like “Oh, I remember this one time I had to talk to like!” And they’re bringing up, like, conversations like when they had to—their encounters with poor people, and black—and I was like, “Holy shit.”

That killed my mood for the class, and I was like, he really contradicted his entire belief.
It kind of happened all—just cuz like, when he changed his voice and his whole personality around like, the black or poor people, it showed them that we weren’t on the same team. We were, actually, the Penn kids who were coming to save the world when he did that, and not that “we’re trying to help you, you’re trying to help us” and that’s what I thought it was supposed to be?

Moments in class discussions and meetings derailed the entire project, from the mural itself to the vaunted process. Students began the class wanting to believe that art can transform cities and fraught relationships, but as the mural project began to illustrate the stark divides in social status, students gave up (on the class, on each other, and particularly on David). Tina explains the moments of fracture as being about “how to deal with poor black people.” As I detail in Chapter Four, Charlotte’s take differs. The course has no room for Charlotte or Tina’s dissent, though, or perhaps any deviation from the party line of art as urban intervention: they really want us here. So what the course produces in terms of solidarity or emotional energy? Strife. Failure. It is not always this way. Casual conversations with course participants from past years do not reveal the same sense of betrayal.

CONCLUSION

Rainbow Tornado, the Picture This mural class, and Art Works forums are spaces of unintentional white socialization. Through participation, white people construct whiteness as problematic, and as somehow helpless in creating a “diverse” community. Diversity takes on two meanings: visible diversity, mostly of race, and diversity of experience, or an invisible diversity. The community art frame is important. While other semi-public sites do similar things, the larger ideology of Art for Social Transformation
and Multiracial Community looms large. Too, some of the organizations studied here and others very similar to them claim expertise on facilitating multiracial and “diverse” community experience. Doing diversity workshops, sitting on funding panels, organizing large-scale international events are only a handful of the ways that white artists have used their tenure at Rainbow Tornado and Picture This to their own benefit and public identity as a “diversity” expert.

In trying to work across differences of race and class, white people wind up reinforcing stereotypes about whiteness and about people of color, particularly in white people’s representation of “blackness.” “TV black voices,” “Mammies,” and other gruesome moments are, in fact, business as usual. This is where we fail. We may succeed, in fact, by recognizing that All White Here does not mean lack of diversity if you look for some diversity of experience. It does mean lack of visible diversity, though, which remains a problem.

And whiteness becomes a problem—but naming it as a problem also enables sidestepping it? People of color, and race in general, emerge as a problem for white people. The problem is white people’s discomfort in dealing with racial difference, in naming it, in acknowledging they are not the architects of a multiracial community. The burden of participation remains on people of color, who are not likely to “participate” as tokens. This illustrates tendencies to lump and split (Zerubavel, 1996), and white people’s concern with what black people think, say, or do.

Minow’s democratic dilemmas of race remain salient here, and provide a lens into what can happen when progressive white people attempt to use to build community in
segregated urban contexts. This is about diversity and democracy, both—how to deal with a multiracial pluralistic America that delineates pretty clearly between the haves and have-nots. How spaces like progressive community arts organizations, devoted to direct democracy of various sorts, “deal” or “don’t deal.”

This public recognition of whiteness leads to several other notable aspects of the Art Works forum, particularly the way that white participants tend to see “diversity” as a racial issue and black white/binary—and the contradictory finding, which is that white participants often mention that the forum was a space of discovery about “diversity,” moving past notions of visible racial diversity to larger thoughts about diversity of experience.

While many moments where visibly white participants raise the public question of why the Art Works forums look so white (particularly notable in a city and 5-county area that are far from majority-white) could be dismissed as moments of white privilege and guilt, where white people raise the specter of race and racial difference in order to exempt themselves from the painful history of American racism, it is white people’s understanding of whiteness as race that may be developing in these moments alongside a possible exorcism of guilty consciousnesses. One translation of visibly white participants’ public Art Works comments for everyone to notice that “there are a lot of white people here” is a cynical one: yet again, people with white privilege are shirking responsibility to talk and act on racial inequality by assuming that discussion about race can only happen with people of color in the room. This argument also goes further to suggest that perhaps white people prefer for black and brown faces and other people of
color to be in the room to do the hard work of talking about race. And indeed discussions of race and racial inequality are hard work—but one of the principles of Art Works forums is that *talk is the work of democracy*. Democracy is hard work, it is true, but work that citizens of all colors could be called upon to perform regardless of the racial composition of the room.

Another angle on the attention to whiteness at Art Works forums can be found in participants’ comments at forums, on surveys, and in interviews. While the Art Works forums may lack visible diversity or representation of the demographics of the larger Philadelphia region, through the hard work of conversation and deliberation, white participants found that even in small groups of people who shared many demographic similarities, there was a wide diversity of *experience* in every group. This is a hopeful expansion of binary racial notions of diversity, and provides another aspect of the Art Works forums for future analysis.

The Art Works forums and similar types of conversation are unconventional but democratic learning sites. These are places where people are learning about themselves, about democratic conversation, and about options for regional change. Some of the things people are learning are old and ugly and reinscribe harmful binaries and hierarchies of oppression—but some of this learning helps us see the Urban Arts Democracy up ahead of us, the unoppressive city and all her glory.

How might projects like Art Works create spaces where difference can be useful? Many of the participants talk about the “surprising diversity” in a group that at first, second, and even third glance appears (and demographically “is”) relatively homogenous.
But the Art Works group can be defined by what members suggest it lacks: “diversity” particularly of age and race. So Art Works can be seen as a particular set of practices and perhaps beliefs of largely middle-aged or older, middle-class or higher, educated white people who elect to participate in conversation. It may be useful to look at this type of “public forum” as white people’s semi-private space.

One important aspect of the cosmopolitan canopy framework is that “civilized” (or cosmopolitan) behavior in public allows for interactions across difference, but necessarily limits those interactions to either anomalous or to surface/polite (not continuous, deep, etc.) interactions. How do we “get deeper”? That polite reserve was questioned by several Art Works participants in further interviews, and gets at the heart of necessary but not sufficient conditions of democratic conversation. Or possibly not even necessary, this cosmopolitan canopy polite veneer. And yet in a city and in a society that still suffers from a particularly American type of apartheid in residential and social segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), the cosmopolitan canopies are few and far between, and provide for many their only experiences of interaction across social differences.

Even at “all white” meetings, it is rarely the case that everyone is white. Is representing it this way another way of sidestepping the actual racial and ethnic diversity present—or like in the Invisible Man, do those black drops of paint make the white paint whiter (Ellison, 1952)? People of color have a lot to say here, but are they heard and understood as equal partners? Whiteness emerges, time after time, as a problem: a problem for white people looking for multiracial egalitarian community, and a problem
for people of color who are excluded, insulted, and left out through limited understanding of diversity (visible and invisible, or experience).

The chief irony, of course, is that these organizations are not all white. Though the communities they “serve” with programming are, in general, people of color living in highly concentrated poverty, the key players include people of color. There is a need for equity more than diversity, clearly. Robert, Deneice, Maria, and many of the Art Works interviewees who are people of color are intimately involved in the workings at each site, so how is it that they are somehow not included/ignored/unseen when participants want to point out the whiteness of the scene? The scene IS white, for sure, but even this rush to label it as such indicates a diversity or token framework, which privileges visible diversity of race over all, and some conflation of race and class, or what people of color are “supposed to” look like/act like.

The Sojourner Truth puppet remained at the Rainbow Tornado, in their museum, but is now joined by a newer representation of Rainbow Tornado: Artie, another giant backpack puppet in pieces (head, dress, arms). Artie was made as a collaborative project by a group of trainee assistant teaching artists brought in near the end of Robert’s tenure and the final days of my first stint with the theater. It was the first training of any sort for teaching artists, focusing on “diversity” (which Flash and Daisy wanted to facilitate) as well as puppet construction. And indeed, in making Artie, the handful of trainees did come together in a sort of community. Artie is a puppet, but one who looks more like the staff and main supporters of RT. And perhaps it is “simply” a puppet, without race. But Artie reads white to me, and white, genderqueer, art school punk rocker in a way that
does reflect the core community of Rainbow Tornado at that time. So which is better? Eventually, they can all just be puppets, but for now, these very real representations illustrate the fraught role of race and class in radical or progressive majority-white community arts organizations.
CHAPTER SIX
IMAGINING THE CITY

Community arts participation is a process of co-creation, an interaction ritual, but the symbols generated often tell stories at odds with the process. Organizations and individuals make a dream of a multiracial city of difference visible. What is unarticulated but present is the reality of social inequality and racialized conflict. Through their involvement with public art of many sorts, participants envision and enact, if only fleetingly, an imagined and unoppressive city. The disconnect between the imagined and lived city, however, illustrates the impact of urban inequality, particularly as white people understand “urban inequality” as “poor people of color.” In enacting diversity through moments of imagination—as seen in street theater, parades, and public art as well as mainstream consumption of art and culture—competing discourses of diversity are created. These are the discourses of visible diversity and diversity of experience, and they “speak” within the context of multiracial community amidst urban difference.

This chapter analyzes the ways white participants in community arts projects can imagine a city in a way different from how it is experienced. Race consistently emerges as a hopeful and threatening category—or rather, white people’s experience of people of color in urban public settings remains a contradictory one, and the question of visible diversity in service of the status quo vs. racial equity and transformation is an important one. Race is one part of intersectional identity, however, and for white women,
community arts participation offers an opportunity for leadership and visibility that is denied women of color, particularly youth.

Throughout the chapter, I draw on the notion that cities may well be diverse demographically, but at the level of experience, much effort is invested in maintaining the privilege and perceived “safety” of middle- to upper-middle-class white people, particularly women. Notions of public and private “safety” are skewed, particularly as white class-privileged artists speak of the benefit of youth engaging with “junkies,” or as they enact curious violations of the private space of young women of color. Yet experiencing racial and other aspects of urban diversity, along with arts and culture, remains a key public value of the city.

BRIDGES AND BREAKDOWNS: EXPERIENCING ART IN PUBLIC

Participant observation, interviews, and other data across the three sites revealed a consistent theme: participants saw the use of community-based art or other arts participation as a way of experiencing a diverse, divided city. As one nonprofit administrator commented in an interview, “you get to participate,” and that in itself is a rare and valued experience for people used to running the show from the top down. Of particular interest to participants, and evident in event analysis as well, is the notion of art as a bridge across social difference, particularly of race and class, even as perceived race and class were generally barriers to interaction in participants’ daily lives outside of arts spaces. In the examples I present here, art does bring different people together in complex and contradictory ways. Art enables a different interaction with urban space, a
performance of identity and multiracial community not experienced on a daily basis. It also provides a lens to examine how diversity remains understood as something visible: as the visible presence of people of color. This is all well and good in “safe” spaces, like a public parade, but less so, in the eyes of white people, when it comes to the bodies and being of privileged young women. Race emerges as something seen and unseen, valued and devalued, and arts spaces may be places to wrestle with white people’s discomfort with race and social inequality.

The data I present here are examples of moments and moments retold. It highlights visions of a city as seen and imagined in three different settings. The importance of art as an experience is tangible at all sites, but it emerges in different ways, especially in interaction with existing inequality, poverty, and experience of race.

*Rainbow Tornado: Spectacular! Parade*

A crowd assembles outside a black history museum housed in a small row home on a mid-Atlantic autumn day, sunny with a breeze. A white panel van unloads stilts made from two-by-fours, screen-printed flags on bamboo poles, and an assortment of painted cardboard, from flat cut-outs to three-dimensional heads, animals, and unclassifiable objects. In this otherwise-residential neighborhood, few people are out on the streets; the asphalt around the museum has chalk markings every few yards, with group names holding the place of those who will assemble. This is Rainbow Tornado’s annual Spectacular! parade, a day when various constituents of the Rainbow Tornado “community” come together to display art they have made and enjoy the company of
their fellow group members (organized into “pods,” an emic concept highlighting the organic component of group work). Groups include prison abolitionists; dog-walkers; an interfaith group; recovery houses; after-school programs; ethnic cultural organizations; and more, including my own group of Radical Cheerleaders (Radical Cheers Philly, or RCP, not unknowingly also the acronym for the Revolutionary Communist Party). There are about a dozen of us, and to any passer-by we all appear to be white, female-bodied, in our teens and twenties, with a fair amount of visible body piercings and tattoos. Tropes of “radical” and “girl” culture are evident: red and black clothes, political buttons and T-shirts, pink and glittered accessories are part of the punk cheerleader looks (short skirts, body hair, shaved heads, garbage bag pompoms, etc.)

When the pods have all assembled, the parade begins. The Radical Cheerleaders begin to “cheer” (an amalgam of protest chants and versions of popular songs, some of which are developed spontaneously, like one for the group AIDSWalk43):

    Spectacular!
    It’s really good!
    Represent your neighborhood:
    North Philly (North Philly)
    South Philly (South Philly)
    Center City (Center City)
    NorthEast (NorthEast)
    West Philly (West Philly)
    Spruce Hill (Spruce Hill)
    Cedar Park (Cedar Park)
    Belmont (Belmont)
    Mantua (Mantua)

43 Some members of AIDSWalk see the Radical Cheerleaders and ask us to come up with a chant for them. I do, based mostly on their signs and T-shirts: October 16th/we’ll march until it’s over/stomp out AIDS/what what/STOMP/OUT/AIDS. At a later date, AIDSWalk organizers contact Radical Cheers Philly to invite us to participate at their annual event. Their executive director says they continue to use our spontaneous chant at their meetings.
We made up this chant on the fly (I was a co-author). The Radical Cheerleaders start it off, and it spreads, call and response style. Others chant along, clap hands, and cheer, especially for their own neighborhood. As Jojo says, “A parade is just fun,” and indeed, walking and cheering is fun. Spectacular! is fun. In the past, drill teams of young African Americans have kept the crowd moving with complex drum and dance routines, although they have no other current connection to Rainbow Tornado—they are hired to come make Spectacular! more, well, spectacular, as well as to visually represent urban youth and urban youth culture.

A few pods up is a group of men from a recovery house. Early twenties through apparent late middle age, with an overarching street aesthetic: heavy tattoos, baseball hats, sagging jeans and T-shirts or workwear (khakis, Carhartts), largely Latino and bilingual (from overheard conversation in Spanish). As the chant moves through the parade, some of these men join in, making the link between the rhythm of our words and

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44 The “neighborhood” motif also draws on an older Spectacular chant, which includes a section that talks about “people get together/to make the ’hood better.” Which ‘hood? Whose ‘hood? Whose Philly? All are up for debate here, as is the open question of whether it is racist, appropriation, or a strategic alliance for mostly class-privileged white people to use the term “’hood,” historically and popularly conflated with neighborhoods of highly-concentrated and racialized urban poverty. Historically and popularly, of course, white people seize on what is perceived as black American slang to perform an attempt at “coolest” or “authenticity.”

45 Appearances do matter here, since much of what is discussed as “diversity” relies on visible clues or cues. Also, addiction, poverty, and other social struggles often do take a visible toll: missing teeth, weathered skin, scars, and other markings.
the strip club “classic,” Luke’s “I Wanna Rock (Doo Doo Brown)\textsuperscript{46}.” Some of them chant along, quoting the song: “Don’t stop/Get it, Get it/Doo doo brown!/Doo doo brown!” Outside of the reference, nothing explicitly raunchy or sexual is said publicly, although some of the men do make comments about the “sexy” outfits and stances of some of the group (short skirts, knee socks, boots). Luke and Radical Cheerleaders both draw on identities that are stigmatized by mainstream culture, whether the “video ho” and hypersexualized black man, as in Luke’s case, or the fat, hairy (presumably lesbian) women, as in the Radical Cheerleaders’ case. The original song and the re-write, however, draw on competing discourses about women (see Images 7.1 and 7.2 on the following page):

\textsuperscript{46} The complete lyrics discuss various ways in which the speaker of the song enjoys sex or plans to have sex with a nameless woman. The refrain “don’t stop/get it get it” is not itself obscene, but anyone who understands the rhythmic or lyrical reference knows this is booty bass, a sex song, a “strip club classic”.
Illustration 6.1: “I Wanna Rock” 12” single cover (“clean” version)

Don’t stop
Pop that p***y
Let me see you
Doo doo brown

I wanna rock
I wanna

I wanna rock my man

Move it up, move it up
Keep goin’, keep goin’
Here we go, here we go

I Wanna Rock (Doo Doo Brown)  

Illustration 6.2: “Fat and Fabulous” Radical Cheerleaders

Fat & Fabulous, Radical Cheers  
design: Naomi Fisher
While the two competing discourses of women and women’s bodies are indexed through song and performance, nothing “happens” at the parade. There is no particular incident, as there will be in a smaller event the following spring, where a demographically similar group of men from the same recovery program are said to be sexually harassing a small group of teenage girls from a youth intervention project at a smaller parade. In the Spectacular! moment briefly described above and the later mini-parade, participants operate under a stated overall rhetoric of unity through difference or diversity. That is, like the neighborhoods that make up Philly, each pod is unique and somewhat separate from others—but all come together to make up a larger entity, but not without conflict or contradiction.

Booty bass is a barometer. “I Wanna Rock” means different things to different people, with the Radical Cheerleaders using it ironically, in a feminist and pop-culture critique of misogyny while appropriating the infectious beats and public recognition of the song. Others who hear the Spectacular! chant mostly just hear the sound of the strip club. This is a common dilemma for groups lumped under “sex positive feminists,” and a complicated one. But in public on this autumn day, two different groups are singing the same song together. Almost. And the spread of the chant through the crowd, naming different neighborhoods within the larger city, is a way for different groups to participate.

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I did not witness this, but was told this story by several Rainbow Tornado employees. None of the Rainbow Tornado staff, nominally “in charge” of the event, understood what was happening since none of the employees present spoke Spanish. Here the girls may have been flirting; the attention may not have been unwanted/unwarranted. Or the attention may have absolutely been public harassment, threats, or degradation. Moments like these tend to be ignored or left out of stories publicly told about Rainbow Tornado, since they don’t “fit.”
with one another and to make our unified presence known throughout the streets where we march.

The parade is an example of the dilemma of diversity. Like the neighborhoods that make up Philly, each pod is unique and somewhat separate from others. All come together to make up a larger entity, but not necessarily without conflict. The conflict here is about depictions of women, and race, and class. It is unspoken.

But how do middle-class white women, even self-conscious radicals, politicos, and anarcha-feminists, respond to similar looks and comments from male strangers when not assembled in squad? Or about men who appear like these ones? How do these men feel about people like the Radical Cheerleaders at events and on the street? The fact that Spectacular! is a public parade explicitly celebrating multi-racial, cross-class, nongeographic community reframes comments otherwise likely to be shouted down as misogynist or unacceptable. The frame here (Goffman, [1974] 1986) is multiracial community, especially in the eyes of the mostly white RT staff and their inner circle of friends, family, and fellow activists. So Radical Cheerleaders may react differently than they would on the street. This is a parade version of downtown manners, or rather, the parade is a cosmopolitan canopy that dictates certain “civil” behavior and a public performance of comity (Anderson 2011), even as raunchy chants rarely meet typical definitions of “civil”. The layers of cultural appropriation and reclamation packed into the use of “I Wanna Rock” in a chant of neighborhood solidarity are multiple. This moment at the parade illustrates the complicated social relationships often experienced as
racialized conflict, but in the parade subsumed in a performance of unity rarely seen in public.

*Picture This: Girls, Girls, Girls*

10 blocks east of the Spectacular! launching pad, another group of mostly white and conventionally attractive young women gather outside a convenience store not far from their university classroom. It is February, and chilly. Several unhoused men, fitting all the standard visual signifiers of homeless men of color, gather in the nearby parking lot and huddle next to square orange and tan garbage cans to the north of the main entrance. *Picture This* classmates Charlotte, a freckled white transfer student, and Ruchel, a blonde Orthodox Jew, both in their early twenties, leave class to grab a snack during break.

Ruchel later recounts, Charlotte “just leans down and asks the guy, ‘So, what do you want?’” imitating Charlotte’s forthright manner, leaning her own shoulders forward in the retelling. The man asked for “just a small hot chocolate,” which Charlotte bought and brought him. Ruchel’s tone is warm with admiration for Charlotte; this may be one small moment, but it is an influential one, re-told months later in an interview about the course experience. It is not a particularly showy gesture. The way Ruchel tells it, Charlotte very matter-of-factly asked a man sitting outside a convenience store what he wanted, and brought him exactly that. The simplicity of the gesture—and the assumption of shared humanity—are some of what Ruchel hoped to encounter throughout the Picture This course. Through creating public art, Ruchel and other students hoped to have a very
particular experience with urban poverty, particularly with people of color living in highly concentrated poverty in a starkly divided city.

Astrid, a self-described “rich white girl” and first-year student at the university, speaks more directly about this link: “Like, the university is ten blocks from here [the mural site], but it’s a whole different world,” she says, referring to the vacant corner lots, the boarded-up row homes, the corner store that sells homemade sweet tea in giant plastic cups. Newly arrived in Philadelphia from a town in the Northeast renown for its elite prep school (a prep school that Maria, the sole student of color in the Picture This course, attended), Astrid mentions a desire to stop by the mural site “to see the kids” and to work on the mural once scaffolds have been erected. Astrid is perhaps 5’6”, 115 pounds, and athletic. She has long blonde hair, rosy cheeks, fitted clothes in neutral colors and natural fibers, and Cartier Trinity stud earrings for daily wear (retail price: over $2,000). She announces her plan to visit the site by herself one afternoon in class, saying, “I could just stop by on my run,” meaning jogging to and from the site up a major corridor connecting the university campus to the mural site. After class that day, the instructor, David, pulls me aside and asks me to “make sure the girls don’t go to the site by themselves.” He suggests they get rides or drive there and back, perhaps with a chaperone like me.

This continues an aspect of public attempts at multi-racial, cross-class community suggested by the Spectacular! Middle-class white women are breeching typical interactional barriers between themselves and men of color presumed to be poor, unhoused, or drug-dependent. In small ways these breeches show the possible city. In the Spectacular! moment, a sexually explicit song partially links two different groups
separated by race, class, gender, and life experience, although the men may not benefit in future interactions with these women, where catcalls, leers, or requests would likely be greeted with disgust, fear, or possibly a call to the police. On a cold February day during the Picture This course, one man did get a hot chocolate. The reverberations of one act are small, if any—except that, perhaps like participants in the Spectacular!, students in the Picture This class enroll in the course partly to engage with poor people of color. Ruchel recalls a moment of informal learning when she talks about Charlotte asking a man what he wants from a store and then buying exactly that for him. Ruchel interprets this as another possible way to interact with people: without fear, with respect, at a human level. This is a tacit theme of the Picture This course, and when students feel this model is not put into action by their primary instructor, the course and the public mural devolve (see Chapters Four and Five).

Art Works: You Get to Participate

A series of town-hall-style meetings about the role of arts and culture in regional development, Art Works is an outlier here: it is not a site of creation, but a site of discussion. The forums attract people with strong feelings about arts and culture, however, and the forums are places where people tell stories about the importance of arts participation in their own lives. Observation at the Art Works sites (fourteen separate meetings in a five-county region) also contextualizes Rainbow Tornado and Picture This in a regional context of arts activity, participation, placemaking, and belonging.

Rainbow Tornado and Picture This are spaces of discussion, but they each do specialize in producing a particular kind of art, whereas the Democracy Project and Art Works are entirely focused on discussion.
particularly the assumption that art can positively transform urban problems of inequality and alienation.

The forums themselves may or may not meet participants’ needs, but they serve as a focusing point for past experience, or perhaps a lens to examine the deeply-held value of arts participation as an urban, communal, and perhaps utopian experience, where new visions of the city are created, imagined, and felt. People draw on memories. They come to the forums to tell their stories. But they also come to be present—to participate in the story-telling and story-hearing spaces. And in small moments, people feel heard and included. At a meeting in a suburban banquet facility, a dozen people gather around a folding table in the lobby for a facilitated break-out session about the use of arts and culture in the region. Two white women in their fifties sit close to one another on folding chairs. They are sisters. One of the women is cognitively impaired. She offers her thoughts on places she likes to go in the Philadelphia area (especially the zoo), and her sister later contacts the Art Works directors to say how valuable it was for her adult sister to participate in a public conversation with other adults as an equal participant. The Art Works forum, in that moment, is imagined and lived as inclusive and somewhat egalitarian.

And other Art Works participants talk about the notion that culture builds community. At the forums, they talk. In interviews, they talk. Melissa, a middle-aged Jewish Latina arts advocate who attended several forums, talks about her experience with community as a child, and contrasts it with discussions at an Art Works forum. She says, when I was growing up in the Midwest, I lived in a very tightknit community and we had a lot of events and things. I never attended an
organization to get to my things. Maybe at the JCC for swimming and stuff like that. But the school created that environment. They would hold festivals in the fall – Halloween things or whatever. But it was very community focused. Whereas in [Artisanas Latinoamericanas, the organization she works for] and in other organizations that people were talking about, we really have to create that environment. It doesn’t naturally exist.

[At an Art Works forum,] the lady next to me, she had a story about her neighborhood. This is getting back to resources. And she lives in Northern Liberties. I can’t remember what the name of the festival is. It’s in the fall. And she said, “You know what?” She’s like, “Some of these organizations, they spend all of this money to put together a festival every year.” She said, “We have this festival every fall, and the neighborhood just gets together and we hold this festival for all the kids and for the neighborhood itself. People come out and enjoy it, and everybody just contributes. There’s not a dollar that needs to be raised to hold this event.” And so it all came back to community and how within the city we’re very disassociated – our communities.

And that was really key. Because this woman who was sitting next to me who agreed with me, she’s like, “I don’t understand.” She’s like, “We’ve had this in the community for years in Northern Liberties and we get together. We have the best time.” Again, I can’t remember what the festival was. But she said, “Yeah, I don’t understand why some people have to spend this money to get people to come together.” And so I think that’s something we all thought. The city might want to focus and bring back the city to the city. Bring back the neighborhoods to the city.

Melissa says, “bring back the neighborhoods to the city,” and in that phrase is promoting arts as an intervention into urban problems. She says, though, “to me the priority is, like the community I work in, if people aren’t living well, how can they focus on the arts?”

Her concern with urban inequality and with community connection motivate her attendance at the forums. She recalls, “There were a lot of white people and very few blacks, Asians or Latinos anywhere at these forums, so one of the reasons I had gone was I thought the Latino voice needed to be represented.” These forums are perceived as majority-white (and indeed, most participants appeared to be or identified as white)—and
they are also perceived as places to advocate for community, from specific geographic, racial, and ethnic community to the larger ethos of multiracial community, of participation in urban life through art and culture.

Megan, a middle-aged Japanese American fund manager, talks more about art, cities, and neighborhoods:

I deal so much, particularly with neighborhood and community groups, in addition to the main institutions you think of or that lay people think of when they think of arts, that there's so much happening in every single community in Philadelphia that I feel you don't have to go very far to find arts right in your backyard or relatively easily accessible to you.

She continues,

I went to an opening once at Project Home and it was all art done by homeless people and as part of the program there and as part of their transition from being homeless back into society where they are working and some of them are still living there but some of them go on to have their own apartments and things like that -- and it was really amazing to see the expression of that kind of experience, you know, from those people; it really was. Really was terrific. That was a very powerful thing I went to.

And another, in terms of things that sort of just like grab you, the other thing is there's a really great art therapy program at McGee Hospital where they take people who have had severe brain injuries and spinal cord injuries and things like that. They have a couple really great programs and one is like horticulture therapy. But they also have this great art therapy program and I think that kind of when you can't get to a person any other way you can sort of get to them that way. When they can't express themselves any other way you can put a crayon in their hand and there's just something very visceral that everybody has in terms of a need to express themselves and that's just something I think that it's very basic and really, I don't know, just sort of shows how basic it is, like very, very primal almost. So those are two really incredible things.

Then on the other end of the spectrum one of the things that we support is an advanced study ensemble at Settlement Music School, which is kids, they're kids who are really amazingly confident. The great thing about Settlement Music School is that anybody who wants to study music can,
and they have financial aid for every single level. But there are -- so as long as you're progressing you can stay and you can study and -- all ages, people who are retired, who always wanted to learn how to play the saxophone can start; they have everything.

But then there are these students who are very obviously gifted and are destined for major careers in music. So we fund an advanced study ensemble which allows these kids to get extra tutoring, working as a small ensemble and getting special private lessons from maybe members of the orchestra or other sort of really high-level teachers. So you hear these kids -- and they're kids, they're like 13 and 15 and they're unbelievably amazing. So you see something like that. I mean Philadelphia just has such a wealth of arts and culture it's just great what exists here.

Megan elaborates on what Melissa says about neighborhoods:

Philadelphia still remains such a town of neighborhoods here there's a huge Russian community up in the Northeast and so we fund an organization that is all the Russian stuff. They have what can be sort of best described as a salon where they have music; it's like music and maybe drinks and some food or something but it's all like very traditional like balalaika you know what I mean? So there's a very Russian thing.

There's Chinatown with all kinds of great things happening. There's like a Chinese opera theater and there's dance and other kinds of things. There's a great Cambodian community center with a really wonderful teacher there. There's a music school that grew specifically out of the African American church tradition of training musicians specifically in the African American church style. It's called the Georgia E. Gregory Interdenominational School of Music. And it's fantastic because it's very specific.

I mean she's also one of these women who just tries to do everything in the neighborhood because she sees such a need but initially what she saw as a real need is who's training the next group to come up and replace these wonderful musicians that are in our African American churches? There are just these incredible people here. But it's hard to say that's Philadelphia. I think what's Philadelphia is you have all of this in one city. It's amazing that you can look at these institutions and organizations and that's like within the city limits. So it is, it's stunning and fantastic when you think about it what you have available within the city limits, which means nothing's more than 45 minutes away.
The importance of art and cultural organizations to making positive urban change, Megan says, is Frightfully important. I mean in their own areas they play a huge role and it may not get beyond that. I mean some people you hear about because word gets out. But a lot of people are like unsung heroes that to really important work in their own areas and it just sort of stays there. I don't know that I have a vision for it other than I feel really strongly about continuing to support them, particularly because there are -- they make such a difference in the specific geographic area they influence. And I think that's important. I think in a city like this where it's a city of neighborhoods even as we get more and more mobile and the world gets smaller. I still think that what happens in your own neighborhood, your own community and having that sense of community is something that we can't afford to let go away.

Not every participant is as direct or effusive as Megan, but even amid fraught processes, the deep belief in the importance of arts and culture for urban identity and for social transformation comes through. What is “Philadelphia” is having all these people here. What is urban and unique is the presence of demographic diversity—and the opportunity to participate.

Joel, a very thin white man in his forties formerly employed by Picture This and now the director of a community development corporation, talks about urban cultural projects:

I also worked for a small place that did community gardens, and so some of those were done with almost no money, just a few people from the neighborhood who wanted a lot to look better, and that was just gratifying to have a couple of kids out on a weekend with a couple of elderly folks who provided snacks and just work together to plant some plants and make it look better than it did before.

It wasn't even high-level planning or vision. It was just let's put some sweat in here and make it a better place, and that was -- it still actually looks pretty nice when I go by it, and so that's one of those things that I feel like I was a part of that is satisfying, partly because I wasn't just
writing the grant for it; I was on the ground helping do it, and I think that connection is important too, you know, as part of arts and culture programming, even for the people who work in the office to once in a while get to participate in something.

Melissa and Joel are highlighting the importance of participation. Dozens of other Art Works forum participants talk about this, about arts and culture rebuffing some of the alienation associated with the city—as well as the sterility suburban-dwellers associate with their chosen neighborhoods. On one hand, Melissa, Joel, and their many confederates may simply be paying lip service to the value of “neighborhoods,” of a nostalgic “community” while overlooking the real structural inequalities that create the need for arts interventions and alternatives. But more than that, these people are also yearning for a face-to-face city, where, as Joel shares, “people who work in the office” can indeed “once in a while get to participate in something.” And that’s the value of all this coded and euphemistic “diversity” talk for class-privileged white people, in a nutshell: warmth, community, and relationships. Something missing from lives otherwise fairly privileged. Some interpersonal, interactional aspect to Philly, to the city, that makes it a very different place than a suburb or exurb or rural setting. They are imagining a city of participation, a city of engagement, and a city that works across race, class, gender, and other markers of identity. Art Works participant Sorrel, a white theater critic in her fifties, points to the symbiotic symbolic relationship among cities, arts, and participation, saying,

I used to live in town, and since I work right down here, too, I won’t say I don’t think twice about coming to town for something because sometimes I do with you know, traffic and what time the event might end, and parking and everything else. But yeah, definitely I feel like the city is where we need to go for the arts.
When asked about a favorite Philadelphia arts experience, Sorrel reminisces,

Mumm Puppet Theatre was my favorite place because it was small, and it’s the one theatre I could go to by myself and comfortably talk with people before the show, at intermission. People at intermission would say what do you think is going to happen next? Isn’t it great how they’re doing this and that. And you know, I went to lots of shows as a Barrymore nominator and as a theatre critic where you stand around in the lobby and you see some people that you know, but you aren’t talking with strangers about what you’ve just seen because it’s so exciting. So I loved that about Mum Puppet Theatre.

The theater-going experience was intimate, and encouraged participation, communication, a type of community. She expresses sorrow over Mumm’s closing, but talks about the puppets she bought at their closing sale, including a dish soap bottle with a top hat. She talks about art connects people, saying,

And it’s great. I have these two puppets sitting on my piano now. My former next door neighbors who are about five and seven came over and I was like hey guys, look at these. So they started playing with them, and they’re good to have around.

So you know, it’s neat when they’re – when you can find a way. You know, when you can make a connection to people who are doing things you admire, and to hear the stories with it. I think it makes it even more meaningful.

She continues, saying of the arts and art participation,

It’s kind of who I am and how I know an awful lot of the people in my life. You know? It’s sort of like the people who are big sports fans who just talk sports all the time, and schedule their lives around sports. It’s I go to my mailbox and often there’s postcards to you know, theatre shows, and arts related magazines, and the postal carrier has to know that I’m the arts. You get onto two mailing lists, and all of a sudden you get everything from the whole city.

Art connects us. Rainbow Tornado artists, students in the Picture This mural class, participants at Art Works forums all echo Sorrel’s comments in various ways. Arts and
culture are profoundly urban in this vision, and may be, as Zukin writes, “the thing cities do best,” but whose art and culture, and how, are fraught (1995; Tepper, 2011). Identity matters in this urban imagination, but symbolic visions of the city as it could be can highlight the dreams of egalitarian community, of an unoppressive city, even as these dreams may not translate into practice yet. Or ever.

CONCLUSION

But still, in these few quick snapshots of community arts in Philadelphia, who benefits? Mostly white women, who are the majority of the committed participants. That’s not necessarily a terrible thing, for women to benefit from community arts involvement. But it also serves to reminds us of the ways class-privileged white women’s experiences are shaped by fear and avoidance in the city, and of the moral or ethical dilemmas this presents when the choices are understood as binary: Stay “safe”/Be “racist”? Be “naïve”/Be open to attack? Urban ethnographers explore these dilemmas and their contexts in great details (Anderson, [1976] 2003, 1990, 1999; Duneier, 1999).

Participation may be a “right,” but it is hard to come by for many people. Urban arts offer a chance to “get involved” in some way, whether vague (as in the idea that going to performances in the city influences your identity) or very specific (painting a public mural or dancing down a residential street in a blocks-long parade). In word and deed, community arts offer a promise of hope to middle-class white people with liberal to radical politics: the hope of participation or engagement with people who are not like them (or other terms that suggest euphemisms for poor people of color), and the hope that
these experiences will help transform urban inequality into a less fraught system of interdependence or mutuality.

Community-based arts organizations articulate particular visions of urban diversity. In the case of majority-white, politically progressive community-based arts organizations working for urban transformation, the vision of urban diversity articulated in public is often at odds with the ways in which diversity is understood and lived within the organizations themselves as well as in the private lives of participants. Rather than simply a “failure,” blind spot, or contradictory reinforcement of white privilege, however, the visions of urban diversity advanced by different community-arts organizations point to the powerful relationship between culture and place, as well as the importance of symbolic aspects of community and the use of arts.

The tension between urban diversity as it is lived--in isolation--and as it is imagined--in interaction--is often experienced as racialized conflict, even in cultural projects dedicated to multiracial community. And yet this tension also serves to highlight the importance of the imagination for urban transformation, and the role of culture in a diverse democracy.
CONCLUSION:

RITUAL AND CONFLICT IN THE URBAN ARTS DEMOCRACY

My research examines the Urban Arts Democracy: its problems and possibilities. Returning to my research questions, I ask,

1. How do majority-white mission-driven organizations try to create multiracial community? And

2. What are the practices and unintentional consequences of a coded focus on “diversity” in majority-white organizations?

While one-word answers to each question could simply read “delusion” and “failure,” that is not the whole story. While it seems that most organizations suffered from their own problematic conceptions of “community” and “diversity,” the racialized conflict that ensued at each site is actually most indicative of failed rituals. The organizational rhetoric, by and large, is the same across sites: the shared experience of arts participation enables new relationships with people and places, and can ultimately re-make the city into something humane and unoppressive. And this may well be true—but at each site, there was a distinct lack of the very experience people hoped to gain through their participation.

Rituals are at the core of any experience. If an experience is the result of “continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world” (Dewey, 1959, 220), all this continuous organic interaction can still be broken down into smaller units of analysis: ritual interaction chains. Rhetoric aside, failed rituals may actually be what is creating contradictions and roadblocks in the work of the three organizations I study.
The pervasiveness of racialized conflict, of the sense that “we’re all white here,” is a symptom of the lack of social cohesion, emotional energy, and collective effervescence that successful rituals produce.

While certainly there are many contradictory discourses and problematic practices to be found at each site, rather than advocate change from the top down, I suggest that majority-white community arts organizations focus on their daily rituals. This suggestion is limited neither to majority-white organizations nor community arts organizations, of course, but in my countless hours of participation among well-meaning white people, it is noteworthy that saying, not doing, seemed to be the currency of each organization. That may be a practice of particular groups of class-privileged, highly educated white people (as well as people of color), the tendency to turn any group process into a graduate school seminar—but if it is an aspect of “white culture,” it is one that can be changed, possibly to dramatic results. Critiques of deliberative democracy (Kohn 2002; Ryfe, 2005) focus on the difficulty of talk-based public process. Polletta and Lee (2006) identify a central paradox of public conversation: personal narrative is valued for its persuasive and humane values even as those who value this type of communication believe that it is not effective at a policy level because of its emotional tenor. Other social critics argue that many attempts at “public conversation” simply serve the interests of elite groups, and that citizen voices are generally left out of the conversations. Ryfe (2005) suggests interaction as an intervention. Intervention, like interaction or experience, however, can be looked at in terms of rituals.
A trope of the contemporary anticapitalist activist scene, like the women’s movement and other group processes before it, is the check-in or go-around: this is a transparent attempt at a ritual activity. Like many other practices of small groups, it is often mocked and dreaded even by ardent group participants. Usually seated in a circle, participants take turns checking in, or going around the circle, often in response to a question posed by a facilitator. Check-in topics can vary. Examples include the “energy meter,” where each participant shows with their hands relative to the floor how much energy they have at that moment; a favorite food or movie; or even the most basic of introductions—name and what brought you to the group. Regardless of topic, the goal is generally social: to introduce participants, to share information, to begin talking. Ideally the check-in topic provides a pretext for future, unfacilitated conversation and connection among participants.

But these check-ins often fail, or produce sufficient discomfort to derail some group process. Part of this is because even in the ostensibly egalitarian circle, participants are responding to the facilitator. Interaction is unidirectional, with the facilitator as the focus of attention and conversation.

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49 I once was part of a group check-in among college students where the facilitated question was about the best present ever received; one young man answered with the extremely valuable antique car he received as a gift for his 16th birthday. Clearly, even the most “neutral” of questions, or those relying on presumed shared experiences, can unintentionally reveal race and class privilege, be classist, racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise loaded.
This is certainly a fine process for gathering information or ensuring that everyone gathered in the group has a chance to speak, but it reduces the likelihood that the check-in will be a successful ritual, which benefits from an abundance of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973).
Illustration 7.2: Multidirectional Interaction

Just as not all unidirectional interactions are conversations between the facilitator and each participant in turn, not all multidirectional interactions connect all members of the group equally. But it’s a denser web with a focus on multidirectional interaction, and some activities are more likely to result in successful rituals.

CONCLUSIONS

Outside of the importance of rituals, my findings across sites emphasize the impact of contradictory discourses and small actions on group process and outcomes. Individual and group identities are on parade, often literally, and this parade, spectacle, or experience is where much of the intra-group learning takes place, tacitly and explicitly. This brings me to the question of race vs. class: why is it that my work focuses so specifically on race? Couldn’t it be class privilege that accounts for endless small conflict? My answer is no, although race and class cannot be separated. My research
strengthens the importance of intersectionality, or "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations" (McCall 2005) as a theoretical and methodological framework (see the Combahee River Collective Statement [1978] 1983; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins [1990] 2000, among others). That is to say, looking at race requires looking at class, and gender, and sexual personae, and other categories of identity. They are interrelated. Race and class are particularly fraught because American poverty is racialized.

And yet the perceived fractures between race and class, or between inner-circle arts participants and those who “receive” the largesse of their actions, are also real. It is highly unlikely that majority-white community arts organizations in Philadelphia would actively seek out white groups, whether working class or not-working class, to collaborate with. This is partly because community arts programs are disproportionately funded as social service and educational programs, and while Philadelphia has large amounts of poor white citizens, the ideology around diversity that guides Rainbow Tornado or Picture This prioritizes visible diversity: race. This focus on visible diversity is one of several mechanisms that reproduce white privilege and class privilege within organizations, setting people up for leadership roles and future impact that relies on the same sort of social reproduction.

Discourses reinforce binary identification and visible diversity too: not just in terms of women and women’s bodies (Chapter Six), but in even in terms of basic bodily functions (eating and urinating). At Rainbow Tornado in the early 2000s, before the mainstream proliferation of community gardens and vegan entrees, Robert noted, “there’s
a whole politics of food and farming here,” pointing to Daisy’s battered blue Nalgene water bottle, wrapped in a bumper sticker that urges “Support Family Farms!” Teaching artists Daisy and Flash both comment on how Robert often buys breakfast from the deli on the corner, shaking their heads or wrinkling their faces at the “slop” he eats: pancakes, scrambled eggs, sausage. At the other end of the alimentary canal, children and new adult visitors to the Rainbow Tornado loft are often amused and taken aback at the bathroom: a single toilet behind a rickety door, tucked into a corner of the studio behind the sink, it features a mirror atop the toilet tank, jauntily angled to reflect the genitals of anyone facing it. The toilet itself is usually full of urine, with the tacit assumption of “if it’s yellow, let it mellow,” or to only flush feces in order to conserve water. These are things you just have to know; if you don’t, your outsider status is reinforced, particularly if you object, if you find unflushed urine unsanitary, or have other counterrevolutionary objections to doing things the right way, in the eyes of Rainbow Tornado.

This adherence to a strict but unstated moral code also guides participants at Picture This and Art Works, especially Tina and her tacit code of racial authority and urban life, but also the many people who more generally populate the Urban Art Democracy. Art Works participant Lucia comments, “People spend money on whatever they want to spend their money on. Whatever is most important to you, you will find a way to spend the money on it.” She continues,

When I was first married and we were very poor but we really liked eating in wonderful restaurants. Now I had friends who went out to dinner at some little local place every Friday night and my husband and I went out like once in three months and we went to Coventry Forge Inn or we went to Le Penitiere, which was a neat little restaurant, so we would rather have spent that. So I would cook -- I was young -- fancy dinners
for us on Saturday night here but -- so that again instead of spending money on that we spent it on what was most important to us. I think you’ve got to realize that that's what happens with public money as well. And if officials are persuaded that people -- the community really feels that there are important concepts they're going to find a way, even in tough times, a way of funding what's most important.

At face value, Lucia is illustrating the modest sacrifices she has made to put culture at the center of her life. This can also be read as a comment about values and class privilege. Various discourses include and alienate, sometimes simultaneously. Again at Rainbow Tornado, it is a commonly held value that everybody can make art. Lead teaching artist Flash comments, to most people

Art is, you know, Van Gogh in a museum and you can’t do that. And even stuff that’s weird and abstract that no one understands and they’re pissed off ‘cause they could do it, it’s still like, “No, that’s for Pollock, you know, not for you…” So it’s amazing to watch [what happens at Rainbow Tornado]. But people really come here like, “Oh, I can’t do anything,” and you’re like, “Well, you’re here, so you might as well do something, you know, why don’t you try.” And the next thing you know, they’ve built like this beautiful giant Band-Aid.

Flash has a BFA from an art school, but her egalitarian message is inspiring, and she is not alone in her beliefs. At Rainbow Tornado, you can make art from garbage, from leftover corrugated cardboard boxes, from repurposed paints to found objects and bottle-cap washers to hold bolts. For youth who come to a workshop at the Rainbow Tornado loft because they live in a temporary housing shelter, however, the notion that they should be pleased when presented with a pile of garbage, and wait patiently for the limited amount of scissors to be available, is less than inspired. Rather than assume what is best for any audience, though, the endless talk that characterizes the Urban Arts Democracy could be put to good use: ask. Ask people and groups what they need.
Observe where competing discourses derail processes and relationships. Be willing to change, to abandon rhetoric, and to do the work of shared art making.

In my data analysis, class-privileged white people benefit from selected understanding of “diversity,” or disengage altogether. In turn, they may go on to impact change, but in some ways at the expense of people already marginalized. This is not the only option, but it presents opportunities for intervention, and asks how understandings of “diversity” and focus on “creating” multiracial community, when spearheaded by well-intentioned white people, actually reinforce white leadership and unitary understandings of “community.”

Diversity and difference shape the city, and shape interventions into urban problems. When majority-white politically progressive community arts organizations attempt to use art to “solve” a perceived lack of multiracial community, the art disappears in favor of a flawed process, and the very social cleavages meant to be bridged widen. This happens in several ways, in moments and over time: through ritual interaction chains that heighten the impact of racial microaggressions; through contested and binary notions of “diversity;” and through competing discourses about individual and group identities, including that of the city itself.

As gruesome as some the processes I observed were, the deep belief in art is not delusion. In a diverse, divided city, art is one of the ways that “you get to participate.” In art. In urban life. That’s what’s important here: the primacy of social interaction, microsociology, relationships. This is how cities are built from the ground up. Even in face of enduring neighborhood effects and the impact of geographic community,
nongeographic communities provide alternatives and counterpoints through similar mechanisms (interaction). Community arts organizations can be a type of cosmopolitan canopy sheltering cross-group experience and other “urban” interaction rarely experienced in daily life outside of the marketplace. Looking at the nonprofit and voluntary sector helps complicate theories of place and of spaces of interaction. But since the interactional processes are both slippery and crucial, we need to attend to what happens and how.

Once race—as seen in the desire for multiracial community, desire to experience “the city,” and the role of art in these things—is the focus, we cannot move on. So perhaps other foci are needed. Perhaps we need more art and less “intervention.” These are aspects of young organizations, maybe, the preoccupation with identity and injustice. As Alice says, perhaps we should just do the work. And indeed there are moments of transcendence, of connection, of new relationships with people and places. But that’s not my focus. Ritual failures, social reproduction, irony, and contested explorations of community became the focus of my research mostly because that’s what participants and sustained observation hammered home.

The social life of community-based art and related democratic practices provide another lens into the role of arts and arts organizations within the contemporary city. Within the fractured context of diverse, divided American cities, community-based arts provide a testing ground for social interaction across demographic difference. My research provides a vertical slice of how diversity is lived in progressive urban arts organizations; so doing, it demands that we engage with urban art and culture in terms
beyond political economy and development. I find that democratic processes focused on
diversity and urban transformation often ironically reproduce white privilege while
establishing a fictive moral high ground that continues to marginalize people of color and
counter the transformative potential of community-based arts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

My recommendation for researchers and practitioners alike is to clarify
categories. I recommend three guiding principles: a focus on

1. *Coalition over community;*

2. *Equity over diversity;*

3. *And rituals over rhetoric.*

Tourism and marketing coordinator Lori comments on funders’ desire for
collaboration:

We get told a lot, “Collaborate. We wanna see you collaborate,” but
they’re certainly not – first of all, as I said, I think genuine distrust that,
“Well, you can steal my idea,” and there has been a lot of that that’s
happened in Philadelphia, or “We don’t wanna work with you. You are
that organization, and our executive director fought with your executive
director 20 years ago. We don’t like you. We know they don’t work
here anymore, but we don’t like you.”

So much of the work done by nonprofits is in response to funders’ dictates, although
funders’ calls for proposals themselves respond to what they see in the field. This is
where an intervention on the level of organizations—philanthropies and those they
fund—can have ongoing impact. I suggest that, rather than the “collaboration” Lori
critiques as easily prey to competition, mistrust, and strained relationships, organizations
consider coalitions. In talking to women’s movements in the 1983, longtime artist and activist Bernice Johnson Reagon emphasized,

You don’t go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive.

She continues, “It is very important not to confuse them—home and coalition.” Or perhaps, coalition and an ideal community. A coalition is not there in order to feed you; you have to feed it. And it’s a monster. It never gets enough. It always wants more. So you better be sure you got your home someplace for you to go to so that you will not become a martyr to the coalition.

Some of the unintentional and highly impactful conflicts at my research sites might have been avoided with clarity around language and goals, and with clearer understanding of the community arts organization as a partner in coalition work, not the driver or originator of community. Coalition work is not fun, and it is rarely healing, but it is a very principled partnership among organizations and people with established ties to multiple communities. Rather than one organization taking over leadership and positioning itself as the community convener or community center when it clearly does not play that role, organizations must work in coalition, sharing resources and information but working more horizontally. Existing organizations, like the Philadelphia Folklore Project, for example, may be sites to better learn how to manage coalitions rather than negotiating conflict.

Another conceptual shift is one from diversity to equity. “Diversity” looks for visible diversity—how to get Deneice in the photograph in the Rainbow Tornado studio. It asks Maria to be a spokesperson for a geographic community of which she is not a part.
Equity, like coalition work, is hard and scary and asks people to make sacrifices. Philadelphia’s Leeway Foundation, where I serve on the Board of Directors, has managed to make several identity shifts over its 20-year history, moving from being a foundation primarily funding white women working in fine art mediums to an anti-racist organization operating from an intersectional feminist framework, funding self-defined women and trans* artists working for social change. A lesson to be learned from Leeway is how to manage this sort of organizational culture and identity shift—and how to focus on equity rather than diversity. A focus on equity also helps privilege experience over “community” with its discontents or limits.

I have already written about what a focus on rituals might look like in organizations, at meetings, and among those working in coalitions in my examples of ice-breakers earlier in this chapter. To reiterate, though, a focus on rituals also enables a focus on experience. Experience is why people come to community arts organizations in particular. The unique blend of politics, arts, and relationships that community arts organizations offer could be a consequential web. A focus on rituals can remind organizations to focus on enacting engagement and participation rather than rhetoric and endless discussion.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

My research could be misunderstood as borrowing a cup of sugar from the neighbors only to throw it in their gas tank. That is the furthest thing from my intention,

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50 The Leeway Foundation funds women and trans* artists working for social change. It is important to note that the categories of “women” and “trans*” as well as “art” and “social change” are left up to grant applicants to define for themselves.
and a misread of data collected over many years. I present ugly stories and ugly realities because of my belief in the power of community art and political spaces as catalysts of social change from the ground up. But white people tacitly learn a lot of counter-revolutionary lessons in the process, and that process of the reproduction of social inequality is what I seek to understand, interrupt, and transform.

Still, focusing on failure has repercussions. Next steps will include research on how individuals and organizations move past moments of failure or rupture, as well as a focus on successful process. Those processes are more likely to be coalition-based than multiracial community in majority-white organizations, however.

The challenges and benefits of multi-site ethnography also have to do with a narrowed focus and limited stories. In writing a cohesive narrative, much of the nuance and richness characteristic of ethnography is lost or flattened. Trying to both compare across sites and preserve unique aspects of settings is challenging indeed, and the analysis is smaller and flatter than I had initially imagined given the large body of data I had collected. Some of that data lies in wait for a different analysis, a look at other questions about community processes, art, and urban transformation.

NEXT PROJECTS: FORMING COALITIONS AND FUNDING COMMUNITY

Teaching, learning, and education loom large in my research. My next major project, tentatively titled *Teaching Artists*, looks specifically at the intersection of public education, community arts, and teaching. As public schools and nonprofits face ongoing funding and structural challenges, community partnerships become increasingly viable
educational and cultural programs. How teaching artists are trained to do this work, however, remains undertheorized, poorly documented, and little understood. My next project addresses this problem from several angles: best practices in school-community partnerships from the point of arts organizations; the social value of community partnerships; and ethnographic investigation of programs designed to support teaching artists. Another strand of explicit investigation into arts, culture, education, conflict, and notions of community includes a look at the growing number of undergraduate and graduate art programs in relational art, community engagement, social practice, and the like. These include MFA programs at Pratt Institute in New York City, new programs at Philadelphia’s own Moore College of Art and Design, Portland State University, Otis Institute in LA, and many others. Many of these programs invoke familiar rhetoric about collaboration and engagement, but how do those notions play out in the classroom, in the administration of these programs, and in the larger art communities as well as any “partner communities” or communities “served”?

I am also developing an historical project looking at contestations of diversity in New York art world, focusing on biennials and other exhibitions. My dissertation and immediate future projects continue to engage in larger debates about the uses of community-based arts and the role of culture in urban inequality. With a focus on individual-level interaction, my fieldwork generates empirical data for theory and explores the black box of “diversity” and its democratic practices in arts and culture organizations and the city at large.
Beyond teaching, learning, and community arts, my research will continue to explore larger questions of role of culture in social reproduction and urban transformation, but more specifically organizational in nature: coalition management and exchange, philanthropic calls for community, and other organizational conceptions of “community,” “culture,” and “change.” An investigation into successful coalition work can be conducted in two parts: an ethnographic piece exploring the social life and process of coalition work, and a mixed methods study that relies largely on survey and interview data. The ethnographic piece enables a focused consideration of the social interactions of coalition work as they happen, while a survey and interview component allows for multiple voices, points of view, and participants.

I remain interested in challenges to the commercial nature of urban community under a cosmopolitan canopy, but also some of the permanence of race/racialized conflict. Microaggressions illuminate the processes at work in interactional ritual chains, and in larger context and theories of change. I plan to explore this from the perspective of organizations, particularly that of philanthropies. How are requests for proposals framing social issues, attending to social interaction, or envisioning communities? More focus on education, nonprofits, and other institutions will likely result in more focused and nuanced research questions, with analysis and publications pertinent to practitioners and theorists alike. The image of the city, and the right to the city, remain tantalizing even in the face of negative data. I will certainly continue with more work on life in the Urban Arts Democracy, on the experiences of urban art, on the use of art as social intervention, and above all, the processes therein.
SUMMING IT UP: YOU CAN ALWAYS TEACH

Formal education has been an absent presence in my research. While many organizations partner with schools or specific classrooms, mainstream public schooling is treated as anathema—and simultaneously, the place where arts should happen. But they don’t. Research says they should, for the benefit of individual academic learning, higher test scores, job training, creativity, to engage students most likely to drop out, and on and on (Americans for the Arts, 2007; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999; Gould, 2005; Galligan, 2001; Nelson, 2008; Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2008). Arts work in schools, for youth, for learning, and for a better society, but in the context of the current Philadelphia school system and the city’s Doomsday budget, it is highly unlikely that arts will remain in a system where schools are shut, essential staff (including assistant principals, nurses, aides, administrative support, and more) are fired across the board, and yet millions of dollars are funneled into prison expansion.

The discourse around art for children, however, illustrates opportunities for community arts organizations as well as another arena for ritual failures and unintentional social reproduction of inequality. At every site there were countless rants, discussions, lectures, and strategies focused on how having art in the classroom would transform society. Rarely was there any kind of training or attention paid to how participants at each site could teach. The message art school graduates among many, many others hear—you can always teach, even without any experience, training, or interest—is relevant. Because these sites are informal spaces of education. Because these sites partner with formal schools. And because the people who pass through community arts
organizations frequently go on to careers in education. Participants at all three sites have gone on, in recent years, to earn MATs, MSEds, and other graduate degrees or certificates in education. Many work at nonprofit organizations in the education or civic engagement departments. And with the very real crisis in American public education, what little arts or cultural opportunities there may be for youth will certainly continue to be in “community-based” and nonprofit organizations.

So it matters that issues of education and teaching are elided at Rainbow Tornado, or absent in the university classroom with Picture This, or misunderstood at Art Works. It matters that community arts are sites that generate and reproduce social conflict. It matters than in spaces ostensibly devoted to identity and engagement, mainstream hierarchies are reproduced, particularly those of white privilege and class privilege.

While community arts and political spaces can be catalysts of social change from the ground up, white people looking for multiracial community need to change tactics. Art, broadly conceived of as a social space, can and does work for urban transformation through relationships, and through access to resources. In terms of “diversity” work, the models need to shift from inclusion to equity. This can be accomplished in multiple ways, with coalition work, clarity of mission, clarity of programs, a commitment to self-determination, and close attention to rituals.

Rather than insist that majority-white organizations take the lead in “creating community,” my research underscores the need to work in coalition. If focusing on “diversity” ironically reproduces white privilege and leadership in ostensibly change-minded, progressive organizations, focusing on IMBY projects (as opposed to NIMBY)
seems to be potentially isolationist. But working in coalition while organizing your own community may actually enable more anti-racist, anti-poverty, and other deep relationship work to happen. The danger of coalition work is in isolation, in lack of coalition, and in defensiveness, which trip up the organizations I study in this dissertation.

Of course, it seems deceptively simple to recommend that people and places looking to foment urban transformation and interrupt inequality mute the rhetoric and focus on doing the work—and yet, that is exactly what I recommend. What draws participants to all three sites are memories and hopes of moments of mutual engagement: a time when they connected to other people through shared emotions about arts and culture, or through a shared process of making or otherwise consuming arts and culture. In addition to focusing on making artwork, organizations and individuals can think about clarity and rituals.

Clarity entails a focus on mission and practices. Rather than page-long mission statements full of clunky pseudo-academic language and claims of creating or reinventing community, successful community arts organizations may want to focus on the communities out of which they arose, and the artwork in which they specialize. Rather than the specious claim in the old Rainbow Tornado mission statement of empowering marginalized communities, perhaps Rainbow Tornado might focus on the use of art in social activism. The concept of self-determination is important here, not only for “marginalized” or historically excluded communities, but for whatever communities the organization actually sees as central. For Rainbow Tornado and Art Works, and for the
university course associated with Picture This, it is not only “OK” but necessarily to acknowledge these are largely privileged communities—because these are communities with the power to impact funding, policy, and other revenue streams that impact people living in poverty or otherwise left out. The guilt that leads white people to portray people of color living in highly concentrated urban poverty as heroic and somehow more authentic than themselves is also what serves as a barrier from effective coalition and collaborative work.

I argue that a focus on rituals is not only part of my fieldwork and analysis, but a crucial research finding. Successful rituals build social solidarity, and keep people invested in group work. Organizations that spend a lot of time talking and theorizing may also need to spend more specific time consciously engaging in rituals. While ice-breakers and go-arounds (techniques where assembled participants each answer a question in turn) make many people uncomfortable or are lampooned as self-indulgent activities that waste time, other small rituals can help participants connect. At the start of meetings and during long-term projects, even self-conscious and scripted moments of encounter, reflection, and connection can provide what people seek from community arts in the first place as well as begin to generate emotional energy, shared experience, and the longed-for collective effervescence that keeps movements working successfully.

Social difference, coded as “diversity,” is part of the urban interaction “problem.” How might Rainbow Tornado, Picture This, and Art Works create spaces where difference can be useful? Many of the Art Works participants talk about the “surprising diversity” in a group that at first, second, and even third glance appears (and
demographically “is”) relatively homogenous. But the Art Works group can be defined by what members suggest it lacks: “diversity” particularly of age and race. So Art Works can be seen as a particular set of practices and perhaps beliefs of largely middle-aged or older, middle-class or higher, educated white people who elect to participate in conversation. It may be useful to look at this type of “public forum” as white people’s semi-private space.

One important aspect of the cosmopolitan canopy framework is that “civilized” (or cosmopolitan) behavior in public allows for interactions across difference, but necessarily limits those interactions to either anomalous or to surface/polite (not continuous, deep, etc.) interactions. How do we “get deeper”? That polite reserve was questioned by several Art Works participants in further interviews, and gets at the heart of necessary but not sufficient conditions of democratic conversation. Or possibly not even necessary, this cosmopolitan canopy polite veneer. And yet in a city and in a society that still suffers from a particularly American type of apartheid in residential and social segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), the cosmopolitan canopies are few and far between, and provide for many their only experiences of interaction across social differences.

Urban art, especially murals and parades, are too often dismissed as bread and circuses, as ideology, as a distraction from larger processes of alienation and inequality. But they are also like bread and roses: food for the body and the soul. If rituals are all we have, let’s make them count.
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