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# Placemaking Through Artistic Pedagogy: Advancing Anti-Oppression in Public Spaces

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**Abstract:** This duoethnographic study explores how placemaking through the arts can serve as a pedagogical method to advance anti-oppression efforts in public spaces. It draws from two projects: graffiti workshops in Toronto's Graffiti Alley and the creation of a school-based anti-oppression garden. The authors examine systemic barriers, including exclusionary policies and institutional resistance. Through personal narrative and critical reflection, the study shows how public art can foster equity, amplify marginalized voices, and reimagine public spaces as inclusive platforms for learning. The findings offer insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers on the pedagogical potential of community-driven art to support transformative learning.

## The pedagogy of public art and placemaking

Placemaking is a process that transforms public spaces into inclusive environments that encourage community participation and belonging (Brain, 2019; Mardan, 2023; Simões, 2023). It serves as a pedagogical tool through the use of art, media, and cultural practices that question norms, invite dialogue, and raise awareness of social issues (Pérez-Izaguirre & Reglero, 2023). This process supports reflection on values and builds stronger relationships between people and their surroundings (Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016).

Traditionally, placemaking positioned planners and designers as the main decision-makers, with limited input from the public (Champagne, 2020; Mardan, 2023). Public art has challenged this model by opening space for marginalized voices and encouraging social change (Raposo, 2023). Graffiti and street art engage broad audiences and speak to injustice, bringing attention to those who have been excluded (Fransberg et al., 2023; Simões, 2023). Projects such as Women on Walls in Northern Ireland and Palestinian resistance graffiti show how art fosters agency and mobilizes communities (Peteet, 1996; Rolston, 2018).

Research on public art has shifted focus from aesthetic qualities toward its impact on dialogue and social equity (Schuermans et al., 2012; Zebracki et al., 2010). Rahder and McLean (2013) explored how race and gender shape public space. The Toronto Public Art Strategy 2019-2029 reflects the tension between economic priorities and inclusive community involvement (City of Toronto, 2019). Some projects illustrate how public art responds to injustice. In Vancouver, an aerial blockade led by Indigenous artists highlighted social issues and encouraged collective reflection (Museum of Vancouver, 2021; Naut'sa mawt Tribal Council, 2020). These cases show how art in public space promotes civic participation and challenges dominant power. Placemaking depends on critical frameworks to support equity. Without intentional approaches, exclusion and displacement may occur, especially in neighborhoods undergoing gentrification (Sullivan, 2021). This study examines two projects, a graffiti workshop and an anti-oppression garden, to consider how public art creates opportunities for shared ownership of space and deeper awareness of social structures. In this paper, we reflect on our observations of how systemic control over space limits equity work. By analyzing our experiences alongside the sociopolitical conditions that shaped them, this study contributes to broader conversations about placemaking as pedagogy. Public art and community-based projects offer pathways for reimagining public spaces as sites of learning, resistance, and transformation (Fransberg et al., 2023; Schuermans et al., 2012; Pérez-Izaguirre & Reglero, 2023).

## The study

This paper draws on two community-based art projects. The first involved outdoor graffiti workshops originally planned as weekly sessions but later adapted to four monthly meetings due to Toronto's various regulatory limits. Seven adult learners participated in creating art and interacting with the public. One session held in May 2022 at Toronto Graffiti Alley (Figure 1), a legal street art site, is the focus of this study. The first author, Somi, served as both facilitator and co-creator, exploring the pedagogical potential of public street art. The second project was a school-based garden created with two teachers, students, an Indigenous Elder, and community organizations. Located beside a school with a colonial name, the garden used Indigenous plants as a symbolic act of resistance. It ran from September 2020 to June 2021, with the co-author, Lena, acting as researcher, educator, and mediator throughout the process. Both projects reflect efforts to turn public spaces into spaces for learning and creative expression, while navigating challenges tied to anti-oppressive work. This paper sees placemaking as pedagogy,

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where public space becomes a site for critical thinking and social change (Fransberg et al., 2023; Pérez-Izaguirre & Reglero, 2023; Schuerman et al., 2012).

**Figure 1**
*Graffiti Creation at Toronto Graffiti Alley*



## Methodology

As racialized immigrant women living in different socio-political regions of Canada, we chose duoethnography to use ourselves as research sites and public space as cultural artifacts (Sawyer & Norris, 2012). This approach allowed us to explore how norms, power relations, and personal values are shaped by dominant discourses in everyday environments (Ashlee & Quaye, 2020). Our conversations were informed by the spaces we worked in, the materials we created, and the lived questions we brought to those settings. We did not position the self as the topic of study but as a lens through which we examined the social and cultural conditions surrounding our work (Sawyer & Norris, 2012).

We first met in 2018 while pursuing our doctoral degrees in the Learning Sciences program and remained connected through shared commitments to justice-oriented education. Somi worked in post-secondary teacher education in Ontario and Lena in K-12 math and science in Alberta. In both contexts, we encountered internalized and external colonial white supremacy while navigating public spaces as settlers. Our identities shaped how we moved through these environments and how we interpreted what we observed and experienced. As we reflected on our work across two different provinces, we began writing in conversation with one another. Our geographic and cultural contexts influenced our interpretations. Following Sawyer and Norris (2012), we understood place as a participant in the research, a condition that shapes social relations and is reshaped through those encounters.

To guide our reflections, we each responded to three open-ended prompts: our involvement in transforming public spaces, which voices were heard or excluded, and how anti-oppressive spaces were perceived. These written responses, followed by mutual commentary, formed the primary data set for our analysis. Somi reflected on barriers to organizing outdoor workshops, especially under COVID-19 restrictions. Municipal policies limited access and excluded many participants, particularly those from marginalized communities. This exclusion often pushed individuals to use graffiti, a practice criminalized by the city, as a way to claim space and express their perspectives (Rahder & McLean, 2013; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). Lena focused on structural resistance within a school-based anti-oppression project. In a racially diverse school, decision-making continued to center white-majority voices. Administrative language around inclusion served to maintain existing hierarchies. At one point, she was told the project had to remain open to all perspectives, including racist ideologies, to fulfill the school's commitment to "welcoming everyone" (MacKinnon, 2021; Champagne, 2020; Takeuchi & Ishihara, 2020). These examples reflect how public and institutional spaces are regulated in ways that limit justice-oriented efforts.

## Findings

This section draws from personal narratives, policy analysis, and contextual evidence to examine systemic barriers in public art spaces. These examples demonstrate how individual experiences intersect with broader sociopolitical structures. Somi described challenges securing inclusive public art programs, especially during COVID-19. She found city policies excluded groups based on criteria, which led some participants to see graffiti as a valid form of expression when access was denied:

> Amid COVID-19 uncertainty, I received little guidance from organizations and began looking for public art programs we could join. The Toronto's Street Art program excluded us because over half the group were not city residents. It was frustrating to see how access for emerging artists was restricted, while international artists and commercial firms faced no such barriers. Yet those programs rarely welcomed community-based artists, often requiring prior recognition.

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> These contradictions tell me how public art, though framed as inclusive, often privileges those already within dominant networks. It made me question how public space is governed, who sets the standards, and what equity and inclusion really mean. Using public spaces for the public should not feel out of reach (Somi, personal communication, September 12, 2023). (Somi, personal communication, September 12, 2023).

Somi's statement reflects how policies such as Toronto's Public Art Strategy 2019-2029 may prioritize boosting the city's image (City of Toronto, 2019) over supporting smaller-scale, community-led initiatives. This imbalance is further reflected in funding patterns, as less than 15 percent of Canadian municipal art funding goes to racialized-led projects (Rahder & McLean, 2013), deepening existing divides. Following this, Lena's narrative similarly focuses on institutional resistance to anti-oppressive school projects. She describes being excluded from conversations and eventually removed from the project under the pretense of neutrality.

> I was the only person of colour present during those garden work check-ins. The contractors 'naturally' made eye contact and spoke about the work to the white administrators, with me third wheeling those conversations as they held up the blueprint developed by my students, my colleague, and me. After the garden was completed, I was called into a meeting and the administrators and HR removed me from the project, claiming it was discriminatory to claim a space as anti-oppressive since it excluded those who believed in racism. As a public space, I was told, we had to be welcoming to everyone. And that included, as I was told, racists (Lena, personal communication, September 4, 2023).

This resonates with critiques of how inclusion rhetoric is often used to maintain existing power structures rather than disrupt them (Ahmed, 2012; Champagne, 2020; MacKinnon, 2021). Research shows that racialized individuals hold only 5 percent of senior roles in Canada, despite representing 22 percent of the population (Diversity Institute, 2020), a disparity that echoes Lena's experience. These tensions surfaced in a conversation between the authors in September 2023. Somi shared, "Many participants (from my art workshops) expressed frustration with limited opportunities. Some began to understand why artists resort to vandalism. Public art programs prioritize commercial firms, leaving everyday people as mere spectators." Lena responded, "Public art, rather than being a means for community-driven dialogue, is often used by the city to gain prestige or by artists to climb the capitalist ladder rather than inspire social and political change. The hegemonic narrative labels such 'illegal' art as vandalism, but in reality, it is resistance art, art that challenges societal norms and acts as a counter-hegemonic force." This exchange reveals how policies protect dominant interests while dismissing marginalized voices. Studies confirm that most funding supports established artists, leaving less than 5% for grassroots projects (Americans for the Arts, 2020). In response, many artists use graffiti as a tool of dissent rooted in community expression (Black & Stone, 2005; Pérez-Izaguirre & Reglero, 2023).

## Discussion

This study explored how placemaking through arts can serve as a pedagogical method to advance anti-oppression efforts in public spaces. It draws on two projects: graffiti creation in Toronto Graffiti Alley and the development of an anti-oppression garden. The study critically examines systemic barriers that exclude marginalized voices and limit their ability to shape public spaces. By addressing the question, "How might placemaking through arts be used as pedagogy to advance anti-oppression efforts in public spaces?" it outlines both the challenges and the transformative potential of artistic interventions.

The findings revealed that policies and institutional structures often prioritize economic development over genuine inclusion. For instance, the Toronto Public Art Strategy 2019-2029 places strong emphasis on commercially driven projects, which can inadvertently exclude initiatives that aim to support communities most in need of meaningful opportunities. These priorities shape public spaces as curated sites aligned with dominant values, limiting marginalized groups' participation in shaping them (Bourke & Lidstone, 2013; Rahder & McLean, 2013).

In the graffiti project, restrictive residency rules excluded many participants, leading some to consider unsanctioned graffiti as an act of resistance (Black & Stone, 2005; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). The anti-oppression garden showed how institutional rhetoric around openness could suppress equity efforts, especially when inclusivity was extended to those upholding discriminatory views (Ahmed, 2012; MacKinnon, 2021). These examples reflect ongoing critiques of performative equity that maintain existing hierarchies (Takeuchi & Ishihara,

2020). Even with these constraints, both projects demonstrated how placemaking, when guided by critical intent, can elevate marginalized voices, inspire public engagement, and support collaborative resistance (Fransberg et al., 2023; Schuermans et al., 2012). These projects engaged participants in rethinking public narratives and reimagining space as a site of shared authorship and resistance (Rahder & McLean, 2013; Peteet, 1996).

Sustainable change requires removing policy barriers and centering participation through inclusive governance (Champagne, 2020; Sullivan, 2021). Placemaking holds pedagogical potential when it opens space for collective meaning-making and challenges structures that determine access and authority. This work contributes to the ongoing discourse on how public art and education intersect to support anti-oppressive social transformation (Schuermans et al., 2012; Stern, 2018).

## Implications

This research shows how artistic placemaking can address systemic inequities, raise marginalized voices, and support social change. Educators can use public space to engage students in real-world learning that encourages critical thinking about power and justice. Involving students in collaborative art projects with communities offers a way to connect learning with lived experience. This requires preparation through professional development that supports awareness of political and social dynamics in public space. At the policy level, strategies such as the Toronto Public Art Strategy often emphasize economic goals while limiting community-led efforts. To shift this, institutions can revise funding criteria and approval processes to support wider access and community involvement. Artists and organizers can shape space through inclusive planning that reflects local voices and challenges dominant systems. Their work can open space for dialogue and spark shifts in how communities engage with public life. This study presents placemaking as both a way to teach and a field of struggle, shaped by institutions and individual efforts. Future research can deepen this understanding by combining reflective methods with broader studies of policy and access.

## Conclusion

This duoethnography examined how placemaking through arts can be used as a pedagogical approach to address systemic inequities and promote anti-oppression efforts in public spaces. Focusing on two projects, a graffiti workshop in Toronto Graffiti Alley and the development of an anti-oppression garden in a schoolyard, the research analyzed challenges posed by municipal policies and institutional practices that often marginalize underrepresented voices. Using duoethnography, the authors reflected on their experiences and explored the potential of public spaces to encourage critical engagement, amplify diverse perspectives, and inspire social change. The findings emphasize the importance of inclusive, community-driven approaches to placemaking that challenge established power dynamics and foster equitable participation. This study contributes to discussions on the intersections of public art, education, and equity, offering a framework for reimagining public spaces as platforms for collective learning and transformation.

Building on the research presented in this paper, we began on the next phase of our exploration, initiated in June 2024. This ongoing project extends to field studies examining graffiti and street art in diverse global contexts, focusing on how public policies shape the creation, reception, and regulation of these art forms. By studying cities such as Toronto (Canada), Jakarta (Indonesia), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Tirana (Albania), and Singapore, we aim to uncover how distinct socio-political landscapes influence public art's ability to challenge dominant narratives and support anti-oppressive efforts. This work seeks to further our understanding of placemaking as a pedagogical and transformative practice within varied cultural and political frameworks.

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