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Making With Place
Youth Public Art Experiments

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Article abstract

Making With Place explores expressions and desires of queer, Indigenous, and racialized young artists on place, community, and culture. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (from spring 2020 to fall 2021) community-based researchers engaged in participatory arts processes with young artists, culminating in public art installations theorising evolving inquiries and ideas into place. In this paper, we showcase six artworks to exemplify three conceptions of place that emerged from this collective work: (a) place holds histories; (b) place is relational; and (c) place as a verb. We consider how learnings from this project can help to more equitably reclaim public space through (re)mapping and (re)visioning as living processes of place-making. Community arts, in public space, can inform how we create, investigate, and make place through the arts. Who does this inviting, and who is ultimately assembled, is of vital importance. Place is where we encounter each other.

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MAKING WITH PLACE:
YOUTH PUBLIC ART EXPERIMENTS

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Charlotte Lombardo is a community-engaged scholar, educator, and facilitator with core interests and experiences in youth engagement, community arts, participatory action, and health promotion. She is currently a PhD candidate. This manuscript was prepared as part of her doctoral dissertation.

Phyllis Novak (aka Nowakowski) is an artist-researcher and educator, and the founding artistic director of SKETCH Working Arts. Her work centres culture-making as a primary way to build equitable and vibrant communities, and social change, which is the focus of her current doctoral studies.

Sarah Flicker is the York Research Chair in Community-Based Participatory Research. She is a widely recognized expert in participatory and community-engaged research, working collaboratively with communities on equity-oriented agendas. Her research has informed policy at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Her teams have won a number of awards for youth engagement in research.

Making With Place is a collective of diverse artists engaged in public art and place-making experiments with SKETCH Working Arts. This article discusses works by T. J. Banate, Jess DeVitt (aka DeVittoris), Em Dial, Nigel Edwards, Lilah Hillman, Jasbina Justice, Maddie Lycheck, Zephyr McKenna, Susie Mensah, Jahmal Nugent, Billy Parrell, Lisa Petrunia, Destiny Pitters, Pogi (the Artist), Emmet Reed (aka Emmerson Outlaw), Pree Rehal, Amelia R-N, Ty Sloan, Ammarah Syed, Ayrah Taerb, Olympia Trypis, Ry King, and Bert Whitecrow. The projects were realised with creative leads Sue Cohen, Lisa Myers and Naty Tremblay.

Abstract: *Making With Place* explores expressions and desires of queer, Indigenous, and racialized young artists on place, community, and culture. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (from spring 2020 to fall 2021) community-based researchers engaged in participatory arts processes with young artists, culminating in public art installations theorising evolving inquiries and ideas into place. In this paper, we showcase six artworks to exemplify three conceptions of place that emerged from this collective work: (a) place holds histories; (b) place is relational; and (c) place as a verb. We consider how learnings from this project can help to more equitably reclaim public space through (re)mapping and (re)visioning as living processes of place-making. Community arts, in public space, can inform how we create, investigate, and make place through the arts. Who does this inviting, and who is ultimately assembled, is of vital importance. Place is where we encounter each other.

How do diverse young people express and create place and community? How might public arts projects amplify and re-centre their voices? What is the role of real and imagined space? In this article, we take up these questions to theorise place through a case study of six artworks created by youth artist-researchers as part of the *Making With Place* project. We write here as doctoral students who facilitated this process as part of our graduate training, alongside one of our research mentors and supervisors, and the collective of young people involved. We begin by acknowledging and celebrating the complicated *we* of this collaborative work.

Community Arts and Making With Place

Community arts can be defined as artistic activity characterised by dialogue and co-creation (Novak, 2012). Such socially-engaged arts are increasingly exploring and theorising spaces, places, and landscapes as culturally constructed and contested (Badham, 2010; Helguera, 2011; Rose, 1997). Community arts, in public space, can inform how we create, investigate, and make place through the arts (Bourgault, 2022; Liodaki & Velegrakis, 2020; Loveless, 2019). Place and space are closely-related, intertwined ideas (Carter et al, 1993). Space is a material experience of the world, and a way of organising that world. To be alive is to move through and occupy spaces; "where there is space there is being" (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 22). As spaces become imbued with social meaning, they take on connotations of place (Larsen & Johnson, 2013). Foundational theorist Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) posited that "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with values" (p. 6). Spaces are generally demarcated in some way, such as physically through geographic boundaries, or conceptually in ideas like "open space." By contrast, places are often bounded more abstractly through meaning, as in "sense of place" or what Tuan (1977) called "centres of felt value" (p. 4).

Making With Place engaged young artists identifying with lived experiences of systemic inequity (including homelessness, forced precarity, and the navigation of associated oppressions and repressions) to artfully explore these relationships. From spring 2020 to fall 2021, Phyllis Novak and Charlotte Lombardo led a participatory research process with QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) young people as artist-researchers. Through artistic practice and production experiments, youth explored the complexities of place from both individual and collective perspectives.

This work transpired during the global shifts in personal and public space mandated by public health orders to contain COVID-19. These changes were felt

acutely by all, but differentially impacted vulnerable peoples navigating marginality and precarity. Social services were closed, shelters became even more crowded and dangerous, parks were increasingly policed, and surveillance limited access to public space. This time also coincided with a period of growing attention, awareness, and organising to address anti-Black racism. *Making With Place* began with a virtually mediated creative practice space and culminated in a series of public art installations. Youth collectively and creatively responded to their personal experiences during a time of significant public and social upheaval: space and bodies became even more regulated, particularly for people for whom ideas about place were already problematic, insecure, and contested.

Location and context

Making With Place took place in Toronto, Ontario, Canada's largest urban centre. It is considered by many to be among the most multicultural cities in the world (Galanakis, 2013). Toronto is characterised by its diversity, economic engine, and growing inequality (Hulchanski, 2007). The city is also located on the treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, the Métis, and many other Indigenous nations. Tkaronto, (the place in the water where the trees are standing), remains home to many diverse Indigenous Peoples. Today many are actively and increasingly naming, resisting, and reclaiming histories of colonial violence and erasure.

The majority of the *Making With Place* projects were produced in partnership with The Bentway[1], a formal public space created several years ago under a highway in the downtown core. The Bentway is a two-kilometre park-like space under the Gardiner Expressway, which offers year-round cultural programming, activities, and events. This place is a relevant and interesting animation site for our community arts projects given current and historical realities of similar spaces being utilised by people as places for living rough, tent cities, co-housing, and community building[2]. *Making With Place* sought to explore and activate The Bentway space with an awareness of the tensions the space may represent, and questions about who is currently being engaged there. This work was undertaken in core partnership with The Bentway Conservancy, the group that maintains, operates, and programs the site. The Conservancy both identified a gap and expressed an interest in programming that featured/engaged voices of under-represented youth.

ReSearching Place: Methods and Processes

How we do our research is inextricably linked to how we see the world. Experiences constructing social reality differ between those who benefit from the status quo and those who do not (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). *Making With Place* draws on participatory and arts-based research traditions and approaches. We centre the knowledge and expertise of diverse youth creatives engaged as artist-researchers. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to research that favours participant empowerment, and voice with the intention to catalyse transformational action (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). Arts-based approaches can be powerful tools for participatory research. Art and art-making can function as: modes of participatory inquiry, engaging people in eliciting evidence about their lives and experiences, modes of representation and production in the co-creation of knowledge, and modes of dissemination for knowledge communication, education, and translation (Mitchell & Sommer, 2016). Creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal, and subjective concerns which operate not only based on explicit and exact knowledge, but also on tacit knowledge (Barrett & Bolt, 2010). This subjective approach to research can help bring into view particularities that reflect new social realities, and that are not yet recognized in normalised discourses.

Making With Place began virtually in spring 2020 amidst the first COVID-19 lockdowns. Eight young artist-researchers were invited through a community arts organisation to join two graduate students in a participatory arts-based exploration into place. During this time of physical isolation, the group engaged in individual creative practice, which they shared and developed collaboratively through online platforms, in particular through synchronous sessions held using the Zoom platform, and asynchronously via images shared on Instagram. With some loosening of restrictions in Toronto in summer 2020, the project team was able to explore and experiment in-person in-place with a suite of time-limited and socially distanced public art activations. Learning from these experiences informed a second *Making With Place* phase that took place from spring to fall 2021. Featuring leadership by six of the initial eight youth artist-researchers, with engagement of additional artist collaborators, this second phase culminated, with further loosening of restrictions, in a series of more fulsome and audience-engaged public art activations.

Participatory Action Research Cycles

PAR emphasises the use of Freirean generative dialogue to uncover root causes of problems, explore new ways of re-learning and representing contemporary and traditional knowledge, and identify collective actions that people can take (Freire, 1970;

McTaggart et al., 2017). *Making With Place* was undertaken through iterative and generative PAR cycles of:

1. *Creative sharing and meaning making*. Place-based artistic and narrative explorations of project themes were undertaken through sharing circles, where the artists brought forth and discussed their artwork and processes in progress. These circles became spaces of storytelling where personal concepts of place were expressed by each artist through their work. They also sparked creative critique and dialogue on place, deepening our collective learning, and furthering the development of solo and collaborative arts practices.

2. *Place-based production and activation.* Drawing from the creative outputs and discussions, the artists engaged in the design and development of multidisciplinary art outreach productions. The intent of these productions was to build on and express surfaced ideas of place, and respond to and activate notions of reclaiming space through public art.

3. *Reflection and theorising*. Throughout, the group engaged in reflection and participatory data analysis to capture and deepen meaning-making, and to explore theory building and knowledge mobilisation. Themes and findings emerging from this analysis formed a knowledge framework that continually informed as it was informed by new project cycles.

The project cycles were facilitated by two white, cis-gendered female graduate students, identifying as queer (Phyllis) and heterosexual (Charlotte). Each engaged not just as facilitators, but also as creative participants, bringing their own artwork regularly to the project sharing circles. The research facilitators engaged in a co-practice of vulnerability, critique, and constructive dialogue with the younger artists, enacting a commitment to learn with and from young people. This participatory engagement sought to counterbalance the positional power held as project directors and graduate students, in an attempt, as Adelstein (2018) asserts, "to redistribute this power and to acknowledge the common humanity that transcends us all" (p. 2).

Making With Place processes and outcomes were documented using qualitative and participatory research methods. Research protocols and informed consent processes were applied and discussed at the outset of the work, and revisited throughout the project stages (research ethics protocols #2020-048 and #2021-201). Youth artist-researchers and research facilitators engaged in open-ended group discussions held approximately weekly throughout the project's first phase and monthly throughout the second phase. One-on-one interviews also took place with youth artist-researchers at key moments in their creative process. These discussions explored

place-oriented perceptions, expressions, and learning emerging from the experiential doing of the creative sharing and production cycles. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed using talk to text software. Auto-generated transcripts were cleaned for accuracy and then reviewed by the research facilitators. They were qualitatively analysed, drawing from Creswell and Poth (2017), through memoing and coding, classifying codes into themes, and developing and assessing interpretations. The resulting codes and themes were then explored with the youth artist-researchers for review, agreement or challenge, and additions, refinements, or integration of new understandings (Flicker & Nixon, 2015). These sessions also centred dialogue, critique, and content analysis of the project's creative outputs, artworks, and place-based activations (Skains, 2018).

In this article, we present *Making With Place* findings on place as expressed through the artworks and participatory analyses. Elsewhere we discuss and reflect more on the participatory research processes. A methods-focused manuscript on this work is in currently process.

ARTiculating Place: Artworks & Discoveries

Making With Place explores and articulates place, in both distinct and connected ways. Participatory analyses investigating the works reveal shared themes and discoveries that cut across the projects. In this section we discuss key results, drawing on six *Making With Place* artworks as case studies, to capture and illustrate findings across three interrelated themes: Place Holds Histories, Place Is Relational, and Place As Verb. These findings and discussions reflect the artist-researchers' voices, desires, and experiences based in and drawing from our participatory analyses, including the artists' expressions about their works and the responses and interpretations of the broader group.

Place Holds Histories

Many of the *Making With Place* projects explore how place holds and reflects histories. Place holds histories in the stories of what has happened and continues to happen in these geographies. These stories are expressed implicitly and explicitly; some are hidden, others are silenced. Place holds histories in the narratives about how spaces evolve over time, and in the chronicles of the forces that mould and change them. Place holds histories in memories that remain, and migrations that displace. In urban space, increasing development alters places in ways that often conceal histories and place-makers. Historical dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and resistance affect how a place is made, defined, and developed, and how it in turn defines those within it.

Figure 1.
Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit [Video poetic narrative] (Whitecrow, 2020).
 See the full work at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L05o-FnxGL0

Processes of community building, and processes of displacement and disruption co-exist and clash in cycles of development. The artworks *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* and *Reconstructions of Home* experiment with, and illuminate, these ideas.

Bert Whitecrow's (2020) video installation *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* explores and contrasts Indigenous and colonial contexts and histories. Bert is a 2Spirit[3] Anishinaabe artist from Seine River First Nation whose work explores themes of healing through preserving and practising ancestral knowledge. Using video and personal poetic narrative, Bert evokes the Anishinaabemowin teaching Mino Bimaadiziwin (the good life). This is a philosophy of living with respect and humility, as well as honouring people, land, and more-than-human relations. As the poetic text by Bert proclaimed: "Spirit is in everything that surrounds us. Honour Nibi who guided our ancestors through riverways steady and strong. Honour y(our) relationships to land, to spirit, a relationship passed down through generations" (2020).

As a public art activation, *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* was projected onto large structural pillars at The Bentway urban park under an expressway in downtown Toronto. Images of moving waters and skies were cast against concrete bents and steel beamed ceilings, backgrounded with recorded sounds of water rocking a boat while words in poetic form danced across the screen. This created a powerful juxtaposition: industrial infrastructure and fast moving transportation contrasted with peaceful video of life-supporting land and healing waters.

Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit animates how histories and geographies can be placed in contrast to each other to visually break internalised confinements created

by industrial architecture and city infrastructure. The space under the Gardiner Expressway, a highway that cuts across the north shore of Lake Ontario, has been mapped many times: by fish and eels in the lake waters before the shorelines receded; by Indigenous peoples creating first footpaths; by settlers at nearby Fort York, a colonial military base; by the highway infrastructure built to facilitate the movement of cars; by people making temporary shelter and community in tent cities; and most recently by The Bentway as a space for arts and culture. The video installation by Bert briefly altered this place with a storyscape of land and waters, creatures and trees. It created an alternate/simultaneous reality that actively disrupted the present. The piece echoes plural, decolonial histories, and invites visceral teaching about the tensions between the natural world and industrialization, and the strident power of nature within, surrounding, and throughout globalisation.

Similarly, *Reconstructions of Home* is a series of audio and visual installations that engages and expresses lived experiences of houselessness. The stories and recollections seek to "call out, call in, be here, hear, listen, know and share" (RoH, 2021, p. 1). The project, also installed at The Bentway, honours experiences of joy, community, challenge, and displacement of those who have survived living under bridges in Toronto. *Reconstructions of Home* is guided by a curatorial committee, dubbed the Tink Tank, that met to develop strategies and principles for community engagement. Core leader of the Tink Tank and artist-researcher, Olympia Trypis, opened this path with an early place-making work, an installation of *Medicine Mobiles* composed of dreamcatchers[4], Indigenous medicines, and objects captured in tiny glass bottles. Olympia locates this work as reflecting and building on her identity as a member of the Cree Nation, as well as stories and lessons from diverse Indigenous teachers. The intervention was offered to a downtown encampment of community members with whom the artist shares personal connections and experience. As Olympia described: "I made each dreamcatcher so that they could be taken off and people could take them into their tents. I have friends who live here, so I thought that the people that live here would appreciate them the most" (personal communication, September 17, 2020).

Figure 2.
Medicine Mobiles [Interactive offerings installation] (Trypis, 2020)
See footage at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMhExVoMOx8&t=49s

Reconstructions of Home surfaces hidden histories of Toronto's homeless culture and frames the ongoing conflict between the city and these communities. During early COVID-19 lockdowns, restrictions on tent communities were initially relaxed. Once reinstated, however, many community members were forcibly evicted through very public, often brutal showdowns. The project illuminates the tensions of development and the impact of displacement on those living houseless. It contrasts experiences of loss and being pushed out with community commitment, creativity, and ingenuity. The installations open honest conversations about engagement in community, positionality, and honouring space and experience. The community connections and evolutions at the

heart of this work demonstrate cycles of reciprocity and action that impact the tonality of a place to transcend common (mis)conceptions.

Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit and *Reconstructions of Home* both animated The Bentway cultural space, a formerly derelict space under a large expressway in the downtown core. This place, which may at first seem to some to be an empty or neutral space, is revealed by the *Making With Place* art activations to be replete with meaning and history. This illumination of alternative histories and hidden stories reflect processes of colonisation and displacement that the artworks evoke and resist. Both works are rooted in storytelling, using land-based, visual, and narrative approaches. *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* tells of personal history, explorations of self, land, culture, and ancestral geography. By contrast, *Reconstructions of Home* offers a communal storytelling to surface and hold hidden voices and experiences. Both pieces question, challenge, and broaden notions of civic engagement, and who public space is for. They express multiplicities through which place holds histories by exploring alternative histories that challenge dominant ideas of place to reveal more complex and contested realities.

Place Is Relational

Making With Place experiments also reveal place as fluid, deeply relational, and embedded in land, bodies, and communities. Relationality of place is manifest through interactions between people and their environments, and between human and non-human relations. As Olympia Trypis described, "place is the flora and fauna between your feet, and all around you" (personal communication, May 15, 2020). Land-based *Making With Place* experiments uncovered place as sacred, unknowable, and unownable, disrupting structures and paradigms that enforce relationships over land as opposed to with it. Relationality of place is revealed as an interplay between both external and internal landscapes. Place is embodied through identity, emotion, and internalised constructs, in complex relation with externalised forces of power and resistance. These were particularly salient insights emerging from the time of COVID-19 lockdowns and uprisings for racial justice. The artworks *Queering Place* and *CRIP Collab* capture and reflect these learnings.

Based around a medicine garden with tactile and digital elements, *Queering Place* weaves together natural materials, plants, medicines, text, and imagery with audio stories. Both an installation and artist residency, *Queering Place* was created as an inclusive gathering space to welcome and nurture queer, trans, and 2Spirit young people, while critically and creatively exploring the roots of queer identity and ecology. At the core of the residency are six queer artists. Each created a planter piece for the

garden using repurposed tires and native pollinator plants with an accompanying digital sound-story. The planters moved like a river (an ode to water) across the Garrison Commons, a park space in downtown Toronto. This led past wind chimes (an ode to wind) hanging in a burgundy maple grove, to a traditional medicine wheel garden (an ode to earth) and a circle seating arrangement (an ode to fire), as described by project creative lead, Naty Tremblay (personal communication, September 30, 2021). The garden and embedded installations invite audiences to stay a while and sit with their "inqueeries," as expressed by resident artist T. J. Banate: "Question marks make way more sense than periods. As soon as you place a period on a place, on an idea, you limit, you define. You don't allow it to be something more, or to develop into something different" (personal communication, October 27, 2021).

Figure 3.
Queering Place [Land art installation] (Whitecrow, 2021)
See a video trailer at https://youtu.be/unfehrMxn8A

Queering Place was created by diverse queer artists navigating impacts of multiple pandemics, from gender discrimination to COVID-19. Based in this time and place of flux and adaptation, the residents and their inqueeries came to centre on relationality. The work embodies the teachings from living organisms that are constantly growing, shedding, and changing. As the garden and residencies grew, the artists witnessed a change in how human and non-human beings engaged with the space. Joggers, dog walkers, and parents with children gravitated towards the installation as a curated place within the park. Baby bunnies were born in the garden sweetgrass, protected from predators by the flora. The artists expressed how making with the natural world provided insight into embracing fluidity and failure as processes of change and rebirth. *Queering Place* activations were hosted in the garden, inviting community members and passers-by to attend performances and readings, to engage in dialogue circles and fire ceremonies, to sit and consult provided reading materials, to talk with one another. These activations altered this liminal space, bordered by the nearby Fort York colonial military base, and condo developments blocking access to the Lake Ontario shoreline. Talking circles explored garden experiences as mirrors to the ways in which queer experiences and lenses vary and flow. Emergent queer theorising explored *Queering Place* as a re-envisaging of spaces, both internal and external, to express a broader, more inclusive understanding of the surrounding natural and social systems.

Making With Place explorations uncovered relationality of place from the physical to the virtual. The online *CRIP Collab* zine provides a virtual space for disabled artists to showcase their work and expressions. *CRIP Collab* is curated by Pree Rehal, an artist educator who centres their work through their identity as queer, non-binary, disabled, and racialized. The zine was born from a need to engage more art from similarly diverse folks. At the time of writing, three editions have featured the work of artists who belong to the queer community, and identify as disabled (including mad, chronically ill, and deaf/hard of hearing), with a majority being Black, Indigenous or People of Colour. The zine showcases digital art, sketches, paintings, photography, graphic stories, and abstract art exploring experiences, expressions, resistances, and celebrations. Beautiful, brave depictions critically exploring, as Pree described, how "place is embodied in our physical bodies, minds and communities" (personal communication, May 15, 2020). The most recent issue of *CRIP Collab* (Rehal, 2022) features creative works alongside personal reflections on place. Métis artist Billy Parrell discussed artful knowledge sharing with instructions for making watercolour paints from salvaged flowers. Artist and sex worker of colour Jasbina Justice unpacked their poetry as expressing "the straddling place, that strange liminal space where life's banality, abject cruelty, weirdness and impossible beauty meld." Jamaican artist Destiny Pitters discussed how her collages explore the displacement of slavery and the "trickiness of place as location." As Pitters' (2022) *CRIP Collab* statement described: "Many

marginalized folk, especially 2SQTIA-BIPOC, don't have the privilege of clear vision when thinking of place as location; instead, we are afforded a broken window with shards of rejection, houselessness, slavery, genocide and asylum-seeking. But as creative substitutes, place exists for us in other ways: as loved ones (human and non-), identities and dreams."

Figure 4.
being/(love) [Collage] from *CRIP Collab 3* zine (Pitters, 2022)
See the full zine at https://www.makingwithplace.ca/2022/02/15/5905/

The *CRIP Collab* zine, as virtual platform, added a different spatiality that was no less effective than the activations performed in physical space. In fact, given COVID-19 mandates that limited physical audiences, the zine creations have reached broader audiences than many of the in-person *Making With Place* activations. Curator Pree

Rehal and their collaborators opened a crucial space of creativity, awareness, and activism for disabled QTBIPOC community members. Throughout *Making With Place*, Pree significantly leveraged the potential of social media as a process and production space, at one point sharing visual art to speak out against police violence that generated over 30,000 reactions. They also expertly employed Instagram to conduct advocacy and crowd fundraising projects for trans queer and disabled folks, ensuring that their perspectives would not be forgotten during the fraught time of COVID-19 lockdowns.

Queering Place and *Crip Collab* express relationalities of place from embodied perspectives of queerness, disability, and racialization. The *Queering Place* garden is an immersive expression with the natural world, centring human and interspecies relations, within a physical space of urban sprawl, condo development and colonial monuments. The experiential learnings from *Queering Place* evoke conceptualizations of queer ecology, offering alternative lenses for reading the world, challenging internal and external landscapes of colonialism and heteronormativity, to chart new pathways for empowerment. The *Crip Collab* zine explores experiences of disability, using digital space to promote the work of disabled artists, resisting constructs of ableism towards disability justice. *Crip Collab* embodies digital space as public space, offering access and voice at a critical time of physical restriction, acutely so for those navigating disability. Both projects express place as relational by resisting limiting landscapes, to create new spaces—physical, virtual and mental—for connection and communion.

Place As Verb

Finally, *Making With Place* discoveries re-affirm place as a verb and place-making as a process of learning and action, often as a move towards transcendence. Several of the projects explore art in public space as a locus for individual and collective consciousness-raising and action. Public art can inform, provoke, and unite, especially when centring under-represented voices. The very notion of a public art experiment seeks to activate place as verb in order to test, discover, reimagine new ideas, and invite novel ways of being together. The artworks *An Invitation* and *Indica; Omega* explore the activation of place for social expression and impact.

The mural *An Invitation* combines words and images for activism and resistance against violence and displacement. Painted by visual artist and community educator Jess De Vitt (originally titled *No Nos Toquen – Don't Touch Us*), the mural explores gender-based violence and resistances locally and in Mexico, Jess' country of origin. Spoken word artist and community worker Susie Mensah was invited to create poetry for/on the piece, drawing attention to intersecting themes of gender, anti-Indigenous

violence, land theft, anti-Black racism, and discrimination against drug users and those living without homes. The resulting collaborative piece became *An Invitation* to the broader community to engage with explicit cries for justice. Centring on depictions of strong, curvaceous bodies and colourful flora, "it is a powerful visual that speaks to oppression without images of ugliness" (O. Trypis, personal communication, September 29, 2020). The bright colours of the mural contrast against the monochrome palette in modern architecture, compelling passers-by to be drawn in "only to later hit them with critical thought-provoking text" (J. Nugent, personal communication, September 29, 2020). The mural is the most enduring of the *Making With Place* public art activations. It is still in place, as of this writing. It is like an alternative monument, testifying to place as verb as a holding of space, enduring presence, knowledge, and power. As Susie's poetry text exclaimed: "Dance with me. Celebrate with me. That we are still here. Step into this wild revisiting of history" (DeVitt & Mensah, 2020).

Figure 5.
An Invitation [Poetic mural installation] (DeVitt & Mensah, 2020)
See and hear the work at https://www.youtube.com/watch?
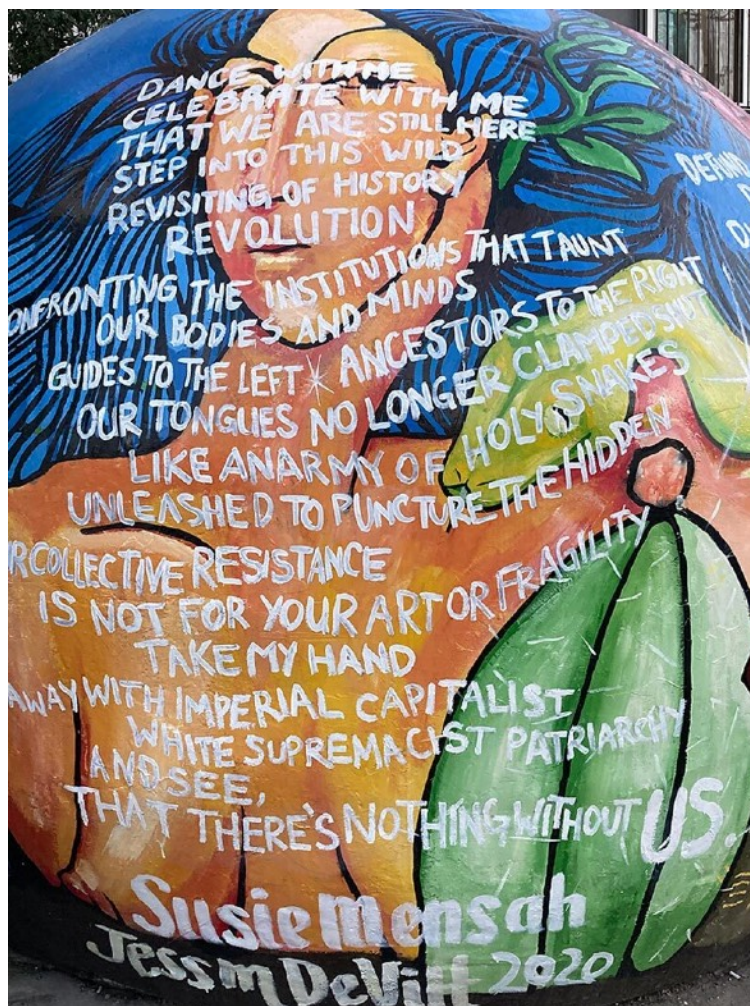
An Invitation is painted onto an oblong concrete structure in downtown Toronto, known as the Drake Rock because of its rounded boulder-like shape, and location across the street from The Drake, a well-known art hotel. The site is on the cusp of the Parkdale neighbourhood, a once predominantly low-income, now rapidly gentrifying area, where condo development is booming. It is a place where people have sought to make community only to be displaced, and where many have been lost to drug wars and police violence. The poetic text explores and expresses historic injustices such as "femicide in the DNA of colonial rule," alongside key calls for justice from recent activist movements including "stop the toxic drug supply," "no pipelines on stolen land," and "defund the police." Over time, and towards realising these activist goals, *An Invitation* has impacted the local community. The work has been featured in several neighbourhood publications, and has generated discussion and debate, particularly amongst local business owners. Some have been very supportive and have even contributed their voices to the messages; others have been uncomfortable with the overtly political tone. The artists, Jess and Susie, have built meaningfully upon their partnership; their new collaborative postcard print, featuring new illustrations by Jess and poetry by Susie, is selling in a local boutique, with proceeds going towards community efforts for Indigenous Harm Reduction[5].

Indica; Omega is archly described by creator Ayrah Taerb as a dissertation on the subject of Black expression. Though not a formal academic dissertation, Ayrah locates his performance installation and album of original hip hop music is nonetheless an important and informed treatise. The work is highly collaborative, produced with a creative team of music, recording, and video artists, while remaining largely a solo performance centring on Ayrah's original hip hop and theatrical creations. The work explores "blackness as it presents itself in pop culture," touching on issues and relationships between marginalisation and creativity, harm reduction and mental health. Vulnerable lyricism explores personal relationships with creativity, self-care, romance, and drug use/abuse, featuring a sound bed that samples Claude Debussy's Reverie. *Indica; Omega's* embodied animation of space challenged power and social norms, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and identity, evoking a multi-sensory experience of precarity, transience, and solitude. As Ayrah's artistic statement expressed (personal communication, October 7, 2021): "This installation takes a look at the beautiful and painful consequences of the creative commitments Ay have made."

Indica; Omega both celebrates and honestly interrogates experiences with blackness and creativity, in a bid towards personal and collective transcendence. *Indica; Omega* explores and uncovers intersections between poverty and genius, complexity and culture, surfacing connections between individual experience and broader sociocultural forces. In a talkback after the performance, the artist and a fellow collaborator discussed how popular culture both constructs and consumes Blackness,

while limiting and subjugating Black people. Exploring hip hop as a response and resistance to processes of marginalization, alongside intersectional experiences of classism and racism, the work reflects on the history of black culture as a driver, and even a commodity, of popular, white culture.

Figure 6.
Indica; Omega [Performance installation] (Taerb, 2021)
See a video trailer at https://youtu.be/wC-wDkYvcxo

An Invitation and *Indica; Omega* engage public space as a site of action and interrogation. Both projects generated attention, discourse, and, for some, discomfort.

An Invitation drew both interest and anger in response to the mural's expressly activist intent. Though the foundations of street art are rooted in counterculture and social critique, a current emphasis on murals as neighbourhood beautification may serve to undermine street art as political messaging. These tensions speak to processes of gentrification ongoing in the surrounding neighbourhood, once an affordable area widely seen as an artistic enclave. *Indica; Omega* used hip hop performance to portray and confront constructions of Blackness, and exploitations of Black culture. The critically reflective talkback after the performance elicited powerful expressions of connection and solidarity, while also generating concerns in relation to hip hop tropes of gender inequality. By generating difficult but important discourses, these works signal the potential of art in public space for critical place-making. They enact place as verb through intervention that seeks to compel, challenge, and disrupt.

Enacting Place: Theories and Conclusions

The themes described above are discussed separately, using specific artworks to home in on and unpack expressions and meanings. Centring our analyses on complexities of place, the *Making With Place* artworks and discoveries are really best understood in dialogue with one another. The following figure captures this interrelationship.

Figure 7.
Making With Place: Themes and Theorising
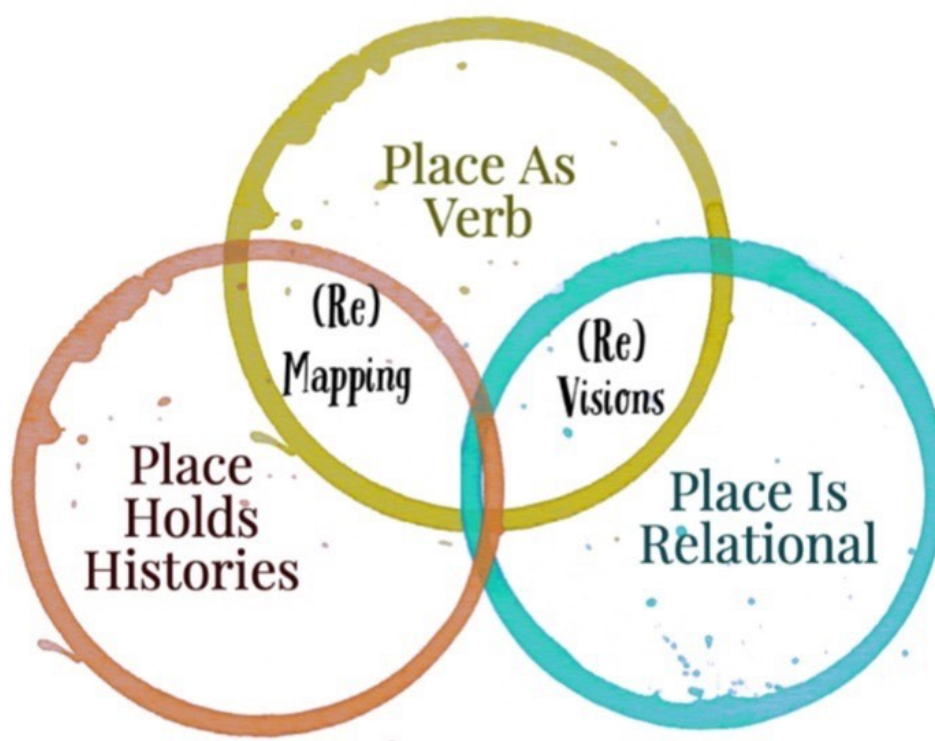
Place as Verb expresses living processes of place-making:
•Realised and resisted in multiplicities of time and space, *Place Holds Histories*;
•Manifest and contested in diverse ways of being and inter-being, *Place Is Relational*; and,
•Enacting a form of *(Re)Mapping*, revealing histories and dynamics of place;
•Serving as *(Re)Visions* into the relational possibilities and politics of shared space.

(Re)Mapping: Histories and Dynamics of Place

The *Making With Place* explorations into histories and dynamics of place evoke concepts of (re)mapping, a term first introduced by Indigenous theorist Mishuana Goeman (2008). Goeman refered to (re)mapping as "the dismantling of boxed geographies" (p. 295) related to colonial structures and paradigms, both external and internal, placed upon subjugated bodies and consciousnesses. She discussed how image, storytelling, song, and movement can produce powerful cognitive maps, narratives, and metaphors, generating alternative conceptions that subvert the project of empire building. In this way, (re)mapping is both a personal process of being and a collective process of becoming, engaging and disrupting space as political and suffused with power struggles, historic and ongoing. These ideas show up repeatedly in the *Making With Place* artworks: *Acknowledge Place Honour Spirit* (re)mapping the urban landscape with poetic video and text as both personal history and land acknowledgement; the *Queering Place* garden (re)mapping land and relationships across genders, racialisations, and even species; *Reconstructions of Home*'s digital storyscape and commemorative placemaking (re)mapping accepted ideas of place by surfacing untold stories and hidden communities. This re-storying of histories grapples directly with essentialised notions of community and the single story (Adichie, 2009). The projects explore imagery and discourse as a resource to chart new ways of being together that challenge dominant constructs typically sorting our engagement based on hierarchies, roles, and binaries. In this time of global uprisings against colonialism and white supremacy, and amidst the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 restrictions, this work is conspiring to "counter dominant and entrenched visuality that stands in the way of collective liberation" (Goeman, 2008, p. 26).

The *Making With Place* transformations of place confront relationalities in negotiations of difference, interdependence, and justice. *Indica; Omega* is both a highly collaborative, and deeply personal, exploration of themes of Black marginalisation and harm reduction. *An Invitation*'s bold text and imagery clearly articulate specific calls for gender and racial justice, garnering the attention of local actors and systems. Exploring what Karyn Recollet (2015, p. 129) identified as "new geographies of resistance," the artworks mobilise public space for creative solidarity, reflexivity, and activism. The *CRIP*

Collab zine collaborators also intentionally employ the relative access afforded online to share beautiful work on queerness, racialization, and disability, often with expressly political messages and activist intentions. The zine leverages the power of virtual space for organising and its potential to provide otherwise un-propertied youth with a durable, malleable site of identity formation, social organisation, and collective memory (Yang, 2007). Each in their own way, the young artist-researchers express responsibilities and accountabilities in relationship with people, place, and built and natural worlds, to prioritise the disruption of past and current processes of colonisation and oppression.

(Re)Visions: Politics of Location

The diverse, fluctuating relationalities and geographies explored by the *Making With Place* artists affirm bell hooks' (1989) pedagogy of the margins as a space of radical openness, and the need to make place to imagine and surface the powers that exist there. This awareness calls for critical attention to positionalities and politics of identity, to hooks' choosing of the margins as a pedagogy, as opposed to a fixed location. As White (2020) contended, "we inherit our labels, we absorb them, we resist them, we embrace them … but we do not start with them" (as cited in Bourgault, 2022, p. 107). This was a point consistently levelled by the artist-researchers and their creative explorations, expressing moral struggles, ethical questions, personal frustrations, and, at times, outright anger at notions of engaging communities on the margins. For example, focusing creative attention on experiences of homelessness and tent housing encampments raised ethical questions about relationship building and the intentions of art production and public art with particular communities. The *Reconstructions of Home* Tink Tank was created as a critical space to explore and address these issues through representation and leadership by artists and community members with lived experience and relationality in this space. Conversations unfolded about the risk of othering individuals with experience outside of normative definitions, while also identifying a passionate need to counteract harmful media and stigmatising stories that only highlight vulnerabilities, rather than focus on the strengths of these communities.

Politics of location, and tensions of place, were also expressed by the artist-researchers in identifications of the acute violence they experienced with oppressive and limiting terminologies. Contestation arose around overused and narrow terms to describe young people with similar experiences to themselves as *street-involved*, *marginalised*, *at risk* or *homeless*. Many emphatically rejected the term *marginalised youth*. Strong discussion unfolded on the ways in which institutions benefit from using oppressive terminology that box people into specific categories. These learnings were brought to the attention of SKETCH, the community-engaged arts partner organisation,

to consider the harms caused by repeatedly using these labels. A definitive call to action was articulated to recognise and change oppressive language used in research, education, culture, institutions, and, especially, in charities. Ayrah Taerb explained: "To identify as (marginalised) is essentially to accept defeat. Like I've allowed myself to be pushed to the margins ... me saying I'm marginalised is like me saying 'I'm lost, help me', to the same person who's kicking me to the curb" (personnel communication, May 29, 2020).

The *Making With Place* investigations of place as relational disrupt and problematise such categorisations that, while often seeking to empower, remain based in subjugation. These reflections also surface ways in which community arts funding is predicated on, while simultaneously fuelling, scarcity. Efforts focused on providing creative and alternative opportunities for oppressed peoples target engagement with marginalised communities. Funding, however, flows inconsistently, and initiatives are challenged within the modest resources and systemic constraints of community work. Inherently recognising this, the young artist-researchers expressed frustration with being asked to hold and create space for something that is much larger than the resources leveraged towards addressing it. Moreover, while rooted in anti-oppressive models, community arts initiatives on their own are not able to fully circumvent lived realities of joblessness, housing precarity, and entrenched poverty. Such challenges ask uncomfortable questions about dominant discourses that market arts activities as "adding value to young people " (Hickey-Moody, 2010, p. 203). Soo Ah Kwon (2013) discusses how growth in the youth development industry has occurred alongside neoliberal social disinvestment and an overburdening of nonprofits, situating community organisations increasingly as important sites of care for marginalised groups. This risks producing notions of empowerment that emphasise opportunities for at-risk groups to improve themselves, while doing little to address "the relations of power that made them powerless" in the first place (Kwon, 2013, p. 11). Without plural and critical approaches, community arts risks becoming "a brightly packaged form of welfare" (Ford-Smith, 2011, p. 85). Ayrah Taerb expresses such critique in *Indica; Omega*, exploring Black experiences that do not fit neatly into binaries of empowerment or objectification, and reflecting critically on the relationship between marginalisation and artistic sustainability. *Indica; Omega*'s guiding question—What goes through the mind of an artist as they commit themselves to making masterpieces on the sidewalk for pocket change?—captures key issues for critical place-making. Who is resourced to drive culture, and who copes within unequal systems to survive?

Making With Place: Art and Place-Making

The *Making With Place* discoveries work within and across multiple complexities of place to surface embedded geographical, historical, socio-cultural, and land-based elements. Knowledges uncovered by the youth artist-researchers compel understanding and activation of place as verb, towards more inclusive processes of community and equity. They highlight how notions of community can be both aspirational and contested (Mulligan, 2013). These endeavours speak to Tuck and McKenzie's (2014) conceptualizations of critical place inquiry; the artworks themselves provide an understanding of place as shifting interactively over time and space, and the researchers' discourses about them aim to further critical politics via a relational ethics of accountability. Place-making through youth arts can provide conscious recognition of suppressed realities of flux and change as creative resistance to dominant narratives of the determined world around us (Hickey-Moody, 2010). While (re)visioning the dominant, it is important to reckon with an active, relational politics of critical place-making. Wrestling with systemic inequities calls for honest reflection on the ways in which the structural realities and constraints of the work itself might be complicit within these systems. We are working within determined structures of hierarchy and scarcity, even while speaking back to and seeking to transform limiting narratives and spaces. In re-centring perspectives from the margins, we must understand this to be a living process of resistance and revision.

Public art can open what bell hooks (1989, p. 15) called "spaces where we begin this process of revision." Art puts forward ideas to be witnessed and interacted with. Placed in and amongst communities, public artworks can be like energetic cultural texts, which different people can read in their own ways. In public spaces, our encounters have a special potential to be surreptitious, serendipitous. Art in the public realm can forge conversations, connections, and new pathways for positive acts of citizenship (Lombardo, 2021; Wood, 2020). If public art is a way of inviting us together, then who does the inviting, and who is ultimately assembled, is of vital importance. Community arts by under-represented voices can suggest reconsiderations of place, creating space to "think about who we are, how we're here, and how we got here" (Yakamovich & Wright, 2021, p. 41). Place is where we encounter each other.

Art does not need to be flashy, monumental, or permanent to have an effect. A community that is able to imagine and make art together is already a community in change (Bourgault, 2022). To be making *with* denotes an engagement of mind, body, and social self (Yakamovich & Wright, 2021). This is an enacting of art as (re)search, positioning public art as theory and method. Stuart Hall (1997) noted that "theory is always a detour on the way to something more important" (p. 42). The creative

explorations, frustrations, and articulations by young artist-researchers call for new practices of mutual growth and "solidarity, not charity" (Spade, 2020, p. 131), strongly and expressly grounded in a desire-centred lens (Tuck, 2009). This embodied and embedded theorising, this *Making With Place*, stands as a bold signpost for helping us all navigate collective spaces so that new, brighter horizons can unfold.

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Acknowledgements

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ENDNOTES

1. The Bentway "works to ignite the urban imagination, using the city as site, subject, and canvas" see www.thebentway.ca

2. The terms living rough and tent cities refer to strategies of shelter and home-making employed by people experiencing housing insecurity, see https://www.pivotlegal.org/explainer_what_is_a_homeless_tent_city

3. Two-spirit is a third gender found in some Native American cultures, often involving birth-assigned men or women taking on the identities and roles of the opposite sex. A sacred and historical identity, *two-spirit* can include but is by no means limited to LGBTQ identities. See https://www.dictionary.com/e/gender-sexuality/two-spirit/.

4. A dreamcatcher is an Indigenous tradition and sacred handmade object, which originated with the Ojibwe people, and has been passed down to other Indigenous nations.

5. Indigenous Harm Reduction refers to efforts to recognize and address harms done by colonialism that put Indigenous people at higher risk of substance use, including re-connecting people to cultural and spiritual traditions. See   https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/mental-wellness-and-substance-use/harm-reduction-and-the-toxic-drug-crisis/indigenous-harm-reduction