

MOVES TOWARD EQUITY:

**Perspectives from
Arts Leaders of Color**

September 2019

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Produced by Arts Connect International



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BEDROCKS **of INEQUITY**

Defining Cultural Equity

There is a “cultural equity gap” within the United States arts landscape. This gap constitutes the unequal representation of various identities including, but not limited to, race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (class). The cultural equity gap arises from a systemic inequity in access to the arts and to positions of power within the arts.

Recognizing inequities in access to the field and to positions of power within the arts industry, Americans for the Arts published a statement on cultural equity in 2016, defining it as:

... embodying the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people—including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented based on race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion...—are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources.²

Releasing this statement on cultural equity was a seminal step for the field as it named the various identities of historically underrepresented individuals and groups. However, there is still a large gap in baseline demographic data in the arts, as well as a lack of understanding as to how these terms are conceptualized and operationalized within the arts and culture sector.

Additionally, it is important to note that the term ‘historically underrepresented’ is a covertly biased way of describing the inherent inequity embedded within the historically Eurocentric arts industry,

one steeped in a history of discrimination and inaccessibility tied to colonialism and capitalist definitions of success and value³.

When addressing equity within the United States landscape, including equity within the arts, it is impossible to escape the nation’s history of slavery, genocide and oppression, leading to systemic and institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, ableism; and more directly, the rise and valuation of patriarchal white supremacy as the founding blocks of this nation. This inequity is replicated across many sectors and industries such as education, law, health, and identity politics⁴.

The arts industry reproduces congruent inequities across the field, seen in the representation of management, the accessibility of training, and the structural components enforced through the distribution of funding, seen with individual donors, traders, and foundations. In turn, historically, white, affluent, cis-gendered, able-bodied individuals, families, and institutions, have been afforded the privilege of systemically defining value and how it is enacted within and throughout the field. This is further enforced in the hegemonic capitalist definition of “high art” within markets, with relatively little variance seen in global arts economies who participate outside of the capitalist structure⁵. Correspondingly, it is the same demographic of power which has defined the ‘historically underrepresented’ through the oppression and marginalization of said communities and individuals.

Given the dynamics of privilege within the industry, the call to action becomes the following: 1) to deconstruct current power systems, 2) to promote, uplift, and foster counter narratives from and with artists and arts leaders across traditionally marginalized identities and communities, with the goal of 3) moving towards creative justice⁶. This demands a systems approach of coordinated efforts across the field to collectively work towards equity⁷.

Arts & Culture in Boston

In 2019 ArtsBoston released the Arts Factor report looking at the economic impact of Boston's arts and culture scene. They showed that in 2018 there was 2B+ of direct economic impact, 30K+ jobs created, with over 21M+ attendees at arts events, accounting for more attendees than Boston's famed sports teams combined⁸. These numbers reveal the importance and vibrancy of Boston's arts and culture sector. However, who has ownership of, voice in, and access to power and opportunity within the arts, remains in question.

In 2016, the Boston Foundation published *Understanding Boston: How Boston and Other American Cities Support and Sustain the Arts*⁹. They looked at ten comparison cities, finding that Boston has as much financial support per capita for the arts as beacons like New York City and San Francisco. However, distribution of funding in Boston is vastly different from the other cities. Boston is dominated by its large arts institutions to a degree that no other cities in the study were, despite having the second highest number of arts organizations per capita of the cities studied. Conversely, the culturally relevant organizations, who are most likely to address equity, are some of the organizations with the smallest budgets in Boston's arts and culture ecosystem.

Funding for the arts in Boston primarily comes from individual donors¹⁰. Although this individual gift giving is undeniably generous and supportive of the ecosystem, it also points to the reality that funding for the arts in Boston is driven by a few very wealthy individuals, representative of one socio-economic group (class). Simply put, correlations exist between white privilege, wealth, and philanthropic giving¹¹. Compared to other cities, Boston has few foundations making grants to the arts, and what is granted has historically gone to larger organizations. Additionally, Boston receives the lowest amount of government funding per capita among the comparison cities¹².

With this funding distribution, unless an artist and/or arts organization has ties to significant individual donors and a consistent stream of revenue generation, it will be very difficult to

secure funding. This ecosystem increases the vulnerability of many culturally relevant organizations in Boston. In this landscape, starting a new organization or launching a career in the arts is a formidable task.

These funding realities deeply impact opportunity for sector innovation, including the ability to build culturally inclusive and equitable arts leadership. Given the changing demographics of Boston, there is a pressing urgency for the arts and culture sector to address equity.

In 2019 the Boston Foundation published *Changing Faces of Greater Boston*, centering work and perspectives from many of the University of Massachusetts's preeminent scholars and institutes¹³. The following findings stand out:

- 1) Boston's person of color (POC) population has increased 65% since 1990
- 2) Key political, business and civic institutions lag behind the region's growing racial diversity, with only 14% of CEOs identifying as POC
- 3) although whites are still the largest racial group, they are no longer the majority, having declined from 59% in 1990 to 44% in 2017

These statistics point to an inevitable shift in population, wealth generation, leadership, and the overall demographics of Boston.

Is Boston's arts and culture landscape ready for the current and upcoming shifts?

The Arts Factor report boasts a vibrant arts and culture ecosystem. However, who are the main consumers and producers of said arts and culture at present?¹⁴ Are the constituencies and audiences as diverse as Boston itself? Are the museums' collections, theater productions, or musical offerings reflective of a diverse, expansive, and ever evolving city?

Moreover, what are the economic impacts for the arts and culture sector if not?

Given that Boston's arts and culture sector is driven by the priorities and interests of individual donors to a degree that other cities are not, how

will ticket sales and donations shift, dissipate, or strengthen with the increasing diversity of the city? The potential for new demographics of audiences and donors demands the sector examine its current practices around cultural equity. It will take employing strategic and coordinated efforts to engage all of Boston's evolving population, both from a consumer and leadership perspective.

If Boston continues to perpetuate stagnation and a lack of innovation based on its current funding trends, the sector risks becoming antiquated and losing its economic impact and viability. In other words, the necessity for diversity and equity has also become a case for economic relevance and sustainability.

Shifting Tides

Since the founding of Arts Connect International (ACI) in 2014 and the beginning of data collection for this multi-phase study on cultural equity in 2017, there have been several initiatives and organizations exemplifying initial and important steps in addressing equity and innovation. Due to these efforts, there have been recognizable shifts in how equity is being discussed and addressed within Boston's arts and culture sector.

The community findings report from Phase I of *Examining Cultural Equity in the Arts*¹⁵ was downloaded over 10K times in twelve months. Language was adopted from the report to describe the "cultural equity gap," showing up in discussions about racial and accessibility injustices in Boston, as well as published interviews and grant funding documents.

In 2019 two awards were developed to forefront work focused on increasing cultural equity, including the Mayor's Office of Arts & Culture developing and distributing a "Model Equity Award"¹⁶, and WBUR's ARTery25¹⁷ awards which honor millennials of color impacting Boston's arts and culture sector. Further, grant makers like The Boston Foundation, the New England Foundation for the Arts, and the Boston Cultural Council changed their policies and procedures to incorporate equity frameworks and redistribution of funds with an equity lens, resulting in new

grant policies, procedures, and programming strands.

Despite the formidable funding landscape as described above, sector innovation is on the rise with the development of new arts and culture organizations and collectives, many of whom aim to address equity. Some examples include: ArtLifting (est. 2013), ACI (est. 2014), Now & There (re-est. 2014), BAMS Fest (est. 2015), the Front Porch Arts Collective (est. 2016) in residence at Central Square Theater, the Cross Cultural Collective (est. 2016), the Network for Arts Administrators of Color out of ArtsBoston (est. 2016), the Berklee Institute for Arts Education & Special Needs (est. 2017), Pao Arts Center (est. 2017), Dunamis (est. 2017), Abilities Dance (est. 2017), Transformative Culture Project (re-est. 2017), and the HipHopEx Lab (est. 2018) out of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. These organizations join a well-developed cohort of arts and social justice organizations in the city¹⁸.

The research presented in this report, accordingly, reflects an arts and culture sector that is in-process and in re-orientation as it moves towards models of equity, with a constant reflection on Boston's past, present, and future. Although the history of systemic oppression within Boston is deep-rooted, ongoing and problematic, there is hope and opportunity for new leadership, systemic reform, and justice moving forward.

Given this background, the research presented here focuses on the voices, narratives, talents, and lived experiences of arts leaders of color in Boston. It was gracious of all who participated in the study to share their time and knowledge with us, and to offer their experiences for the betterment of the arts and culture field. We thank you. In return, we expect the same level of intention and respect will be given to their words, reflected in the analysis of the data, the writing of this report, the distribution of the findings, and the conversations and programming to come.

It is our collective responsibility as an arts and culture field to share, disseminate, and uplift said voices. This act in and of itself is an important step towards equity and justice.

EXAMINING CULTURAL EQUITY

Background on the CEG Study

In the summer of 2017, Arts Connect International (ACI) began a multi-phase, multi-method, and multi-year study examining cultural equity within the arts and culture sector.

Phase I of the study was a baseline attitudinal study, consisting of an electronic national survey with 332 respondents and six in-person focus groups conducted with 39 arts leaders in Boston. Both the survey and the focus groups aimed to 1) elucidate influencers¹⁹ understanding of the cultural equity gap and, 2) understand if influencers are motivated to eradicate the cultural equity gap.

Findings from Phase I were published in a community findings report, *Examining Cultural Equity in the Arts*, released in January 2018²⁰, downloadable on ACI's website²¹. The report focuses on systemic inequities which cause and perpetuate the cultural equity gap, as well as levers for change to move towards eradicating said inequities. Findings reveal important insights, attitudes, and beliefs held by influencers in the sector.

Accurate to the demographics of the sector²², the dominant voice throughout Phase I was white and female. The demographic breakdown for the national survey was 72% white, 22% POC, 77% female, 20% male, and 1% gender non-conforming. The demographic breakdown for the focus groups were 67% white, 31% POC, 79% female, and 21% male.

Given the above demographic representation, ACI's research team found it imperative to conduct a follow-up study. Phase II focused on the perspectives of arts and culture leaders who identify as POC. The researchers asked participants of Phase II to disclose demographic information surrounding disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Although recruitment was focused on racial identity, there was intersectional representation among these identities.

The research team recognizes the need for further study focused on the perspectives of arts and culture leaders who identify as people with disabilities (PWD), and/or as part of the disability community.

Objectives & Questions

Phase II of the study focused on two core questions: 1) *how arts leaders of various marginalized identities (POC, PWD, female, LGBTQIA+²³) conceptualize and operationalize leadership development for themselves, and 2) how arts leaders of various marginalized identities (POC, PWD, female, LGBTQIA+) perceive barriers to access for positions of leadership in the arts and culture sector.*

Phase II led to an examination of systemic inequities, calls for culture shifts within the sector, discussions on navigation of the sector as it exists today, resilience, and entrepreneurship. These threads shed light on leadership, innovation, resistance, and equity within the sector.

Methods & Recruitment

Phase II employed community-based participatory action research and a transdisciplinary methodological approach²⁴. The research produced qualitative findings through focus groups, key informant interviews, and a youth participatory action research (YPAR) process.

Moves Towards Equity: Perspectives from Arts Leaders of Color focuses on findings from the focus groups and key informant interviews²⁵ which took place in the summer of 2018, with 28 arts leaders representing 26 unique organizations and institutions spanning universities, small non-profits, large non-profits, funders, sole proprietors, and museums. There were five in person focus groups, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Key informant interviews were conducted virtually and lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Given the focus of Phase II centering perspectives of arts leaders of color, ACI recruited within the Network for Arts Administrators of Color (NAAC), an affinity group based out of ArtsBoston and established in 2016. NAAC Boston welcomes self-identifying arts administrators of color such as Asian American, African American, Native American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Latin American, or multiracial individuals. The Network is open to individuals working in a full-time or part-time capacity at a non-profit or for-profit arts and culture organization in Greater Boston, as well as freelancers and consultants.²⁶

NAAC's membership list is publicly available on their website, including name, affiliation, and email contact information. As of July 2019, they have more than 300 members listed. Three of the four researchers who worked on Phase II are also NAAC Boston members.

In the summer of 2018 ACI's research team sent out a recruitment email to 60 individuals listed on NAAC Boston's website, ensuring representation along the lines of gender, career level, and positions within the sector, with a goal of speaking with 25 arts leaders. The focus groups did not have paid advertisement, but participants were incentivized with a meal, either lunch or dinner.

The research team coded the qualitative data after transcription using NVivo software, employing splitting methodology and emic coding with multiple researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability. This study was supported by the University of Massachusetts Boston Dissertation Development Grant, the Boston Pride Foundation, Shinnyo-en Foundation, Boston Cultural Council, and Foley Hoag Foundation.

UNHEARD (NOT UNTOLD) STORIES

“Artists of color have struggled and continue to struggle to find the resources to do the work that they want to do, in the voice that they want to do it. [...] They are asked to scale back their production; they’re asked to fit into a narrative that is comfortable for the dominant culture so as not to offend the audience. [...] We need to hear those stories and those full voices and our infrastructure, our ecosystem in the arts world is not prepared to hear the truth of these experiences.”

In this section we present some of the experiences that arts leaders of color shared with us during the study. These experiences are common stories that are often told. However, they often remain unheard and unaddressed. These narratives include conversations on power, representation, capital, and pipelines within the arts and culture sector.

Power

“A white, Western canon is usually what people think of first when they hear the term [arts].”

“The dominant narrative of the Euro-white experience, literally dominates our center.”

“Who essentially has the power to decide what they want to do is mostly white people.”

In the United States we have inherited a socio-political reality that has positioned the dominant race as white, leading to the reproduction of racial inequities within our arts and culture

sector. In this way, white privilege is reproduced due to implicit biases and assumed superiority. Additionally, artists and arts leaders of color are often measured against a white, Eurocentric standard that they inherently cannot meet without concealing, hiding, or denying their identities as people of color. This builds a society which perpetuates racial dominance and subservience through assimilation into current power structures. The reality of white supremacy is felt by people of color both on an individual basis through their lived experiences, and on a structural and institutional level. For example, one arts leader shared:

“I run this organization with a very tall white man. When we walk into the room, people can’t imagine that I [a man of color] am the Executive Director. And they, in fact, can’t look at me when they talk to us. They actually only look at my colleague.”

In particular, the arts leaders of color we spoke to referred most frequently to these experiences in relation to representation, capital, and pipelines.

Representation

“Who’s at the table? Who’s making the decisions? Who’s writing the rules and policy? What does that say for who’s being represented? All of those things combined decide whose story gets told and how it gets told.”

When asked if there is an adequate racial representation in the arts landscape, participants responded that the arts and culture sector consists predominantly of white people, with an underrepresentation of people of color across the board. This includes small percentages of people of color in staff, board of directors, audiences, populations served by the organizations, and artists participating in and presenting artwork.

Additionally, visual art collections and performance productions including dance and theater predominantly present a white or Eurocentric narrative through their work.

One arts leader noted that they manage a collection of artworks for their organization. However, the artworks are predominantly by white artists, reproducing the Eurocentric narrative of the arts and culture sector. Another person noted that this underrepresentation leads to assumptions about audiences for events:

“If you have a majority Black group, it would be framed as ‘this is a Black event’...but if it’s all white and a couple of people of color, it doesn’t have to be noted as any form of ethnicity or racial group.”

As another person noted,

“White folks can represent everyone, but people of color only represent themselves.”

The limited representation of people of color within arts and culture organizations becomes an even larger issue as we examine leadership positions, including executive leadership and governing boards. Given that people of color are not occupying decision making positions within organizations at this higher level of leadership, their voice as a collective is not given adequate weight.

“If you don’t feel welcome in an arts space, you probably won’t go. If you feel like an outsider, why would you go if you don’t see yourself represented in any way? If you don’t have a personal connection, then why would you attend? Or, if you even see yourself represented in a harmful way or a stereotypical way, then why would you attend?”

Within the representation of people of color that does exist in the arts, the aforementioned representation is often problematic. Most commonly, the arts leaders gave examples of representation that are tokenizing, othering, and play into racial tropes and stereotypes. Tokenism is akin to window-dressing, a symbolic effort towards diversity that pretends to give advantage to those who have been historically marginalized. Othering establishes an individual or group identity as inherently different by juxtaposing said individual or group against the dominant group. People of color are also made to play into racial tropes and stereotypes.

“If they do include people of color, it’s always like an afterthought. Like, ‘Let’s do a day-of and invite everyone to come and we can check off our quota.’”

“I think that for artists of color, people want them to perform their identity in the content of their work, and in some ways, they’re kind of required by the larger culture to express their particular viewpoint or their own identity—particularly when it comes to racial identity.”

Capital

When it came to capital, two forms were discussed at depth: financial and social capital.

Funding priorities in Boston are dictated by its patronage and donors. Funding is therefore contingent on knowing how to navigate the landscape, requiring both social and financial capital—including knowing funders, having social networks to gain access to individual donors, and grant writing skills.

The arts are also known for having market rate salaries that are well below other industries, a product of funding investment, along with valuation of the arts and labor within the arts and culture field itself. This underfunding and

devaluation of labor directly impacts the compensation that arts leaders receive for the work that they do. Participants noted poor compensation and lack of benefits as a detriment to entering or staying in the arts and culture sector, and many shared that they either thought about leaving, were planning on leaving, or had never planned on entering the sector for these reasons.

“You can’t afford to take the twenty-thousand-dollar-a-year job and live on that, with two master’s degrees. And then telling me that I didn’t deserve more. I didn’t deserve more time. I didn’t deserve benefits. You don’t see yourself at your place of business anymore. [You’re being told that] there’s no future for you.”

Issues of compensation are compounded by increased stress due to lack of capacity of arts and culture organizations. Often, staff are required to do the work of multiple positions because of funding capacity and the work that must get done to keep an organization sustained.

Simply put, the field cannot redistribute what is not there. Our foundations and government need to put more capital support behind the arts and towards general operating funds of arts and cultural organizations so that the sector is not as dependent on individual donors. Further, labor in the arts needs to be valued and compensated fairly in order to uphold values of inclusion, diversity, and equity.

Funding was also discussed as an inherent inequity surrounding motherhood. Many female-identifying participants discussed the impact of trying to raise a family on their salary, pointing to the reality that one has to have a partner, or independent and inherited wealth, in order to both have a family and stay within the field. This indicates that the salaries offered in the arts and culture sector are not sustainable for single parent households.

One person noted that in order to create their

organization, they had to give up their dream of having children, sharing:

“I remember crying about not having children because I gave everything to the theater.”

Another person noted that they were fired from their job after getting pregnant, a life altering event that transformed their arts and culture career, encouraging them to become more entrepreneurial.

“I was working in a school, and after three years of building a nationally recognized program, and me being quoted around everywhere... the moment I got pregnant, everything changed... There was a racial component. And as a woman of color, I also got the double whammy. And I didn’t have that job anymore. That shifted a lot of things for me. That’s when I said, well I have to just build my own thing because it’s not like anybody’s going to be looking out for me. My mother today says that was actually a blessing because that’s when I started to become much more entrepreneurial.”

For this individual, the current structure of the sector required her to become creative in the ways she supports her career. Because of systemic barriers that did not support her as a woman of color, she sought other ways of gaining capital within the sector.

Ultimately, when talking about financial capital and social capital, both forms become interconnected access points to leadership. Access to financial capital requires social capital and vice versa. The people with financial capital have decision making power as they ultimately say what and whom gets funded. If one does not have the social capital to access said people with

financial capital, their chances of getting funded becomes significantly reduced. High levels of leadership within arts and culture organizations almost always demand strong fundraising and management skills. Accordingly, access to social and financial capital play an important role in accessing leadership and the power to influence the sector.

“It’s not just giving more resources to the larger institutions to do work that is culturally specific or culturally relevant, but in lifting the boats of all the institutions—of those that aren’t fully resourced and have struggled for many years to find the resources to capitalize on their own narrative and tell their stories in the way that they want them to be told.”

Pipelines

Pipelines embody the idea that there are multiple access points into the arts (i.e. family, education, social capital, financial capital, early exposure, etc.), leading to a more formal leadership pipeline where one is first a participant within the arts, then a patron, then an activator (art maker), then an educator, or a manager, eventually becoming a thought leader.

It should be noted that one does not always have to move all the way through the pipeline into the position of thought leader. One can have a very meaningful relationship with the arts through being a participant or patron, and it may not be a goal to become a thought leader or influencer. Further, you can occupy many positions at the same time, such as being a patron, artist, and thought leader.

The arts leaders we spoke with are in a place where their careers are within the arts and culture sector and they are activators (artists), managers, and thought leaders, or they are on the trajectory to assume said leadership positions and roles. For many arts leaders of color, the system of pipelines that are currently in place are

inadequate in supporting their successful pathways towards leadership. Pipeline issues become apparent when we recount individuals’ experiences getting pushed up against power structures which prevent them from accessing higher leadership positions.

Education

Participants advocated for the importance of education and the investment in youth as early access points in the pipeline. When discussing their own paths into the arts and culture sector, arts leaders noted the importance of access to the arts during their childhood, i.e. exposure to the arts from a young age. This is tied to education and access to arts-based education during formative years. If high quality and relevant art education cannot be accessed either in school or through community programs, young people are unlikely to conceive of a future in the arts. When it comes to pursuing higher education degrees in the arts, tuition is costly. Yet degrees factor into job application requirements. Many arts leaders discussed how their educational contacts during their undergraduate and graduate studies were instrumental in navigating to, and landing, their first positions within the field.

“Having the opportunity and privilege of having a really great education has enabled me to feel that I could choose art as a career and specifically theater... getting involved in other school programs, going to a really good undergrad business school and then thinking, I can try going to grad school for theater education and I firmly believe that arts education and young people—arts is one of the best venues for young people to express themselves, find voice, find opportunity...everything we all believe in.”

Importantly, multiple arts leaders noted that educational credentialing is often not enough to

access higher level positions in the arts sector. Due to implicit bias that leads people to assume someone's capability, even with master's degrees, the credentials of arts leaders of color are not properly valued and given weight. Supplementary to formal education, arts leaders discussed the role of nonprofits and community programming in supporting early exposure, as well as the importance of scholarships and fellowships to pursue a career in the field itself.

“I’m a pretty unique case, both a high school and college drop out. Growing up being a participant in the nonprofit sector helped boost my confidence and self-learning. As an adult, I wouldn’t have been able to become a manager without other supports. But even being a person of color with no super academic background, it was challenging because I had to convince myself to do it, and implement it, and then even growing up with an organization, I had to prove that I wasn’t just grandfathered into a management position, but I actually deserved it and can do the work to withstand it.”

There were multiple discussions with arts leaders of color on the need for ongoing training and support in higher level leadership positions. This includes support in building networks, recognizing that social capital often leads to financial capital, which is a core component of holding and sustaining higher leadership level positions.

Mentorship

Arts leaders of color called for more mentorship, from and by other arts leaders of color, as well as by leaders who hold multiple positions and identities in the field. Participants indicated that said mentorship would support them in seeing themselves in those leadership positions

while supporting their learning in a nurturing environment.

“[It's] thanks to other leaders who inspire me and have mentored me and helped me make choices, and sort of helped back me up including people within my organization and outside the organization. It's taken 13 years of experience and encouragement and being given opportunities and asking for opportunities. As a woman of color, I feel like we're not taught to claim our leadership qualities.”

Tied to mentorship, family came up as another important theme for initial access to the arts and culture field. Discussions took place on the importance of care providers (parents, aunts, grandmothers, and other chosen family members) supporting early and frequent exposure to various art forms and cultural opportunities. This often included narratives around family encouraging young artists to create and to practice their craft, even if the family itself did not hold an “artistic practice” within the home.

“I grew up in a family that supported and believed in me and challenged me to follow my passions. And there, early on, I established a love for classical music. And my family nurtured that instinct, despite the fact that I was a young Black boy growing up in the South, and that was not supposed to be my trajectory. People did not see me in that way. But it was encouraged, and I fell in love with it. And through the arts, I was actually exposed to experiences that my other Black male colleagues didn't have because I met people who had different experiences than I did.”

CALL for **CULTURE** **SHIFT**

Arts leaders of color are calling for a culture shift, moving past cosmetic changes to the existing structures and systems.

Open Conversations

“Until we can actually directly address the issues that we’re dealing with and name race and name the supremacy, and name all the things—we’re never gonna get there. Because our inability to talk about it actually reinforces the narrative that we’re trying to dismantle.”

Arts leaders are calling for open conversations. Organizations need to be safe spaces where people are listened to, and where people can speak up without fear of verbal, relational or financial loss, or isolation. The ability to bring one’s whole self to the workplace, without **code-switching** or enduring **microaggressions**, was not the norm for the arts leaders that we spoke to.

In linguistics, code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages or language varieties in the context of a single conversation. Multilinguals, speakers of more than one language, sometimes use elements of multiple languages when conversing with each other. In the context of culture, language refers not only to words, but also to cultural behaviors and structures. Code-switching therefore has extended to and also encompass the idea of changing one’s actions or ways of being to accommodate a dominant culture.

“[In my organization] we talk about the importance of not code switching at work and bringing your whole authentic self into wherever you are. And that is a culture shift. I can see that certainly in the demographics in our staffing, and what that’s doing. And people are not

just coming in and they have a voice at the table and setting policies and I’m like, ‘yes. Let’s do it.’”

In many cases, code-switching is done for self-preservation and to avoid misunderstandings, microaggressions, and discrimination. This often leads to assimilation. Open conversations can support arts leaders of color in sharing this emotional labor with their colleagues, such that entire organizations take responsibility for understanding multi-cultural teams and environments rather than enforcing assimilation into dominant cultures.

Microaggressions are a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority. Microaggressions are experienced more often than not by arts leaders of color and accumulate over time. This creates emotional labor and work, putting the onus on said leaders to address the aggressions or to make the active choice not to.

There is a price for both internalizing the oppression of microaggressions, choosing not to speak out against them, as well as making the choice to address them. The latter often involves having to educate others, predominantly white colleagues, about how the microaggressions are toxic and how they impact people of color. This is where the call for equity training at every level of the organization comes in.

Equity Training

Participants noted that often educators or staff in programming positions are asked to go to equity trainings. Arts leaders of color alternatively spoke of the need for leaders at all levels of an organization, particularly thought leaders and board members, to be integral in said training. Further, many noted the importance of ongoing training, recognizing that these trainings are not “one and done” events.

“It's not, 'Now we don't have to think about it anymore because we did it and we put it in a nice box and wrapped it in a bow and we're done.' It's equity as a constant process of self-examination.”

Equity training is critical in moving towards open conversations and shifting cultures of organizations to allow arts leaders of color to bring their full, authentic selves to their workspaces. Similarly, it is important that the staff and leadership of organizations reflect the communities they are partnering with. Any brochures, websites and the content of programming should send a consistent message that local and marginalized communities matter. Their voices must be present in making the decisions that impact them.

Shifting Power

“Issues of racism and inequality hovers around us like the sun. We feel the warmth of it. We feel the heat. But we don't actually look it in the eye. We do a lot of window dressing to make ourselves feel good about the issues, but we're not actually fundamentally shifting power. We're not fundamentally shifting ownership.”

Often the process of diversification means that a shifting of power must occur. Participants noted that many times white influencers do not leave their positions unless they retire or accept an attractive offer elsewhere. This leaves little room for a newer generation of artists and arts leaders to actualize their skillsets, and many powerful leaders of color leave the sector or change organizations when it is clear that there is no hope for the advancement and development of their careers. Participants noted that while this shift can be difficult, they challenge white arts and culture influencers to be willing to shift.

“Change is change. And it's not enough to simply help people of color succeed. You have to be willing to have your organization be transformed by those people of color.”

Participants challenged influencers to hire candidates of color who might need a bit more training, recognizing that for such candidates, lack of social and/or fiscal capital can be connected to generations of systemic inequity. The work of diversity and shifting power must be intentional.

“Unless that person is willing to say, 'Okay, I recognize... it's time for me, and I recognize this pattern of passing on power that is happening...I need to either step aside or work very hard to train and recognize talent from people who don't look like me.’”

“A lot of white culture is saying, 'Well, I'm just looking for someone else to know what to do,' but not realizing their own power and job privilege to be able to use it for good.”

This also refers to prior conversations on pipelines in connection to the importance of education and mentorship. Additionally, in shifting power, organizations and funders alike must be willing to fund a shift toward equity by allocating dollars toward strategic planning, board development and diversification, equitable hiring campaigns, leadership training, equity training, and other critical work.

Arts leaders of color noted that the arts and culture sector must recognize that people of color are not just the people 'we serve'. Many people of color have money, access and other resources, and can be recruited for competitive and diverse

boards. The sector must address these implicit biases, changing the ways in which it interacts with various individuals and communities of color.

Arts leaders further spoke to the exhaustion felt by having to constantly prove that the work they do is valuable, and that the arts have value in society. In the end, participants want conversations that lead to action, and action that leads to change.

“ I feel like a lot of the work that I do is based around trying to prove something. Which then makes me feel really tired because I’m always, consistently trying to prove that the work is valuable. Trying to prove that the art is there. Trying to prove that the kids are worth it. That the project is worth it. That I am worth it.”

RESILIENCE & RESISTANCE

Creative Innovation as Resistance

“I’m concerned about the current script that positions our entire existence in [opposition] to Eurocentric colonizers’ existence. We know who we are. We know our dance. We know our artists. We know our poets. We know our writers. And what we need is the resources to grow and build the capacity and the scale of the work. So I sit here as a maker, an entrepreneur, and an administrator.”

The arts leaders of color we spoke to were quick to note that the language used to talk about diversity, inclusion, and equity is often deficit based. One of our participants questioned—and rightly so—the framing of our questions, that identified a “cultural equity gap” and “lack of representation” of arts leaders of color. In fact, there are a multitude of arts leaders of color who are doing important work.

Even in the face of all the challenges that emerge in navigating a white and Eurocentric arts landscape, arts leaders of color demonstrated their resilience as creative innovators and entrepreneurs. These leaders are resisting current structures that do not allow them to actualize their full visions. They resist these oppressive structures by creating their own art communities on their own terms. In this report, this is how we define creative innovation and entrepreneurship as resistance.

“Being a member of the grassroots arts community, I find that there are a lot of really mission-driven entrepreneurial thinkers, creators of color who are loud and proud and vocal about it. So I’m hoping that heat will rise to those decision makers at the top.”

Resistance comes in many forms, including the physical spaces that the arts leaders choose to occupy, the networks that they intentionally engage, and the new organizations and/or collectives they build from the ground up. One of the participants explained her decision to change her performance venue to a low income, historically marginalized neighborhood. Initially, this decision was questioned by those around her, asking if this change would draw a large enough crowd. However, she noted that she was met with success, drawing a full audience.

Finally, a significant portion of the arts leaders of color we talked to expressed that they started their own organizations, collectives, and projects to find a sense of authenticity for themselves within the arts and culture sector. These initiatives included programs both within and outside existing structures, spanning entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial endeavors.

Supporting the Alternatives

At present, the structures within the arts and culture landscape are not set up to support arts leaders of color with profound, radical, creative ideas that call for an equitable arts landscape. Shifting the ethos of capital distribution is essential in working towards equity and supporting the artists who are calling for and actualizing said change. We need to recognize the agency they have, having them define what success means. Fundamentally, this requires that the sector allows people of color to assume power and ownership over their own narratives and voices.

“I’m an artist and I believe in my work on my own terms and I don’t need an institution to help me make my art. But if I could work with an institution to do that, it could accelerate my growth, it could help me become a better artist, it could help me get my work out there. But, again, only on my terms.”

NEXT STEPS & CALL TO ACTION

An Invitation

Inequity and injustice have been present since the inception of the United States. It has led to generations of marginalization and oppression based on, but not limited to, race, disability, gender, sexual orientation and class. The resulting gap in equity can be seen in funding, hiring practices, programming, and many other areas of the arts and culture sector.

It is of the utmost importance that unjust systems and practices be disrupted and dismantled, and it takes everyone to do so. Our lives are interconnected; our liberation and bondage are tied together. When one suffers, we all suffer. When voices are no longer silenced and multiple perspectives actively participate at the decision-making tables, entire societies benefit as a result.

As people whose destinies are intertwined, justice is not the work of the marginalized and oppressed of a given society. It is also the work of allies and those who seek to understand and offer support from a place of humility, integrity, and authenticity.

We are always learning and must create room for our thoughts to shift.

The invitation this study offers is to leverage the power and privilege we all have; be it education, class, race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or otherwise, to build and sustain equity. The leaders of color who participated in this study share many entry points for this critical partnership.

We invite power holders and influencers in the arts and culture sector to consider the ways in which they might leverage their privilege to expand ideas of leadership, and to make space for, and honor, all voices at the table.

Creative Justice

Justice is about acknowledging debts and paying dues. -Mark Banks

In *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*, Mark Banks presents the four building blocks of creative justice as: 1) parity of participation, 2) diversity, 3) objective respect, and 4) reduction of harms. Parity of participation necessitates equal access to participate in and evaluate cultural products. Diversity points to the importance of having multiple perspectives and artforms as a result of equal access to participation. Objective respect is the valuing of cultural objects as they are, acknowledging that culture shapes the way we perceive. Reduction of harms notes the importance of reducing negative physical and psychological impacts of cultural work, including stress, over working, bullying, intimidation, domination, aggression or violence²⁷.

In *The Role of Foundations in Achieving Creative Justice*, Antonio Cuyler further summarizes these concepts, defining creative justice as “the manifestation of all people living creative and expressive lives on their own terms.”²⁸

It will take the entire arts and culture sector’s coordinated efforts to actualize this vision of creative justice. It requires the field to move past preliminary engagements with justice to create and follow through on actual and clear steps for change.

Consider justice and equality as the idea that we are all fundamentally equal as human beings and deserving of equal opportunities to pursue education, artistic practice, and other goals towards fulfillment and self-actualization. While this idea is essential, creative justice and equity provide a fuller vision.

Consider pursuing creative justice and equity as actually creating and promoting the fair and just process for equal opportunity to happen, minimizing any disparity that arises from a history of systemic injustice. We can see, then, how justice and equality are initial rungs on a ladder leading toward equity, and not the sum total of the ladder itself.

Creative justice is important for the arts and culture sector to embrace if it hopes to move past recognition of a cultural equity gap into active practices of building equity.

Wherever you fall within the arts and culture sector and however you identify, there is work to do in building justice and equity.

Moving forward, let us all endeavor to listen, reflect, and act.

“

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself - a Black woman warrior poet doing my work - come to ask you, are you doing yours?”

-Audre Lorde²⁹

GIVING THANKS & AUTHORS

Giving Thanks

Many thanks are due to all of the arts leaders of color who participated in this study. Your generosity of time and knowledge, and your sharing of intimate narratives, experiences and stories, are held with great appreciation.

Deep rooted thanks are due to the research team for all of their efforts in making this possible, with recognition of contributions by Joseph Quisol (Programming & Artist Fellow 2017 - 2019, Arts Connect International), Dr. Jessica Fei (YPAR Consultant 2018 - 2019, Arts Connect International & Harvard University), and Stephen Hamilton (Artist Leader Alum 2015 - 2016, Youth Mentor 2018 - 2019, Arts Connect International & MassArt).

Further thanks go out to our advisors and mentors, including Dr. Valerie Karr (Advisor, UMass Boston), Dr. Benyamin Lichtenstein (Advisor, UMass Boston), Dr. Barbara Lewis (Advisor, UMass Boston), Dr. Mia Perry (Advisor, University of Glasgow), and Dr. Antonio Cuyler (Mentor, Florida State University).

Great thanks and recognition are due to the aesthetics curator and graphic designer of this report, Kimberly Curhan. This study was supported by the University of Massachusetts Boston Dissertation Development Grant, the Boston Pride Foundation, Shinnyo-en Foundation, Boston Cultural Council, and Foley Hoag Foundation.

Last but not least, thanks are due to ArtsBoston for developing the Network for Arts Administrators of Color (NAAC), which creates invaluable space for POC arts leaders to convene, in turn raising visibility of POC arts leaders across the sector.



Authors

Our research team acknowledges that no work is ever objective or neutral. We also acknowledge that there are many facets of identity that are not static, and that individuals and cultures impact how someone identifies. We share our bios with the aim of bringing light to how participants responded to us, and how we responded to and shared their stories as researchers, artists, and human beings.



Marian Taylor Brown (*she, her, hers*) is the Founder of Arts Connect International and the principal investigator of the Cultural Equity Gap study, both Phase I and II. Marian identifies as a cisgender, queer, white woman, and as part of the disability community. Raised in Rochester, NY, she attended local public schools where she was immersed in studio arts praxis, a space where educators met her learning disabilities with artistic inquiry and an asset-based lens. Since a young age Marian's life has been committed to building and supporting inclusive and equitable practices and communities both in and through the arts. This has led her career to sit at the intersection of art, disability rights, racial equity, public health, education equity, and leadership development. Her work has spanned local, national and international contexts. She earned her BA from Colorado College in Studio Art and Education, her EdM from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Arts in Education and is a PhD Candidate at the School for Global Inclusion & Social Development at the University of Massachusetts Boston.



Hanako Brais (*she, her, hers*) is the Research and Programming Assistant at Arts Connect International and has contributed to the research from the beginning. During Phase II she conducted and transcribed the focus groups and individual interviews and contributed to the analysis and writing of the report. Hanako identifies as a cisgender, straight, and able-bodied biracial Japanese-American. Born and raised in Lexington, MA, she attended Lexington High School where her passion for the visual and performing arts was nurtured by arts programs in school and out. Her questions about representation in the arts spaces that she occupied and her experiences as a woman of color led her to explore social justice in the arts. This gave rise to her dedication in listening to and elevating stories and voices that are marginalized. She received a BA in Anthropology and French from Connecticut College with a certificate in Public Policy and Community Action and is currently pursuing an MA in Global Inclusion and Social Development at the University of Massachusetts Boston.



Allegra Fletcher (*she, her, hers*) is the Director of Arts Connect International. She joined the research team as a data analyst and contributed to the writing of this report. Allegra grew up in Dorchester, MA in a single parent low-income household and identifies as a cisgender, straight, Afro-Caribbean Latinx woman. Allegra went to Boston Public Schools, where she tested into Boston Latin School, leading her to start many arts-based initiatives. She also played her first shows and grew her songwriting skills through participating in Boston's open mic scene, where she found leaders of color who gave her a platform and encouraged her in her artistic journey. Allegra received her BA in Italian and Education from Bryn Mawr College and later completed her EdM in Arts in Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Allegra is an educator, singer-songwriter, poet and crafter. She is passionate about stories and uses any platform she has to bring light to voices that have been kept in the dark—including her own.

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- ¹⁹ For the purposes of Phase I of the CEG study, influencers were defined as leaders in the arts world who hold institutional decision-making power. This includes arts managers, educators, funders, board members, individual artists, universities, small non-profits, large non-profits, museums, foundations, for-profit companies and government. Further, when referring to the arts landscape, this includes all the spaces and seats which said influencers occupy, taking a field level perspective examining the arts and culture sector.
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