

RESETTING THE BREAK:
LESSONS ON HEALING AND COMMUNITY
FROM THE DISABILITY JUSTICE MOVEMENT

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Preface

Before reading, it is important to understand a few concepts that shape this writing. I have written this with several readers in mind, from performing arts administrators to disability justice activists to readers unfamiliar with either topic. Whether you are approaching this paper with prior knowledge of the subject matter or are learning about these topics for the first time, the framework set forth below will help contextualize the Disability Justice Movement, my argument, and my position within the conversation.

First, this paper uses identity-first language. The debate over person-first language (e.g., people with disabilities) versus identity-first language (e.g., disabled person) is contested within and outside the disabled community. I believe this approach normalizes language that both honors the experiences of these communities and subverts the concept of disability as an afterthought or an inherently negative experience that disabled people should seek to not be defined by (Ferregon; Liebowitz).

Second, *disabled* and *disability* is used to refer to people with physical disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, chronic illnesses, mental illnesses, those who are part of the d/Deaf community, those who are neurodivergent, and those in chronic pain. While language is always in flux, currently these identifiers are prevalent and affirmative terms used within the disability justice community to describe a wide variety of experiences. It should be noted, however, that self-identification varies, and everyone has a right to self-identify as they choose.

Third, the term *liberation* is used throughout this paper to describe efforts to effect real and lasting change to systems that oppress all of us. The term *liberated*

spaces refers to communities doing that work. If safe spaces are rooted in suppressing uncomfortable situations, liberated spaces are “grounded in community and love. A space we are free to be human along with one another...a liberated space is a space in which everyone works as a team to repair that which has been broken” (Urbach).

Though liberation is often conceptualized as describing macro-level system changes like government policy, it is also important to conceptualize all community spaces within this framework: how do we change our systems such that anyone can safely and sustainably lead, participate, or both? Working toward liberation allows each of us to show up as our authentic selves, holding each other accountable and protecting each sacred being.

Finally, you will find that throughout this paper, I use first-person language rather than the traditional third-person language customary in formal writing. I made this choice deliberately. The topic I am addressing demands that we come as we are and invite others to do the same. It requires a step-away from strict, formal, academic writing in order for each of us to approach the topic authentically, openly, and through a lens of pushing against the status quo. By doing so, we make room for our unique individual voices and our collective liberation. Just as I cannot come to a space authentically without acknowledging my unique experience as a queer, chronically ill, Puerto Rican woman, neither can you approach the work of community building, healing justice, community care, and liberation without acknowledging all parts of your own experience. In the words of Cara Liebowitz, “my disability is just another thread in the tapestry of my life. Pull it and the whole thing might unravel. Pull it and you might get an ugly hole where something beautiful once was.”

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Introduction

Performing arts organizations have sought to create inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community to ensure long-term organizational health. Organizations pursuing meaningful community hope to be safe and inclusive spaces where all feel welcome to participate in the arts, but historically, most performing art organizations have failed to create this atmosphere for their entire community. Spaces have been inaccessible in historic theatres; Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) actors have been excluded from most roles; arts workers have been overworked; and decision-makers have primarily been white, cisgender, able-bodied men (Onuoha).

Movement toward greater community building has often been enacted largely for its symbolic merit rather than as a path to develop meaningful connections with traditionally excluded groups. Organizations speak about having more diversity at the table while doing very little to make the table a space that is safe and accessible for all. Rather than looking at community building as pulling up an extra chair to a table, we must instead envision community building as resetting a broken bone. Currently, performing arts organizations are trying to put weight on the fractured bone: creating policies and procedures to build more inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community where all feel welcome, valued, and heard while neglecting the prior harm caused. The performing arts world has broken its leg again and again and done very little to promote

long-term healing. It is only through the work of healing, care, and undoing that performing arts organizations can address past injuries, minimize pain, limit future injury, and realign and reinforce our collective community; we must reset the break.

The performing arts community, however, is not alone in its endeavor for inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community.

Arts Organizations and Community Building

Arts organizations have long sought to create community. Whether to diversify audiences; cultivate community buy-in for funding, attendance, and volunteers; or to foster relationships with new creative thinkers to help them navigate and meet the challenges of the moment, community building is central to both workforce and audience development for arts organizations.

Organizations have struggled to create the inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful communities because of chronic issues like lack of representation in leadership, high-stress and low-support work environments, and failing to follow through with expressed initiatives. Arts administrators and participants alike have suffered from this lack of meaningful community building as it has historically excluded disabled and BIPOC communities, among others. Despite this shortcoming, many performing arts organizations have enjoyed the reputation of being inclusive, community-oriented spaces. Organizations have created community in ways that have intentionally or unintentionally acted as exclusionary and unsustainable spaces where, for many, the sense of community is hollow and lacking meaning.

There is ample evidence for arts organizations serving as exclusionary institutions, especially viewed through data on staff diversity and lack of representation

in leadership. Antonio Cuyler, professor and Director of the arts administration program at Florida State University, conducted an exploratory study on the diversity of demographics in the arts management workforce. Cuyler concluded that arts managers did not reflect the increasing diversity of the nation, specifically diversity by race, ethnicity, and disability (Cuyler). Furthermore, a report from the National Endowment for the Arts found similar results when analyzing arts participators (*US Patterns* 23). Lack of representation exists at every level for the performing arts. The now viral “We See You, White American Theatre” statement is a stark call to action around longstanding shortcomings of the art world when it comes to inclusivity, justice, and meaningful community, particularly when it comes to race. The open letter from multidisciplinary theatre-makers speaks with one voice and no leader or spokesperson. It is the beginning of a movement in the theatre world that pushes us toward justice and reimagines what is possible: liberation. The statement reads, “we see you. We have always seen you. We have watched you pretend not to see us” (“We See You”).

Inclusivity is far from the only shortcoming when it comes to community building in the performing arts world. Arts administrators have also struggled to create sustainable community through their business and staffing practices. Performing arts administrators face many of the same stresses experienced by the general population during the pandemic and civil unrest of the recent past, but they are reporting more frequent mental health impacts than the general public. Of the current performing arts workforce, 33% are somewhat or very likely to leave the field in the next five years, a grave warning sign for the industry’s sustainability (McGraw and Friedman). With shrinking budgets and increased workloads, performing arts workers are being pushed

to the brink within an ecosystem of overwork, lack of boundaries, and a lack of emphasis on community care.

Lack of meaningful community building plagues the arts community. Throughout the *We See You, White American Theatre's* accountability report are statements from theatres claiming they are listening and learning, planning implementation of suggestions from the movement, and expressing gratitude to the community for bringing these issues to their attention. Unfortunately, many theatres have yet to implement any of the proposed liberation-minded policies beyond a public statement of support ("We See You").

Inclusion, sustainability, and thoughtfulness in community building are essential to the success of the field. Communities are looking for arts organizations to be leaders in these areas, and current events have primed the sector for a reimagination that makes inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community possible, if performing arts organizations listen to their communities and rise to meet the moment. Rather than listening to their communities, many institutions rely almost exclusively on analyses of current resources to determine future decisions. The problem with using this model alone is that institutions can focus too much on past failures and successes and resource scarcity while neglecting creative thinking and problem solving (Thibodeau). Performing arts organizations can improve their sustainability and re-emerge as centers of public well-being, community, and positive experience. The Disability Justice Movement offers a path to do it.

The Disability Justice Movement

The Disability Justice Movement, not to be confused with the fight for disability rights, offers us, disabled or nondisabled, lessons in healing and community. The movement picks up where disability rights left off by propelling us to deeper and more nuanced conversations around community, healing, access, and what our collective imagination can create when we honor each person's unique contributions and needs.

The history of the Disability Justice Movement, rooted in community and solidarity, serves as a foundation for its ability to guide performing arts organizations in their pursuit of inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community. The Disability Justice Movement started as a conversation about a second wave of the disability rights movement between Patty Berne and Mia Mingus, two queer disabled people of color. Both Berne and Mingus saw that the disability rights movement left liberation unfulfilled. The movement of the 1960s was single-issue based, centered white leadership, ignored other intersecting forms of oppression, focused on mobility impairments, and primarily promoted strategies to achieve rights through litigation and a rights-based framework (*Sins Invalid*). While the disability rights movement was a vital step forward, it left behind many disabled people and rendered others invisible, including BIPOC disabled people, disabled immigrants, people with invisible disabilities, and LGBTQ+ disabled people, to name a few. Seeing this limitation, Berne and Mingus fought for a second wave of disability rights: disability justice.

Disability justice recognizes that all bodies are unique and essential; all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met; all people are powerful because of the complexities of our bodies, not despite them; and all bodies are confined by ability, race,

gender, sexuality, class, nation state, religion, and more, and we cannot separate them (“What is Disability Justice?”). Additionally, disability justice centers 10 principles: 1. intersectionality, 2. leadership of those most impacted, 3. anti-capitalist politic, 4. commitment to cross-movement organizing, 5. recognizing wholeness, 6. sustainability, 7. commitment to cross-disability solidarity, 8. interdependence, 9. collective access, and 10. collective liberation (“10 Principles”).

With those principles in mind, the Disability Justice Movement uses tools like healing justice and community care, also known as collective care, to work toward liberation.

Healing Justice and Community Care

Simply put, healing justice is how we respond to trauma and violence with collective practices for healing that are transformative for individuals and communities and community care is any care provided by a single individual or group to benefit other people in their community (“Healing Justice”; Dockray). The Disability Justice Movement has been successful in community building through healing justice, community care, and constant evolution to meet individual and collective communities’ needs. These characteristics should serve as a model for performing arts organizations.

Healing justice and community care are intimately tied both to each other and to the Disability Justice Movement. Both are frameworks for how we care for one another, and many similarities exist between the two frameworks: focus on collectivism and sustainability, leadership from within communities, and desire to build liberated spaces. The unique experiences of disabled people, especially disabled BIPOC, and the tools they have developed for care are unmatched in their capacity to address community building toward liberation consistently and intentionally (“What is Disability Justice?”).

Healing justice is a framework first named by the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective that identifies how we can holistically respond to generational trauma and violence in order to bring collective practices that transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts, and minds. Healing Justice prioritizes the wellbeing of all community members. The work of healing justice can take the form of community healing circles, emotional literacy exercises, and traditional cultural practices in addition to other physical and mental wellbeing practices. Though there are commonalities among existing healing justice practices, there is no set template. Healing justice is an ever-evolving framework that shifts and expands with the needs of its community members (“What is Healing Justice”).

Applying healing justice practices for an organization requires a reimagination of community, structures, safety, conflict management, resource allocation, and leadership. One example of Kindred Southern Justice Collective’s healing justice work is the organization’s response to increasing anti-immigrant hate and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the mid-2000s and the protests thereafter. The organization established mobile teams to provide food and water to organizers and protestors and organized nurses, energy-based healers, social workers, and harm reduction counselors to de-escalate confrontations with counter protestors and police and to address the real-time violence and trauma people were experiencing. The organization later trained other organizers in healing practices like breathing and grounding techniques to multiply their healing work. Another example from the organization’s healing justice practice took place during Juneteenth celebrations to reflect on how Black American traditions, medicines, and foods helped build resiliency

during slavery and continue to be healing forces in the face of continued systemic oppression (Raffo 7-8).

Healing justice is intimately tied to the Disability Justice Movement. The frameworks rely on each other. In 2012, Allied Media Projects, an organization that cultivates media for liberation, held the Allied Media Conference, a convening of the organization's networks meant to celebrate, strategize, and skill-share. During the conference, several principles and guidelines were established, including centering the leadership and brilliance of the disabled and chronically ill communities and placing focus on interdependence and wholeness ("Healing Justice Principles"). Additionally, the Disability Justice Movement relies on healing justice as a framework for wellness while organizing and existing in community with one another (Berne).

Community care often goes hand in hand with healing justice and works from a model of solidarity, not charity—of showing up for each other in mutual aid and respect (Piepzna-Samarasinha 41).

The importance of prioritizing reciprocal care becomes even clearer when we understand that our stresses and traumas are a common plight and not individual pathologies. As human animals, we are living in environments that cause emotional and physiological incoherence. While we may not be able to eradicate the systems that imprison us immediately, we stand a far better chance if we don't get tricked into thinking our struggles or the solutions to them are individual. The more ways we find to act in honesty with each other, whether in sorrow or in excitement, the stronger and more

resilient we become—individually and collectively. (“Self as Other”
23)

Community care recognizes that we are together in our pain, and we should be together in creating and carrying out solutions. Care webs, organized networks of care in which each individual leverages their own privilege and resources to care for one another in various ways, are excellent examples of community care that show us the power of care when it comes to community building and liberation. In *Care Work*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha describes care webs as “ways to access care deeply in a way where we are in control, joyful, building community, loved, giving, and receiving, that doesn’t burn anyone out or abuse or underpay anyone in the process” (33). In the traditional sense, care webs within the disability community can look like formally organizing ride sharing, picking up groceries for a community member, or attending a doctor’s appointment with a community member in order to take notes. However, community care need not be organized as traditional care webs. Instead, community care can be as simple as getting to know your neighbors and learning small ways to support one another. For an organization, it can mean forgoing one part of a planned event to afford transportation stipends or allergen-free food options.

Arts and the Disability Justice Movement

The principles of healing justice and community care can be used in the nonprofit performing arts sector to create inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community. The Disability Justice Movement primarily focuses on justice and secondarily on methods of healing and embodiment, including art, while arts organizations are typically concerned primarily with art and secondarily, if at all, with issues of justice and liberation. Despite

their differences, the Disability Justice Movement and arts organizations both value art as central to healthy communities and both are looked to as leaders in empathy, community, safety, and inclusion (*Culture + Community*). Because of this, principles of healing justice and community care can be applied to the performing arts world to build the community it seeks.

It is important to acknowledge that this work requires capacity, time, expertise, and money, resources that are certainly in short supply in the performing arts sector; however, the application of these principles can build both community and capacity. In her article “From Self Care to Collective Caring,” Leah Harris writes, “in America, illness and wellness are almost always depoliticized and decontextualized.” The same is true of the figurative illness and wellness of arts organizations and the following principles can help to contextualize the health of arts organizations as it pertains to building community and liberated spaces.

Lessons from Healing Justice and Community Care

The following eight lessons offered from the Disability Justice Movement through healing justice and community care are valuable tools for creating liberated spaces. Performing arts administrators can look to these lessons to form more inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community. By applying these lessons, performing arts organizations can start to reset the break such that their communities create ample space for healing and care.

Lesson 1: Come as You Are

Healing Justice offers its participants unique and meaningful ways to connect and heal within community. Aurora Levins Morales, author of *Kindling: Writings on the*

Body and early framer and adopter of the Disability Justice Movement, writes in her book: “Come with your triggers, your losses, your scars. When something you hear, something you see, makes your wounds ache and throb, it’s only memory rising, a piece of our history. Bring it into the circle. We will hold it together” (Levins Morales 165). Levins Morales captures the first lesson of healing justice: come as you are and make space for others to do the same. This framework recognizes, values, and seeks to understand the unique set of skills, dreams, traumas, fears, systemic oppressive forces, and other experiences community members hold when they walk into a room and how that room might be a force for liberation or a force for oppression.

We Love Like Barnacles: Crip Lives in Climate Chaos, a virtual performance held in October 2020 by Sins Invalid, featured performers of varying disabilities, races, ethnicities, genders, and art practices. One performer named Lateef McLeod told the story of what it would be like to navigate and survive a climate crisis as a disabled person who uses adaptive equipment. McLeod starts the performance in his wheelchair and eventually is removed from his wheelchair by a fellow performer, his face distraught while he pleads for the audience to listen now before it is too late. McLeod and each of the other performers infused their own perspective and experiences into their individual performances, allowing for the creation of a liberated space not just for the performers but for the attendees as well. Without the performers’ ability to come as they are, each individual’s stories and perspective would be lost, people would be excluded, and the collective imagination toward what is possible would be lost.

Following the performance, organizational leaders and performers held a virtual question-and-answer session with the audience. One commenter asked the panel what

made Sins Invalid and this performance so special, and why had so many people involved with the organization stayed involved since its inception in 2006. Antoine Hunter, long-time Sins Invalid performer and founder and artistic director of Urban Jazz Dance Company and Bay Area International Deaf Dance Festival, responded, “Sins was the first place I felt like I could bring all of the pieces of myself, and I didn’t have to leave any pieces at the door” (qtd. in Berne et al.).

Performing arts organizations can take the example of Sins Invalid by implementing a number of policies that enable performers, administrators, and attendees alike to come as they are. These policies include: removing dress codes that needlessly restrict self-expression and changing policies on professional norms that encourage code-switching: “adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities” (McCluney et al.). More generally, to build a more inclusive community, organizations can move away from damaging frameworks of accommodation and exception and toward a framework of valuing and celebrating each new and existing community member’s unique perspective and contributions.

Lesson 2: Healing and Care as Collective Responsibility and Community Privilege

Healing justice and community care remind us that healing and care are collective responsibilities and a community privilege, not just an individual act. Depictions of healing in American media often appear as a sick person lying in bed alone, a victim writing a perpetrator a letter and then burning it, or an overworked employee going home to take a bath alone.

If we let ourselves be caught up in the discussion of self-care, we are missing the whole point of healing justice work... Too often self-care in our organizational cultures gets translated to our individual responsibility to leave work early, go home alone and go take a bath, go to the gym, eat some food and go to sleep. So we do all of that “self-care” to return to organizational cultures where we reproduce the systems we are trying to break. (Padmasee)

Conversations centering burnout often result in a call for workers and community members to practice self-care, only for the culture of overwork and burnout to persist. Not only is the hyper focus on self-care detrimental to community healing and long-term systemic change, but it also serves as an impediment to connection and intimacy between community members, which leads to more shallow and unsustainable community. Community healing practices not only aid in addressing a culture of overwork, they can also be used to begin the work of mending relationships between performing arts organizations and their communities as a whole. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, author of *Care Work*, describes the long-held traditions of community healing as age-old practice. Inviting someone into your home to have tea, discuss their grief, hold their pain, and pray with them is a common tradition used across the world. Holding space for healing in community arenas allows us to connect and imagine what could be (Piepzna-Samarasinha 99). Healing collectively enables meaningful and sustainable community building.

The Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective, a leader in healing justice work, created a “Healing and Accountability Wheel” that the organization uses in

workshops (Appendix A). Emotional literacy, setting boundaries, and identifying our toxic relationships with productivity are integral to community healing. Referring to resources like the “feelings wheel” when we are in the workplace can serve as a starting point for honest conversation and can help us contextualize our community healing process in order to form healthier, more sustainable communities where employees are not working themselves to the point of exhaustion and where partnered communities feel a sense of ownership while being heard, valued, and included.

Community healing is a vast practice that can be applied to a variety of issues facing the sector and practical applications for this lesson in the performing arts sector can take a variety of forms. Organizations should allow space for honest assessments from the community on the work the organization is doing as well as honest assessment from staff about what could be improved in the workplace. Organizations may hire a healing justice practitioner or consultant to assess current practices and suggest new practices that can be incorporated into the workplace and community building as a whole. Practices that prioritize community healing as a collective responsibility and community privilege may include strict close-of-business times led by the example of upper-level management, no emailing outside of business hours rules, and healing circles with staff and attendees to address any harm the organization may have caused. Employing this lesson of treating healing as a community responsibility and privilege allows us to create liberated spaces where we all are welcome to be human and heal together.

Lesson 3: Center Historically Excluded Parties as Leaders

Healing justice believes BIPOC, disabled, queer, and femme voices should be centered in leadership for true healing to occur (“Healing Justice Principles”). In American society, each of these groups has been historically excluded through everything from segregation to the Ugly Laws, a set of laws banning “unsightly” individuals from being in public, to discrimination against LGBTQ+ workers (Schweik). Each group holds particular knowledge and genius that helps build liberated community in new, exciting, and accessible ways. Healing By Choice!, a healing justice group in Detroit, holds a monthly healing circle at a senior living community in collaboration with a disability justice group called Detroit Disability Power. This healing circle features Western medicine as well as traditional healing practices from several different groups. Breakout groups are created in which disabled people can all work together and caregivers can work separately. These affinity groups allow for honest sharing while the mixed group makes for deep healing and growth (Sands).

Healing by Choice! and Detroit Disability Power’s example demonstrates things that are possible when we center leadership from historically excluded groups: new healing practices emerge, transparency with fellow community members grows, and services for a variety of groups are offered in accessible and community-oriented spaces. When we apply this lesson, we start to build a community that not only looks like the world around us, but also utilizes the particular strengths and ideas of each community. We are reminded of both the importance of intersectionality in leadership and the unique genius of each group to lead and decide what they need when it comes to healing, policy change, and more broadly, community norm shifts (Page and Pandit).

Centering historically excluded groups in leadership within the performing arts community can look like taking an honest inventory of current practices with a third party to evaluate what exclusionary practices are currently in place. Consider who is not represented on the board and leadership teams and what the organization can do to be a more hospitable and accessible place to queer, disabled, femme, and/or BIPOC leaders who have been historically excluded. Organizations should look to historically excluded parties to fill leadership positions and ensure that their voices are valued and protected, not just heard.

Lesson 4: Exalt Disabled Wisdom

Both healing justice and community care exalt disabled wisdom. Although it has been seldom acknowledged, disabled people have a unique wisdom that is valuable to inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community building toward liberation. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes of the hallmarks of disabled emotional intelligence and wisdom, citing strengths like emotional generosity when those around us are struggling; communicating in smaller, non-academic words and waiting for others to finish their thoughts completely before speaking; maintaining flexibility with scheduling and other community members' conflicts; exercising empathy for community members navigating bureaucracy and the unexpected expenses associated with poverty; noticing and showing respect when community members push themselves past their limits for one another; sharing resources, offering what you can, and accepting "no" as an answer without taking it personally; reading body language and energy of community members struggling with fatigue, pain, or overwhelm; understanding that most things will take longer than you anticipate; leaning on interdependence; and tending toward giving one another the benefit of the doubt and never assuming (69-73).

When Patty Berne, co-founder and executive director of Sins Invalid, was asked about why, as a Haitian-Japanese femme disabled artist and organizer, they chose to create a performing arts organization and Disability Justice Movement incubator as opposed to giving workshops on accessibility, they replied they could give workshops indefinitely or they could create a short piece of art that is made up of people's dreams and nightmares that will stick with the performers and the audiences alike for the rest of their lives (Piepzna-Samarasinha 150-151). Patty Berne and other disabled artists and leaders within the Disability Justice Movement understand their own strengths and brilliance and what their particular voice can do for both their organizations, the movement, and the world.

Performing arts organizations can honor and exalt disabled wisdom through consulting with existing disabled staff members about current policies and procedures and placing them in leadership positions to lift up their wisdom. Organizations can also look to existing disabled leadership in liberated spaces online and implement the wisdom being shared. Additionally, organizations can adopt practices championed by disabled leaders' wisdom, such as: universal design, adhering to agreed-upon work hours and discouraging overworking, adopting telecommuting practices that permit staff to meet their individual and family needs, eliminating after hours emails and phone calls, and making sure disabled people are in positions of leadership and are empowered to speak their mind and put more accessible practices into effect.

Lesson 5: Learning and Healing Are Concurrent and Continuous

We often approach community building as a fact-finding mission in which we gather relevant information, analyze it, and then act. After we have acted, we wash our

hands of the mission and move on to the next order of business. Healing justice, however, reminds us that learning, healing, and expanding our capacity should happen simultaneously. Arts organizations often raise a false dichotomy: do we focus on our current audience and serve our mission, or do we do the very long, hard, and complicated work of widening our circle? Healing justice says we can do the work of healing relationships and creating spaces for liberation while not only serving our mission but fulfilling it more deeply.

Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People is a disability justice primer created by Sins Invalid to serve as an introduction to, and history of, the movement and as a resource for disabled and nondisabled leaders and decision makers to refer to when considering accessibility needs within their events and organizations. In a passage about access needs, the last guideline reads, “hold compassion for ourselves and everyone else in the process.” The section outlines ways we will inevitably fail and have unmet needs in our community and that we must have compassion for ourselves and each other while simultaneously remaining humble and open to feedback (Sins Invalid 28-32). What the Disability Justice Movement teaches us is that our work is never finished, and we must act now while remaining teachable and open to being given feedback both privately and publicly. There is no arriving at liberation; there is the continuous work of liberation.

The Disability Justice Movement leads the way of continuous and concurrent learning and healing through Patty Berne’s “Disability Justice – A Working Draft.” The definition of disability justice has gone through new iterations with each voice added to the movement, which began as a marriage of disability rights, racial justice, and

LGBTQ+ rights. Even in its inception, the movement had already started learning and healing from the disability rights movement, which left out many groups. Though “Disability Justice – A Working Draft” presents a visionary concept of the movement and the future of liberation work, it will no doubt continue to shift and change as each of its members and the collective community grows and heals.

Organizations can put the lesson of concurrent and continuous learning and healing into practice by avoiding issuing hasty statements on current events and instead focusing on creating liberated spaces in a meaningful way. This can look like creating a crisis management plan that centers accountability to harm caused, transparency through the process of learning and healing, and continuing conversations and education opportunities for staff and community members.

Lesson 6: Grief is Essential to Liberation

As we continuously learn, heal, and expand, an essential and uncomfortable lesson emerges: grief is an essential part of the work of healing and community building. Healing as a community means there will be many painful moments—moments of loss, moments of reckoning. Organizations and individuals must contend with the harm they have caused, and their community must feel welcome to express their pain and opinions on how best to heal the relationships. The goal is not to sweep pain under the rug and form shallow and short-lived community bonds, but to acknowledge, address, and move forward, empowered with the knowledge of how to do better the next time.

Healing is dangerous work. Healing is about going into the struggle. When trauma happens, we go away from that space in our body where it

happened—and when we go into it, it hurts so much as it wakes back up. I'm interested in creating the place where the body can remember itself, even though it hurts to do it. Where feeling better is part of it, but it's not the goal. Struggling better is the goal. (Piepzna-Samarasinha 225)

Piepzna-Samarasinha's words remind us that returning to pain and acknowledging it will likely be difficult but bypassing pain is not the goal. Becoming comfortable with the essential nature of the grief process is not easy, but it helps us heal and “struggle better” as we continue community building and exposing our strengths and opportunities in doing so. This lesson in practice can look like creating space for whistleblowers within your organization to raise issues without fear of repercussion, facilitating healing circles, or regular talk-backs with the community.

Lesson 7: Solidarity Not Charity

While charity works from a vertical framework with the organization or individual passing down knowledge or resources as a saving force to a community who is at a personal deficit, solidarity works to address system deficits created by dominant groups. Solidarity work understands that each of us is the expert in our own experiences and has the right to determine how to address our own needs, desires, and issues. Perhaps most important, rather than the internal mode of accountability embraced in charity work, accountability in solidarity work is turned outward to the communities we stand with (Distaso).

Mutual aid is one form of solidarity in which individuals or communities pool resources to address common struggles rather than allowing individuals to fend for themselves. Mutual aid is a long-held tradition within and between marginalized

communities that predates the Disability Justice Movement but one which continues to play a major role. One of the often-cited examples of mutual aid took place during the 504 Sit-In in which disability rights activists staged a month-long sit-in to pressure lawmakers to enforce Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was modeled after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to protect disabled people against discrimination. During the sit-in, Brad Lomax, founder of the Black Panther Party of Washington and a disability activist, arranged for the Black Panthers to deliver food to disabled activists every day to support their efforts. Acts like the ones taken by Brad Lomax and the Black Panthers are shining examples of solidarity and mutual aid (Connelly).

The Disability Justice Movement centers the practice of solidarity with other movements and between different disabilities. The movement recognizes the need to build coalitions around change and in pursuit of the world we want to see. In order to engage communities, you must stand with them when it matters the most. True community means you are just as important as I am, I will walk besides you as you face life, and my peace means nothing without yours. Building meaningful community and liberated spaces centers solidarity as a central tenant.

In performing organizations, solidarity can appear as offering year-round virtual performances for community members who cannot attend performances in person, public declarations of support for movements that affect community members and following through on expressed liberation-minded initiatives, mutual aid funds in which the organization and community members can contribute to offsetting costs and other obstacles to attendance and participation for fellow community members, and spending

time in your organization's neighborhood, interacting and contributing to your community authentically and regularly.

Lesson 8: Interdependence is an Asset Not a Liability

Depending on one another allows space for each of us to hold the roles of both care receiver and care giver, depending on what the situation demands. Interdependent community creates more sustainable community building and less burnout. Not only is interdependence practically important, but it also creates connection. "Help isn't a favor; it's a shared experience. It is an intimacy. It's how connection is created" (Amato). Working to care for each other on an individual or organizational level in whatever way our resources allow builds trust and widens our reach.

Interdependence can look like community partnerships, like the one between Sins Invalid and Ante UP!, a professional development organization for justice workers. One organization focuses on disability justice and art while the other focuses on continuing education and professional development on issues around justice and liberation. The organizations have come together sharing resources, knowledge, staff, and networks to offer disability justice professional development at a price point that allows them to offer other community education classes on a sliding scale for community members at a variety of income levels. While either organization could have stretched to provide these opportunities for education on their own, sharing their resources allowed for expanding the networks of both organizations without overextending either group. Organizations can directly apply this lesson from Sins Invalid and Ante Up!

Implications for Arts Organizations

Suggestions have been offered at the end of every lesson, but actionable steps toward inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community building are plentiful. Resources like *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of the Movement is Our People* and *We See You, White American Theatre* offer a variety of specific and general suggestions, from creating fragrance-free spaces, to holding compassion for ourselves and our peers, to ways to respect differing cultural traditions in the same space. These resources offered to the performing arts community through queer, disabled, and BIPOC leadership should be regular touchstones for the community as it continues the work of artmaking and community building. Actionable steps are constantly being expanded upon as groups coalesce toward liberation.

Despite having offered a few small, actionable suggestions in each lesson, healing justice, community care, and access cannot be treated as a checklist. The lack of inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community building has eroded trust and prevented, and in some cases broken, community connections. A fundamental shift in framework must occur for performing arts organizations to create inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community and liberated spaces. Adopting these lessons and principles must be an act of love and care for our communities. In the words of Piepzn-Samarasinha, “we won’t come where we are not loved, needed, and understood as leaders, not just people they begrudgingly provide services for.”

Conclusion

Performing arts organizations should look to the Disability Justice Movement and the lessons of healing justice and community care to create liberated spaces where all

people are free to be human together and to work together to fix what is broken. The collective reckoning and awakening taking place in the United States due to the pandemic, increasing political tension, and modern-day civil rights movement have brought the important and longstanding issues of oppression in all spaces and meaningful community building and liberation to the surface. Performing arts administrators are dealing with difficult circumstances that, without care, can lead to hollow community building or lack of any community building at all. Instead of shrinking away from these major cultural shifts and clinging to our previous ways, performing arts organizations can and should capitalize on this moment to create inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful community and liberated spaces.

For many years, the performing arts sector has enjoyed an often-uneared reputation as a safe and inclusive space. Performing arts administrators have viewed their work through the lens of charity, believing that the sector lacked the problems plaguing other sectors when it comes to community building. However, this has not been the case. The longstanding view of community building as seats at the table has prevented performing arts administrators from questioning the table itself. It is not enough to make room at the table, the performing arts community must fix what is broken in order to create the firm foundation for the community they seek; it must reset the break by addressing prior injuries, preventing future injuries, minimizing pain, and realigning and reinforcing its values through the lessons of healing justice and community care. Organizations must work to make each of their community spaces, whether those spaces are for staff or patrons, a liberated space. Community building is an act of healing as much as it is an act of celebration and fellowship. The Disability

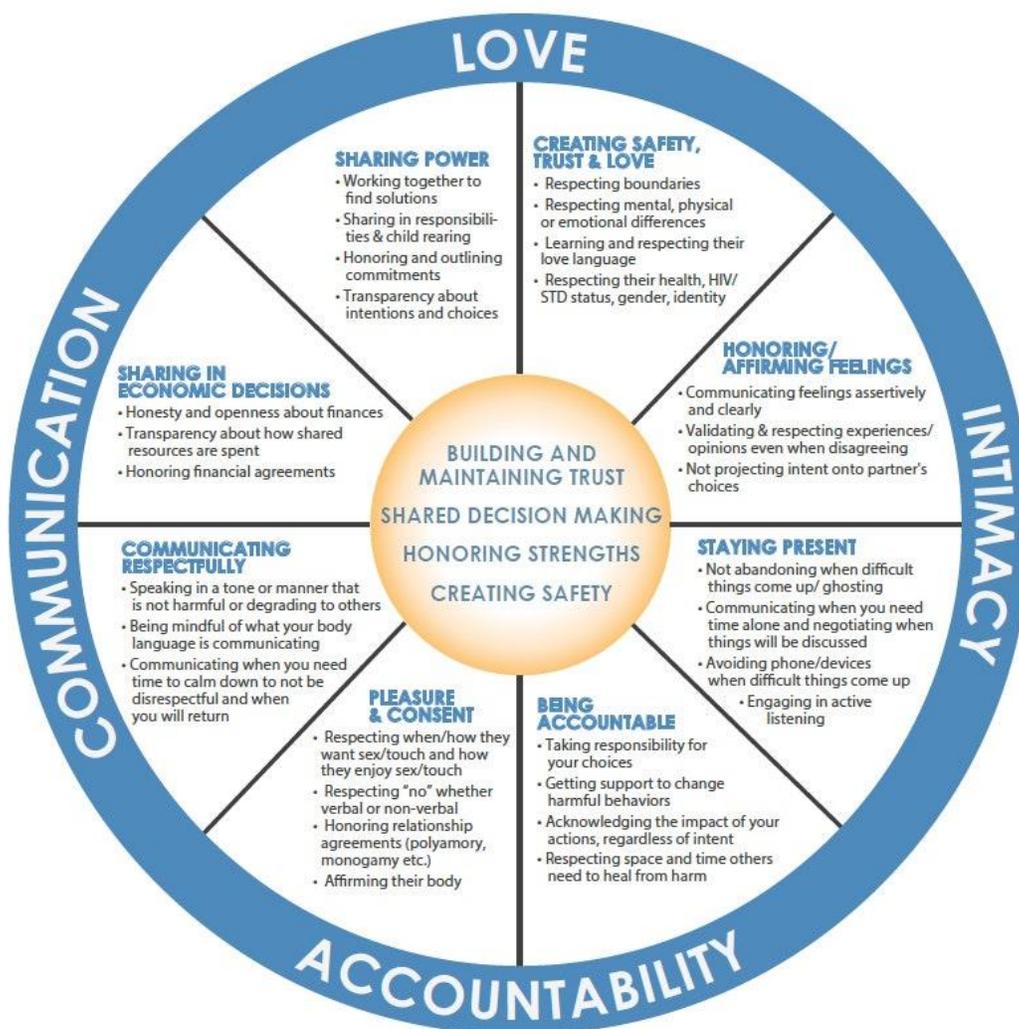
Justice Movement and the principles of healing justice and community care provide the sector the opportunity to create liberated spaces in which all people are celebrated and free to come as they are, knowing that their pain and needs will be addressed with the respect, care, and urgency they deserve. If performing arts organizations take up this charge, they can emerge as the centers of radical love and well-being they have always sought to be.

Appendix A



BLACK EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
COLLECTIVE

HEALING & ACCOUNTABILITY WHEEL



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www.beam.community

This wheel credits and builds upon the work of the Non Violence Wheel designed by New Hope For Women

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