

Initial Thoughts About the Relationship Between the Arts and the Affirmation of Human Dignity

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This memo explores one of nine distinctive characteristics of ethical engagement through the arts. It is part of the research informing the report entitled: Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash: How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges.” This research was proposed by the [Community Arts Network](#) (affiliated with the [Porticus Foundation](#)) and carried out and written by [IMPACT: Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture, and Conflict Transformation](#).

Humanity dignifies, restores and reimagines itself through creating, performing, preserving and revising its cultural and artistic life . . .

Karima Bennoune, United Nations Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights (Bennoune, 2020)

I'd like to start with two stories that connect the arts with the affirmation of human dignity. The first is a contemporary one, featuring an artist's recollection about how he sees his art as supporting others in their experiencing of dignity. The second reflects on how the practice of dance, music and ritual in a refugee camp, decades ago, became an assertion of dignity by those experiencing displacement and statelessness in a war zone.¹

“Black beauty taking up space”

During the final semester of his senior year at university, in 2020, a student of mine was busy preparing a photo exhibition. Entitled “Black Prom,” the show was to be installed in a gallery on campus. Prom, for many across the United States, is the biggest dance party of one's final year in high school. Who goes with whom and how one dresses can be very big deals, although the meanings and the specific rituals around this vary by region or community, or even by family. “Black Prom,” according to Rasheed Peters, the artist, investigates “the meaning behind a night that typically requires great financial sacrifice” for individuals and families who don't have many material resources and who “*have been seen as systematically powerless*. To what extent is Black Prom a performance of dignity and ownership of humanity?” (Peters, n.d.).

Inspired by a question posed by artist Ebony G. Patterson: “What does it mean for people who have been seen as systematically powerless to employ the tool of dress as a way to perform their value?” (O'Neill-Butler, 2019)² Peters embarked on “exploring this quote through the extravagance of prom for Black people.”

Rasheed Peters is a filmmaker, sculptor, photographer and storyteller. He is Black and from Jamaica where, he told me, getting all dressed up to catch the attention of the cameras at the dance hall is the big thing, not prom. Moving to the U.S. for college, he became intrigued both by those words of another

¹ I have personal relationships with the two stories that open this essay. In my position as Associate Professor of Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation at Brandeis University, I am the former teacher of Rasheed Peters, the artist at the center of the first story. And, in the case of the second story, years ago, as a doctoral researcher, I spent months working with Voan Savay and other performing artists, documenting projects in the Site 2 refugee camp. These relationships are inscribed by my position as a white U.S. citizen. My responsibility for and commitment to undoing structural racism and colonial patterns impact these relationships, and, as well, my selection of these stories.

² Patterson goes on to say, in the article in which this question appears, “There's long been a critique of poor people spending too much money on material things, and we've always lived in a world that places value on ‘things’—and not the person. My work acknowledges that, if I live in a space that says I'm not worthy, what does it mean to use those same tools to throw the question of value right back at you? Like a call-and-response.” (O'Neill-Butler, 2019)

Jamaican artist (Patterson), and the notion of Black prom in a country in which Black people are living amidst and experiencing the legacies and vestiges of centuries of enslavement including recent racist policies and actions. He invited Black couples to participate. Each guided their own photo shoot – to be taken from which angles, with what expressions, and so on -- against a floral backdrop Peters had designed. The plan was to enlarge each printed photo, put the selected images on fabric, embellish the fabric with rhinestones and pearls, and hang them around the gallery. Peters explains:

*These photographs and the way they were to be displayed are confirmations of dignity and of Black prom being its performance. It wasn't so much me **trying** to confirm that Black prom was a performance of dignity. It was me **confirming** it. Until the pandemic came and made it impossible for me to do my senior art project, this was going to be Black art and Black beauty taking up space, filling that gallery, floor to ceiling. Making a demand for us to be seen and treated with dignity, in all our humanity. Using a language that's common among the broader society, 'prom,' and, having grown up poor, one of them in the foster system, those all dressed up for this project expressed that they had often felt seen as 'less than' and as 'other.' But we flipped the script on the night of the Black Prom photo shoot. They confirmed that they were not 'less than' anyone (Rasheed Peters, personal communication, March 2021).*

“Feeding the soul” in the context of displacement

In the 1980s and early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians were living in refugee and displaced persons camps, first on the border with -- and then inside -- neighboring Thailand. They had run from starvation, poverty and ongoing violent conflict and political repression in their homeland, which had just emerged from a genocide. While the United Nations and international and local non-governmental agencies established sanitation, health and education programs in many of these camps, the Cambodians themselves created performing arts centers. Dance, theater and music programs among the Cambodian residents of Site 2, the largest of the displaced persons camps, attracted thousands to their outdoor performances. Parents clamored to get their children into one of the centers where they could study a range of traditional music, dance and theater forms. I spent most of 1989 in Site 2, working alongside the artists as they documented their work.

“You don't know what it's like to be on *their* land...” I was told by dancer Meas Van Roeun. And to be at the constant mercy of the trajectory of artillery shells. Many others told me that “here [in the camp] we are like animals in a zoo. People visit and look, toss us a treat, and leave,” and said that “classical dance feeds our soul. Without it we are not alive, not human, not Khmer [Cambodian].”³ The dance and music training and performances, including associated rituals that honor spirits and deceased and current teachers of the arts, re-established connections to history and homeland, and fostered beauty and control in the midst of chaos and violence, asserting the humanity of performers and observers (fellow refugees) alike (Shapiro-Phim, 2008). “I was never happy,” dancer Voan Savay recalled in a recent conversation about her more than a decade in those camps, including Site 2, where we had met. “But, as a dancer and teacher, I knew I brought something to those young people who followed me. Even with no guarantee of a secure future in their homeland or somewhere else where they could establish roots, they had dignity as artists secure in their connection to a heritage that matters.” The parents spoke to

³ “Khmer” is the name of the majority ethnic group of Cambodia. In common English usage, Khmer and Cambodian are often interchangeable. (They speak Khmer (or Cambodian); I like Khmer (or Cambodian) food; etc.)

me about the discipline and focus, as well as the beauty, that this practice brought to their children and their homes, while surrounded by uncertainty, loss and danger. And, indeed, when denizens of Site 2 and other camps were repatriated to Cambodia after peace accords were signed, a number of young performing artists chose to repatriate with their teacher, Voan Savay, to maintain their practice, rather than to go with their parents.

Processes that restore and affirm human dignity are necessary in countering complex challenges, including racial injustice, inequality and displacement, because they lay the groundwork for the bolstering of people's agency, and for meaningful connection or reconnection with self, culture and community. Indeed, responses to challenges with compound interdependencies that *do not* address violations of people's dignity are unlikely to succeed. According to peacebuilding scholar and practitioner John Paul Lederach, "I think dignity is the place where the recognition and acknowledgement of our humanness appears, or as is the case too often, re-appears" (John Paul Lederach, personal communication, May 2021).

"Dignity has something of a double quality," notes James Thompson, professor of applied theater at the University of Manchester in the UK, "being both protection and an assertion of a demand in the world" (James Thompson, personal communication, March 2021). In the example of "Black Prom," dignity is claimed and asserted; through adornment and visual representation it demands (or would have demanded) space and recognition in a gallery that does not often celebrate Black people. Peters' confirmation of his subjects' performance of dignity is also a gesture of protection, at that moment, against the racial injustice and attendant inequality they experience outside of that studio (and gallery), where Black people have been systematically and consistently stripped of their dignity. This can be seen as, in Thompson's words, an "extraordinary act of resistance" (James Thompson, personal communication, March 2021)⁴. At "Black Prom," it is through the arts – the arts of dress and of photography -- that people seize and project or perform their dignity, in the face of surrounding indignities. In Site 2 camp, people did the same, through music and dance with centuries-old roots that tie them spiritually to the physical earth of their homeland, and that guide them through stories with moral potency. This does not mean that people live in denial of surrounding circumstances. It means, instead, that they face them head on, in and with their full humanity, as one step in demanding and creating positive change.

So, what is human dignity?

What follows is a provisional, cautious and modest beginning of an inquiry into the term "human dignity." It is limited by time and scope, referring to written materials only in English, or in English translation.

⁴ Thompson relates this to British colonialism, which was in many ways "about stripping people of their dignity." Creative practices through which people confirm or reclaim dignity can be a manifestation of anti-colonial (and other forms of) resistance.

Because dignity is, in part, “the full opposite of both humiliation and invisibilization,” (John Paul Lederach, personal communication, May 2021), I include the following quotations, which reflect upon absences of dignity, and could possibly extend our consideration of the impact and the weight that the nurturing, affirmation or restoration of human dignity offer. (I put select phrases in bold type.) I begin with an excerpt from an article about the horrors of the COVID-19 crisis, which, as I write this, continues to lay bare gross inequities within regions, nations and cities, and across the globe, including as vaccines are most available to so few.

*People are dying in hospital corridors, on roads and in their homes. Crematoriums in Delhi have run out of firewood. The forest department has had to give special permission for the felling of city trees. Desperate people are using whatever kindling they can find. Parks and car parks are being turned into cremation grounds. It’s as if there’s an invisible UFO parked in our skies, sucking the air out of our lungs... None of this conveys the full depth and range of the trauma, the chaos and, **above all, the indignity** that people are being subjected to... The system hasn’t collapsed. The government has failed. Perhaps “failed” is an inaccurate word, because what we are witnessing is not criminal negligence, but an outright crime against humanity... My friends and I have agreed to call each other every day just to mark ourselves present, like roll call in our school classrooms. We speak to those we love in tears, and with trepidation, not knowing if we will ever see each other again. We write, we work, not knowing if we will live to finish what we started. Not knowing what horror and humiliation awaits us. **The indignity of it all. That is what breaks us.***

Arundhati Roy, writer and human rights and environmental justice activist (Roy, 2021).

*To take away people’s choices, to make their livelihood completely dependent on your own political and economic needs, is a question of dignity. **Loss of dignity** is when the political process serves to dehumanise you, making you passive recipients of whatever crumbs your oppressor/master chooses to throw at you. Dignity is reclaimed with the powerful act of saying no. For demanding the political process to affirm your humanity, indeed for it to be based on your human needs, not to annihilate them... [T]he cry for dignity is the human need for recognition, the right to be human.*

Lina Jamoul, Ph.D, labor relations and public policy expert (Jamoul, 2004).

*As township dwellers, we were Cape Towners in name only. I never truly saw Table Mountain, the epitome of the beauty of this magnificent city, although it is within visual reach of the township; it was part of the world that had tried **to strip my people of their dignity** and respect, part of the world that had reduced them to second-class citizens in their own country. Langa, like all other South African townships...was a world...where a history of discrimination, repression, and exclusion from the privileges that citizenship and wealth confer had left its debilitating mark of poverty.*

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Ph.D, clinical psychologist and scholar of forgiveness in the aftermath of gross human rights violations (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003).

The term “human dignity” appears in human rights and peacebuilding literature and in statements of mission and vision of philanthropic foundations, often presented with an assumption that there is no need for explanation or elaboration. Philosophy scholar Michael Rosen traces the history of the word, mainly in the Western world, noting from the outset that some of his colleagues see the concept of dignity as so vague as to be almost useless (Rosen, 2012). He finds the strands of meaning associated with the term to include:

Human beings’ intrinsic value;
The intrinsic value of something that occupies its proper place;
A certain manner or bearing;
Social status;
Autonomy;
The capacity to endure suffering without loss of self-control; and
The prohibition of certain kinds of degrading and disrespectful treatment; among others.

These meanings take hold in specific contexts, however, and might infer judgement and proscription, as when, for example, someone is criticized for behavior deemed beneath or unbecoming of their status or perceived or assumed “proper place.” In a March 2021 conversation about the affirmation of human dignity and the arts, James Thompson pointed to the famous statement by anarchist and feminist activist and writer Emma Goldman (1869-1940) in which she rebuffs the criticism of her colleague who finds that her dancing with merriment undermines her status as a “force in the anarchist movement;” and that it is, therefore, undignified.

At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha [Alexander Berkman], a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. ‘I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things.’ Anarchism meant that to me, and I would live it in spite of the whole world--prisons, persecution, everything. Yes, even in spite of the condemnation of my own comrades I would live my beautiful ideal (Goldman, 1934).

Scholar Michael Rosen notes that after the Second World War, dignity became connected with the idea of inviolable human rights (Rosen, 2012). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948), begins – in its Preamble – with a statement about human dignity, and then includes references to such in several of its Articles:

The Preamble:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...

Article 1:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 22:

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23, point #3:

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

Lawyer and legal scholar Bernadette Atuahene, writing about South Africa, has proposed use of the term *dignity taking*, “as property confiscation that involves the dehumanization or infantilization of the dispossessed... [T]he appropriate remedy for a dignity taking [involves] ... processes that affirm [the dispossessed populations’] humanity and reinforce their agency”(Atuahene, 2016). She calls this remedy *dignity restoration*, which goes to the heart of restorative justice as it seeks to acknowledge and work to change the underlying dehumanization, infantilization and political exclusion that set up the possibility of (in this case, land) dispossession in the first place.

Salomón Lerner Febres, philosopher, lawyer, university professor, former chair of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission and President Emeritus of the Institute of Democracy and Human Rights, writes that “[h]uman dignity, inherent to all people, is not fulfilled in the experience of the isolated individual but through the bonds linking him to others, his fellow human beings, who grant him recognition.... Any violent act entails a depersonalization of the victim, who becomes, suddenly, an object without dignity” (Lerner Febres, 2020). He develops this notion further: “Violence, then, attacks meaning by breaking down the bonds between people and dehumanizing them” (Ibid.). Recognition – affirmation – of one’s humanity forges vital connections without which one cannot experience dignity.

Conflict transformation scholar and practitioner Donna Hicks has developed what she calls “The Dignity Model” for conflict transformation endeavors. She defines ten essential elements of dignity: acceptance of identity; inclusion; safety; acknowledgment; recognition; fairness; benefit of the doubt; understanding; independence; and accountability. She developed this model “to help people understand the role that dignity plays in their lives and relationships” (Hicks, 2011). She believes that acknowledging how vulnerable we are to being treated as if we don’t matter – as if we have no value or

worth -- would give us “the knowledge, awareness, and skills to avoid unknowingly harming others. [The model] demonstrates how to rebuild a relationship that has broken under the weight of conflict and suggests what to do to reconcile.” She goes on to note that “[m]ost of us have a gut feeling about the word dignity, but few of us have the language to describe it. Dignity is different from respect. Dignity is a birthright” (Ibid.).

When we sense that our worth is being threatened, we are flooded with dread and shame—with destabilizing feelings that are painful and aversive. Most of us would do just about anything to avoid these dreaded feelings, which are part and parcel of an injury to dignity. When we experience harm, our self-preservation instincts are very strong, inciting feelings of humiliation, rage, and self-righteous revenge. Some humans who have experienced chronic violations of dignity have even gone to the extreme of taking their own lives to bring an end to these intolerable feelings. Others go to the opposite extreme by killing those who caused the injury (Ibid.).

“[The field of Human] Rights has tended to focus on defending human dignity by seeking accountability,” explains John Paul Lederach (Lederach, personal communication, May 2021). “Within the complexity [rests] a certainty that harm is best stopped when clarity of who harmed is named, at times shamed, in order to bring both repair and responsibility, which ultimately is seen as the way to prevent and protect. Perhaps in the word ‘defend’ we find the pathways most often followed. This places rights-based [approaches] at odds with other pathways that may seek to dialogue, understand, and negotiate – so, in tension with resolutionary approaches. That, at least, is how I have experienced it in practical terms wherein peacebuilding is perceived to offer impunity” (Ibid.).

In contrast, he notes,

[p]eacebuilding often engages in reaching out to understand the drivers, dynamics and deepest impulses of people's story behind and beyond the demands and actions. It requires ways of seeking meaning by remaining open and holding spaces of ambiguity -- often within a sense of deep, transgenerational systemic patterns. Ultimately, it also seeks ways to end violence while rebuilding trust and repair -- restoration -- of what has been lost and damaged. It has a relationship-centric understanding of change. It can perceive the demands for accountability [of some in the human rights field] -- the shaming in particular -- as seeking to blame, which can reinforce the defensiveness, the justifications for renewed cycles of violence (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, given these differences or divergences, “[w]here these both depart and ultimately return to seems best described as human dignity. A common root and fruit are sought. I think it offers a bridge between the two [fields]” (Ibid.).

In Michael Rosen’s book on the history and meaning of dignity, he mentions one instance of an intentional separation of the concept of dignity from that of rights: “The contrast between dignity and equal human rights is ... evident enough in the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (issued in 1990 by the Organization of the Islamic Conference), whose Article 6 asserts that women have ‘equal dignity’— but not (and here it is in conspicuous and unquestionably conscious contrast to the Universal Declaration) equal rights” (Rosen, 2012).

Ann Elizabeth Mayer offers a more detailed discussion of the consequences of the use of the word “dignity” instead of “rights”:

*Like the Iranian constitution, the Cairo declaration is often deliberately vague. Through ambiguous wording, the authors of the declaration try to obscure the fact that it is deficient in providing for equality. Article 1 of the Cairo declaration states that human beings (the gender-neutral term *al-bashar* in the Arabic version) 'are equal in terms of basic human dignity and basic obligations and responsibilities, without any discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, language, sex, religious belief, political affiliation, social status or other considerations.' If read carelessly, Article 1 might seem to be a guarantee of equality regardless of sex and religion. However, it actually speaks only in terms of an equality touching on 'basic human dignity and basic obligations and responsibilities,' offering no guarantee of equality in rights and freedoms. The deficiencies in this formulation become clearer if one compares this wording with Articles 1 and 2 of the UDHR..., which it superficially resembles. Article 1 of the Cairo declaration thus affords no protection for a woman or non-Muslim affected by the discrimination that is mandated by retrograde views of Islamic requirements adopted by governments in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia (Mayer, 1996).⁵*

Dignity, therefore, might assume the full honoring of a person's human rights. Or, on the other hand, some people (for example, women) could be understood to enjoy equal dignity with all others, even in the absence of a commitment to their human rights.

Arts and the affirmation of human dignity: brief descriptions of selected initiatives

All of the examples that follow affirm human dignity in the context of complex global challenges, although, any given complex challenge is often intertwined with others. Each art initiative described below engages with processes that lead to (or have the potential to lead to) recognition of a shared humanity, even across difference(s), which is central to the constructive transformation of conflict. It is critical, however, to "guard against making facile links between the practice of theatre [or dance or music or other arts] and the assumption of an inevitable 'humanizing' outcome," James Thompson et al remind us. "Constructing and negotiating this link happens in the contingencies of each testing moment of practice" (Thompson et al., 2009). It is true, as well, that engagement with the arts can do the opposite of humanize and dignify; it can denigrate. President Mobutu Sese Seko (in office 1965-1997), in what was then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), required that the populace dance to honor him and his political agenda. Harsh punishment befell those who didn't. One man's experience of being obliged to dance publicly for others, when, in his tradition, others should dance for him, was described by his son as "really like being raped. I wept when I saw my father being forced to dance on the podium, it was painful to see him so humiliated" (Huckstep, 2008).

⁵ Mayer goes on, in a footnote: "As a scholar who has carefully examined possible counterparts of modern human rights in traditional cultures has concluded, 'dignity' may be a concomitant of one's ascribed status and is granted to the adult 'who adheres to his or her society's values, customs, and norms,' 'who accepts normative cultural constraints on his or her particular behavior.' See Rhoda Howard, "Dignity, Community, and Human Rights," in Abdullahi An-Nacim, ed., *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: A Quest for Consensus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 83" (Mayer, 1996).

In the face of gender-based violence

Un Lugar en el Mundo (A Place in the World), Bogotá, Colombia. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBR6gttYkyl>) A project of the Banco de la República Museums in Bogotá, *Un Lugar* involved transgender women in the city taking over parts of the Museum complex to stake a claim to belonging. Literally marginalized, and subject to violence and poverty, trans women in Bogotá have limited professional options and a life expectancy almost half that of the overall Colombian populace. They hadn't frequented the Museum complex, and Museum staff reached out to them to collaborate on an initiative which gave the participants an opportunity to create meaningful spaces and experiences in the Museum, and to share them with the public. This project has the potential to invoke the affirmation of human dignity through the resultant portraits and performances envisioned and realized by the women themselves and witnessed by the public, portraits and performances communicating the humanity and extra-ordinariness of each.

The Medea Project, theater for incarcerated women, USA (<https://themedeproject.weebly.com/>). Many women who are in prison are survivors of intimate partner violence, having a negative relationship to their bodies through the experience of trauma. In a place structured to dehumanize and isolate, and indeed, often, to continue physical control/abuse, this dance program affords individuals the chance to gain some control over – and a new, positive relationship with -- their bodies, and a way to build trust with dance-mates. They come to see themselves and each other as of value to themselves and the broader (outside) world, to which most of them will return. The project works to reduce recidivism, countering the guilt and self-loathing that many women inmates experience. The majority of incarcerated women in the United States are Black and Latinx, incarceration being intertwined with poverty and racial injustice (see Fraden, 2001).

Phka Sla Krom Angkar, a moral and collective reparations project of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Cambodia. The full initiative involved a traveling exhibition, a documentary film and archived oral history interviews, a dance drama, and psychosocial support. The focus of the project was acknowledgement of the experiences of survivors of forced marriage (institutionalized rape) under the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, and some redress, as forced marriage was newly classified as a crime against humanity during the trial of some of the Khmer Rouge senior leaders. The redress involved, in part, having their experiences honored publicly through a performance of some of their stories in venerated art forms – classical Cambodian dance and *pin peat* music – art forms that connect Cambodians to spiritual, geographic, historical and other communities. It was, in some ways, an assertion of full belonging and a rejection of labels of shame and tarnishment (see Shapiro-Phim, 2020).

Women's House, Croatia. Artist/activist Sanja Ivekovic works in collaboration with women in shelters for survivors of domestic violence, developing arts projects that counter the women's feelings of lack of worth and fear of the future. These sentiments are shared in testimonies that, sometimes, become part of the art itself (see Iveković, 2016; Pabijanek, 2009).

Mural by Indigenous women survivors of sexual violence during Guatemala's civil war. In 2008, Equipo Comunitario de Asistencia Psicosocial/ Psychosocial Assistance Community Team (ECAP) invited The School of Art and Open Studio of Perquín to work with 30 Indigenous women survivors. They gathered in Huehuetenango, in Guatemala's northwest. Participants came from all over, speaking numerous Indigenous languages, to collaborate on a visual rendering of their horrendous experiences and their

hopes, as a way to communicate both to their daughters. They recreated meaningful patterns from their traditional textiles as a border for the mural. The messages contained in the painting were shared with the Tribunal of Conscience for Women Survivors of Sexual Violence inflicted during the Armed Conflict in Guatemala, a deliberative body charged with investigating the atrocities. The women decided to make the mural portable so that they could take it to their own communities, and to universities where these women who had been dehumanized and oppressed by the broader society have given lectures to students and faculty about the civil war and its impact on communities and individuals. They are adding to the historical record, and commanding attention as people whose lives matter. According to artist and human rights activist Claudia Bernardi of The School of Art and Open Studio of Perquín, “It seemed as if the art process was allowing the women to see themselves like something else besides, or even beyond ‘victims’” (Bernardi, 2012).

In the face of displacement

Ashtar Theatre, Palestine (<http://www.ashtar-theatre.org/>). Offering intensive theatre training programs for local students, their projects focus on equipping young Palestinians with leadership and teamwork, as well as acting skills, attesting to their humanity at the moment, and into the future. Individual programs connect the youth distanced from the rest of the world to other young people across the globe through the sharing of stories crafted by and reflecting the Palestinians’ own experiences. Their lived experiences are honored and amplified, even though they are structurally isolated, when enacted by youth across the globe.

Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change, USA/Liberia (<https://becauseofthewar.org/>). A group of highly accomplished singer/songwriter/dancers harnesses the aesthetic and moral potency of traditional music and movement to nurture dialogue among Liberians in diaspora (and, increasingly, online, in their homeland) about gender-based violence, inter-ethnic strife, and anti-Blackness and anti-immigrant sentiment and action in the U.S., and to connect people to resources and foster commitments to counter all of the above. Black African women immigrants and refugees speak of experiencing particular kinds of isolation that can put them in specific kinds of danger, including a loss of sense of worth or control in new circumstances. Through engagement with traditional arts, they’ve built community in a new place, establishing a sense of belonging, purpose, and value, emplacing themselves with dignity in a new space. They are now called on as community leaders and organizers because their art speaks in profound ways to members of their communities eager to shift power imbalances and turn hate and fear of “the other” on their head.

Dance and music programs among the Acholi people in the Patongo refugee camp, Northern Uganda (<https://www.shineglobal.org/project/war-dance/>). The programs – for youth who suffered unspeakable violence and loss (and some who committed violence under duress) – reinforced commitments and connections to community and ancestors and built a sense of belonging and accomplishment in a place of exile (a camp for internally displaced persons - IDPs). The residents of Patongo were among the two million+ IDPs in Uganda at that time. The extensive “cultural breakdown” among the Acholi has been documented by the Norwegian Refugee Council (2005). One exceptional year during which young people in the music and dance programs went to Kampala to participate in the country’s national music competition is chronicled in the film, *War Dance*. Treated with some disdain – as “less-than” – by other students in the competition who were not displaced, and not from a war-

torn part of the country, these young artists from Patongo shined on stage, honoring their Acholi elders and heritage, and their current community, including themselves.

In the face of authoritarianism, inequality, gender-based violence, and displacement

Ruda Colectiva, Latin America (<https://rudacolectiva.com/Home-EN>): Eleven women photographers from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela, form this collective whose intention is to generate new historical and contemporary narratives about people's lived experiences, highlighting women's perspectives. They are intentionally promoting inclusion in the face of systemic marginalization of and violence against women and Indigenous and Afro-Latino communities, and the attendant poverty that has continued under authoritarian regimes. Their images reframe what is reported by mainstream media, recognizing and dignifying cultural knowledge and political organizing skills that contribute to healthy, non-violent and inclusive communities. This is a step in making space for the voices and actions of those who have been kept on the sidelines to influence attitudes, behavior and policy. In a poem on the Collective's website, they identify "Outbreak [of protest] as dignity."

In the face of racial injustice

\$/!thole Country Clapback by Pascale Armand, USA (<https://www.pbs.org/video/pascale-armand-okcht/>). A one-woman show, written and performed by Armand (Haitian American) for Haitian Americans and others, calls the U.S. to task for its white supremacy and anti-Black and anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric. Performances reinforce valuing and celebration of Haitian and other diaspora cultures and communities in the face of denigration by the then-U.S. president. (This project also addresses polarization.)

The Spirits Break to Freedom by Germaine Ingram, USA. (<https://news.allaboutjazz.com/the-spirits-break-to-freedom-jazz-collaboration-for-the-presidents-house-on-june-12th>) Ingram imagined, through a performance piece involving percussive dance, music and song, and projected photographs and animations, "the internal lives of the enslaved Africans who served George and Martha Washington in the first White House, the colonial mansion in Old Philadelphia that was known as the President's House.

[In the piece, there] is a song to Hercules, the Washingtons' highly-skilled, Black and enslaved chef, who was sufficiently prized by the Washingtons for Hercules to be able to negotiate an arrangement where he could sell the scraps from the executive dining table and keep the proceeds for himself. In the tradition of the Black dandy, Hercules used some of these proceeds to have a fine waistcoat made for himself, and to purchase an ornate cane and watch fob, all of which he wore as he strolled through Old Philadelphia after he'd finished his kitchen duties. I imagine Hercules being better dressed than the President. I choreographed a dance in a bed of rock salt for tap dancer Khalil Munir, portraying Hercules. You can hear the crunch of the rock salt under the melody...

[Lyrics] 'Waiting for a sign, listening for the answer. Here's the crossroad, light the way. Give me courage to obey. To run a course unknown....or eat my pride, and stay.'

... *The dance in a trough of rock salt evokes... the punishment of toiling in the salt mines that Washington leveled on Hercules due to suspicion that Hercules was planning to escape (which he eventually did)...*" (Ingram, 2021).

Ingram was, through performance, acknowledging Hercules in his full, complex humanity, in his fancy attire, "taking and claiming space" along those city streets (Ingram, personal communication, April, 2021). She wasn't only expanding an historical narrative, but also honoring the dignity, the dreams and the agency of an individual who was another's property, until he broke free, complicating received images of those who were enslaved. Attending to this conjuncture of Hercules' "internal life" with his public performance of dignity, Ingram's work brings us back to the story that opened this essay as it considered Ebony Patterson's interest in those who employ "the tool of dress as a way to perform their value," and Rasheed Peter's wish to fill space with Black beauty. In the context of ongoing anti-Black state and interpersonal violence in the U.S., *The Spirits Break to Freedom* asks viewers to ponder contemporary political rhetoric and the history of American slavery, and to consider what's at stake when individuals and whole communities are dehumanized and distanced from resources and certain kinds of choice.

Ingram, in my conversation with her, went on to quote the writing of Saidiya Hartman on the early 20th-century practice of dance among African American women in New York City: "Like the flight from the plantation, the escape from slavery, the migration from the south, the rush into the city, or the stroll down Lenox Avenue, choreography was an art, a practice of moving even when there was nowhere else to go, no place left to run. It was an arrangement of the body to elude capture, an effort to make the uninhabitable livable, to escape the confinement of a four-cornered world, a tight, airless room. Tumult, upheaval, flight--it was the articulation of living free, or at the very least trying to, it was the way to insist *I am unavailable for servitude. I refuse it.*" (Hartman, 2019). Ingram sees this as Hartman's "affirm[ation] of the dignity of her subjects, Black women who were considered 'wild,' 'wayward,' and 'promiscuous,'" through her interpretation of their movement, their art, as subverting the limitations imposed on them. And I see Ingram's choreographic work as continuing both lineages – of African American women articulating *at the very least* an attempt at freedom (a tremendous act of resistance), and of artists (writers, choreographers, and so on) affirming the dignity of those around whom their art centers.

Constructive social change seeks to move the flow of interaction in human conflict from cycles of destructive relational patterns toward cycles of relational dignity and respectful engagement.

John Paul Lederach (2005)

Dignity, in the ways artists and those involved with arts-based initiatives cited above are conceptualizing it, is the core of our humanity. It's as if without dignity, we wither. A sense of dignity registers within ourselves and in our relationships, flourishing in the bonds or connections we forge as members of communities, however defined. I interpret their artistry, projects and explanations to mean that affirming human dignity equates with affirming one's own and/or other people's humanity, the possibility to freely and safely access resources, and partake in full citizenship. Not to exist at the whim,

and for the material and political benefit, of others. Not to be exploited. Not to have certain choices proscribed, or safety impacted by exile, war, or political, social and economic systems.

In a presentation entitled, “Art Against Brutality,” part of the 2020 Serbia-based DAH Theatre Arts and Human Rights Festival, Claudia Bernardi describes how she worked with survivors of political violence in El Salvador who wanted to create an art school. The mayor and many others in the town of Perquín, following a brutal 12-year civil war, requested help establishing a school of art. Bernardi showed a video recording in which participants in the school’s arts programs reflect on the importance of art in that particular community, and how it helps beautify a place with ugly memories, unite people marked and marred by violence, and serve as a reminder of what happened so that it won’t happen again. “When I see the works of art that I’ve been able to realize,” one (unidentified) man shares, “I feel like a person with dignity. It’s important to overcome the low self-esteem that poor people sometimes have. In this context, I think art is very important because it’s a way of reconciling ourselves with ourselves, and of reconciling ourselves, after the conflict, with other people” (DAH Theatre, 2020).

Artist and peacebuilding practitioner Carole Kane points out that, over the years, she has seen people who had long “been in the shadows” emerge through meaningful engagement with the arts, “to be able to say that you have a place here, so you have dignity,” and that there’s a “humanity, then, that comes from feeling good about yourself” (Kane, personal communication, March 2021). Whether it is in a studio, museum, storefront or refugee camp, or in a theater or on the streets, in the midst or aftermath of violent conflict, in the face of grave inequality or blinding poverty, processes that restore and affirm dignity contribute to “social healing” as discussed by John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach (Lederach and Lederach, 2011). They allow for and nurture the presence of individuals in their full, complex identities, and allow for and nurture the (re)telling of narratives from the perspective of those most impacted or placed in most precarity by the challenge(s). Without that perspective, solutions are unlikely to make a positive difference in those individuals’ and communities’ lives. Without the affirmation of human dignity, chances for violence escalate. The affirmation of human dignity deepens connection to place, meaning and one another. It is through those connections that our sense of mattering, of importance, and of the “mattering” of others, comes into being.

Author Biography

Toni Shapiro-Phim serves as Associate Professor of [Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation](#) and Assistant Director of the [Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts](#) at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University.

Toni received a PhD in cultural anthropology from Cornell University. Her dissertation, books and other publications focus on the history and cultural context of the arts in relation to violence, migration, conflict transformation and gender concerns. She's held teaching and research appointments at the University of California-Berkeley, Yale University and Bryn Mawr College, and worked in Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese refugee camps in Indonesia and Thailand. She's also conducted years of ethnographic research in Cambodia.

Co-editor of *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, and co-author of *Talking Dance: Stories from the South China Sea*, she has also contributed to *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*; *The Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience*; and *Coexistence in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*, among other publications. Her documentary film, *Because of the War*, about four women – mothers, refugees, immigrants, survivors of Liberia's civil wars, and superstar recording artists – was awarded the 2018 Elli Kongas Maranda Prize from the American Folklore Society for outstanding work on women's traditional, vernacular, and local culture and/or work on feminist theory and folklore.

Immediately before moving to Brandeis, Toni was Director of Programs at the Philadelphia Folklore Project where she conducted ethnographic research, curated exhibitions and produced performances, humanities forums and publications highlighting aspects of the cultural practices of Philadelphia's diverse communities, all in collaboration with artists and community groups working for equity and justice. Toni is a member of the [IMPACT Leadership Circle](#).

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