Road by Walking:
Popular Theatre for Transformation

Introduction

When Mirtha Rivera arrived in Regina, Saskatchewan as a political refuge from Chile in 1975, she carried with her a dream: as a political activist, she had been an active part of a local popular theatre group in Santiago, where she had witnessed firsthand the power of theatre to build community, foster empathy, and challenge oppression. Mirtha was part of a grassroots movement of participatory popular theatre that emerged in Latin America throughout the 1960s and 70s, informed by the Marxist pedagogy of Paolo Freire and codified in 1974 in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

At the core of this movement was the idea that interactive, collective theatrical activities will blur the boundaries between spectator and performer, creating spaces for emotional, political, and social expression with the potential to transform their lived reality. Mirtha had seen the impact of popular theatre as an act of resistance against systems of oppression, and it was her dream to bring that methodology to cultivate spaces where communities could challenge racism, colonial violence, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination.

Inspired by that dream, Mirtha worked with Righting Relations Canada to develop a project that sought to develop transformative engagement and education processes that, through popular theatre methodology, would challenge employers within the arts, culture, and heritage sector to implement more robust policies and practices to address racism and other forms of exclusion within the workplace. With financial support from Canadian Heritage's Multicultural and Anti-Racism Program, the *Road By Walking: Participatory Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive Policy Design Through Popular Theatre* project ran from September 2025 - September 2026 with pilots in Regina, SK and Edmonton AB.

The project's premise was simple: that through popular theatre, people with lived experience of oppression could confront those experiences, understand them better, and articulate their support needs. These reflections would then inform the development of policy recommendations for their workplaces and for the Arts, Culture, and Heritage sector more broadly, to encourage organizational leadership to incorporate anti-racism/anti-oppressive policies developed directly from the experiences of staff working in the sector. Popular theatre would support participants to unpack their encounters with systemic oppression in the sector in a way that allowed for joy, fun, and humour in order to prevent potentially retraumatizing them and create opportunities to envision a workplace that was safe, inclusive, equitable, and supportive.




Who We Are

Organizational Partners

Righting Relations Canada is a women-led, pan-Canadian network of adult educators and community organizers working to strengthen the capacity of individuals and organizations using popular education methodology to bring about radical social change for a just society in Canada.

The **John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights** (JHC) is a women-led organization working to advance a culture of peace and human rights through human rights education and community building.

The **Anti-Racism Network** is an alliance of community members from over 30 organizations across Saskatchewan who challenge systemic racism and engage people in transformative processes to unlearn psychologically entrenched racism and achieve anti-racist action in the institutions in which we work and live.

Community Advisors

Mirtha Rivera - Mirtha was born in the capital city of Santiago, Chile, where a military coup overthrew the elected popular government in 1973. Mirtha came to Saskatchewan as a political refugee with her husband and young son in November 1975. The cold weather didn't freeze her creative spark, and she continued her organizing work in the Chilean community, women's community and arts communities.

Her heart is with the ones whose voices are not heard, the disabled, the houseless, the Undocumented. She is a singer, musician, writer, political activist, animal-lover, and mother of two grown sons. She and her companera began their relationship in 1989, lobbied for LGBT rights (including the right to marry) before 2005, and married in 2010.

Becky Sasakamoose Kuffner - Becky is an anti-racist practitioner, a skilled facilitator and a survivor of the 60's scoop from Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation. She has undergraduate degrees from the University of Regina, and L'Université Laval with a Master's of Transformative Justice Education from the University of Saskatchewan. Becky has extensive work experience as a cultural diversity and race consultant, policy analyst, and employment advisor at the community, provincial and national level. She co-founded the Anti-racism Network, is an active member of the National Urban Indigenous Coalitions Council, co-creator of the Indigenous led Equity Indicators Framework and is always grateful for her learning journey on Turtle Island.

Lautaro Reyes - Lautaro is a Chilean-born artist with over 15 years of experience in theatre, visual arts, and community engagement. Their work focuses on migration,

identity, and belonging, using art to foster dialogue, social change, and inclusivity. They are passionate about creating art that engages and empowers all members of society, reflected in their work, such as Native Gardens (2024), Les Gars Art Babayants (2023), Welcome ~~to My Country~~ (2024), and Stories of a Lifetime (2025). Through their art, Lautaro challenges social norms, promotes inclusivity, and invites audiences to reflect on the world we live in and the changes we can create. They believe in creating work that not only entertains but sparks conversations that lead to societal change.

Manuela Valle-Castro - Manuela is an educator, researcher, and advocate with over 25 years of experience exploring systems transformation through cultural and institutional change. Originally from Chile with Mestiza (Spanish-Italian and Afro-Indigenous) background, she holds a PhD in Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice and a master's degree in Women's and Gender Studies, both from the University of British Columbia.

Manuela's work ranges from research and educational strategies that advance social justice to projects that mobilize communities to organize and advocate for their wellbeing. From 2020-2023, she was the Director of the Division of Social Accountability of the College of Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. Manuela also co-founded the Anti-Racism Network, where she led coalition building and advocacy work with Indigenous and settler organizations, and newcomer agencies.

Jean Hillabold - Jean is an Instructor in the Department of English, University of Regina, a freelance writer and author of fiction. She has taught English Literature and creative writing for over 25 years, and her research encompasses the politics of smoking in lesbian social space, feminist publishing in the 1970s/80s, the history and status of erotica, and teaching vampire literature. As an author of speculative fiction and erotica, she has published hundreds of short stories, a novel, and a historical novella. In 2004, Jean wrote and produced a one-act play at the Globe Theatre of Regina. She is also a longtime activist and advocate in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, fighting for, amongst many things, the right for same-gender couples to marry.

Kris Alvarez - Kris is a Treaty 4 Filipina theatre artist who gratefully works in Saskatchewan as a creator, an Artistic Associate, a dramaturg-playwright, a collaborator, and a performer. She has worked with and performed at Curtain Razors Theatre Fadadance, the Artesian Theatre, Persephone Theatre, the Globe Theatre of Regina, and the Heritage Community Association, and was the director of the Globe Theatre School's Youth Company. Kris is known for bringing people together, whether it's in her variety/talk show Burnt Sienna, or in leading conversations through Common Weal Community Arts' Respond To Racism program. Her work addresses culture and identity while encouraging interconnectedness and driving conversations about race, privilege and culture. Besides gathering people and making art inspired from living here, Kris makes space for being herself, daydreaming and rest.

Yaw Baayim - Yaw is a community advocate, educator, and project coordinator based in Edmonton, Alberta. A graduate of the University of Alberta with an MA in Performance Studies, Yaw also holds an MA from the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, a diploma from the Geneva School of Business and Economics, and a Bachelors' degree in Radio, Film, and Television from the University of Ghana.

Yaw began working with the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights (JHC) as a Project Program Coordinator since 2022, where he oversaw the delivery of several civic engagement programs for young leaders, such as the Stride Advocacy program, the Youth ACCTIVATOR program, and *Dear Future YEG*. He currently serves as JHC's Community Outreach and Engagement Coordinator, where he works to build connections within and across communities in Alberta and beyond.

Lisa Odle - Lisa is the Righting Relations' Regina Circle Coordinator a West Hub Representative on the National Steering Committee. The phrase "righting relations" describes her work and her goals, at both the familial and corporate level. Her heart's desire is to be in a right relationship with the Creator and her family; and to build and strengthen healthy, respectful relationships among people of different cultures, races, genders, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Ally Crockford - Ally (she/they) is the National Coordinator at Righting Relations Canada. Based in Ottawa, ON, Ally is a passionate social justice educator, facilitator, administrator, communicator, activist, and advocate who has been working for equity and radical social change for over 20 years. Their work spans nonprofit operations and transformation, academic research, open knowledge advocacy, and feminist and disability justice education. Ally has worked with organizations across industries and continents, always looking to tell stories, engage communities, and facilitate change.









Problem

Any organizations committed to inclusion and equity must acknowledge the ways that oppressive systems exist within them, causing them to reproduce toxic and harmful dynamics, and arts, culture, and heritage organizations are no different. While there has been a demonstrated desire and willingness within the sector to implement anti-racist and anti-oppressive policies, research indicates that the issue is still prevalent.

In 2020, Canadian Art magazine noted that despite public pledges of zero tolerance for racism, discrimination, and harassment, multiple cultural organizations either lacked policies to address how and to whom to report discrimination or harassment, or did not follow through on accountability mechanisms in the event that a complaint was lodged. It noted that "reaching out to boards of directors is... key if workers are concerned about harassment or workplace safety in their organizations," yet too often Boards themselves are poorly equipped to respond to those concerns, in particular because the selection of Board members prioritizes fundraising and prestige. Boards themselves are also typically lacking in diversity; a 2022 study of leadership in 125 Canadian arts and cultural institutions by McMaster University and Toronto Metropolitan University found that only 5.7% of CEOs are racialized, with similar results in Artistic Director and Chair of the Board roles. Anti-oppression education is uncommon in orientation processes for Boards and institutional leadership alike, meaning that leadership often lacks a nuanced and compassionate understanding of discrimination and oppression.

A 2022 study of the relationship between Canadian cultural institutions and Indigenous peoples by the Yellowhead Institute found that not only did Indigenous employees at cultural institutions describe their experience as one of tokenization and alienation, in which the identity and position of staff were used to benefit the institution and gain access to grants, but that this experience intensified with the onset of COVID-19. Like many other industries, the pandemic has had the effect of "distill[ing] the historic challenges... into a clearly visible concentration" within the arts, culture, and heritage sector. Despite a renewal of promises from across all sectors to improve internal anti-racism/anti-oppression policies and centre justice and equity, the intensification of far-right extremism and economic instability has meant that for many Canadians, the workplace has remained unsafe and discriminatory.

This disconnect creates environments where racism and discrimination persist, undermining both staff wellbeing and organizational credibility. The arts, culture, and heritage sector already has a historically tense relationship with marginalized communities, particularly Indigenous and other racialized communities where colonialism has resulted in theft and exploitation, and the toxicity of such workplaces informs the experience of visitors and local communities as well. Organizations that struggle to create welcoming and equitable spaces for their staff are more likely to face similar difficulties in developing programming that is inviting to marginalized folks within the community. In

organizations where staff awareness of systemic oppression is low, there is also a greater likelihood that the communities served by these organizations will experience discrimination, alienation, and microaggressions.

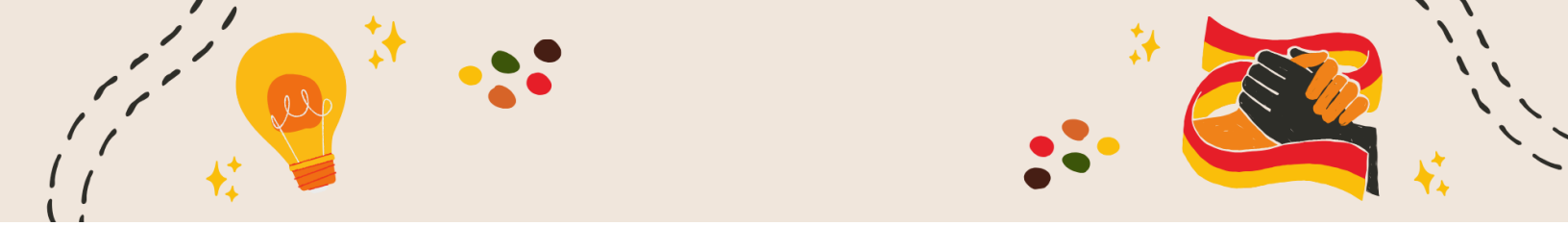
Cultivating intersectional spaces in which Indigenous, Black, racialized, and other marginalized staff can connect and share their lived experience of oppression and develop a series of policies and practices to address discrimination as they see it is a fundamental component of building an anti-oppression and anti-racist framework within the workplace. By recognizing and amplifying the knowledge and lived experience of staff from marginalized communities within institutional policies and practices, particularly with respect to anti-racism, anti-oppression, and codes of conduct, organizations can establish a more equitable foundation on which to create opportunities to connect with marginalized folks in the communities they serve.

What Is Popular Theatre?

Also known as participatory theater, community theater, protest theater, action theater, theater for social change, and theater of the oppressed, popular theater uses theater as a means of promoting social and political change. Inspired and informed by popular education, which blurs the line between educator and learner and aims to empower people to critically examine their social and political reality and take action to transform them, popular theatre similarly seeks to erase the distinction between audience and performer in order to effect social transformation. Interactive techniques engage participants in a process of exploring, analysing, and transforming the reality in which they live, building pathways for empathy and connection while challenging assumptions, stereotypes, and systems of power and oppression. Popular theatre has been a powerful source of transformation across countries and cultures, though it is especially deeply connected to many large-scale resistance movements across Latin America in the 20th Century. It was perhaps most famously articulated by Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal in the 1970s, whose community-based “Theatre of the Oppressed” transforms passive audience members into active participants who reclaim their power using performance as a rehearsal for real-world liberation.

What We Did

We started by building a project advisory board to steer the overall direction and to support project management, program design, delivery, and evaluation. With support from partner organizations like the John Humphrey Centre and the Anti-racism Network, Righting Relations reached out to advocates, policy experts, popular theatre facilitators,



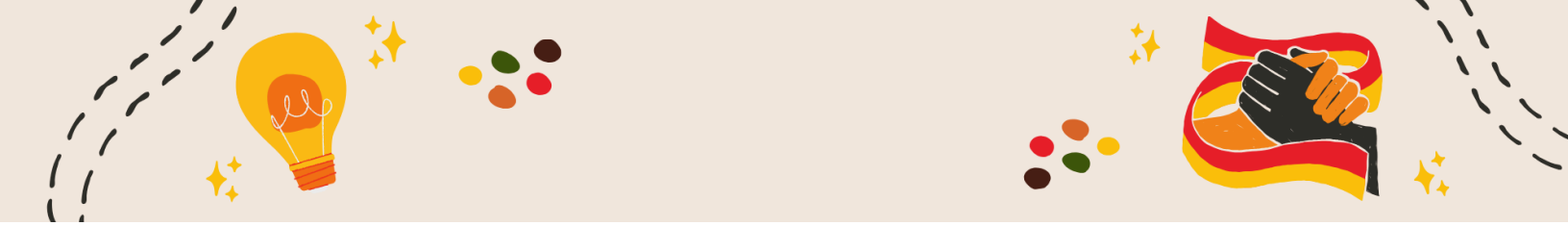
and members of the arts, culture, and heritage community in the Prairies. Through one on one and group conversations, we recruited a project advisory of 9 people, prioritizing Indigenous, Black, and other racialized voices who also had intersecting experiences of oppression. Members consisted of four representatives who work or had worked in the arts, culture, and heritage sector, two experts on anti-racist and anti-oppressive policies, and three with backgrounds in project management, administration, and events coordination who have also worked extensively in the human rights and social justice sector.

In November 2025, the project advisory board met in person in Regina, SK where they spent three days collaboratively designing a workshop framework grounded in popular theatre methodology and identifying organizations in the arts, culture, and heritage sector in Regina and Edmonton who might be open to, and benefit from, the workshops. The next stage of the project focused on event planning, outreach, and recruitment, before the workshops themselves were held in late June/early July, first in Regina and then in Edmonton. Each one-day workshop had 13 participants, with multiple organizations represented, as well as some independent artists. Throughout the day, popular theatre activities invited participants to explore the embodied experience of power and oppression, to tap into their experiences in the sector, and to build empathy across their own differences. In recognition of the fact that discussions could potentially touch on painful or even traumatic experiences, the facilitation team at each event included at least two people trained in crisis support and mental health first aid. The workshops were recorded to generate transcripts that could be used to capture and inform policy recommendations as well as project evaluation; to respect the confidentiality of the participants, the transcripts were anonymized and the recordings themselves were not shared outside of the project advisory board members.

Following the workshops, anti-racist/anti-oppression policy experts reviewed the anonymized transcript from both workshops to identify policy recommendations that were then shared with all organizations that participated in the pilots, as well as a wider outreach list of arts, culture, and heritage organizations in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Along with the recommendations themselves, we also included a resource map of organizations and individual consultants doing work in the social justice sector who could work with organizations to review their own policies and support them to implement the recommendations and measure their impact.

Challenges

The most significant challenges that the project faced were navigating the sector's programming schedule, and building relationships with organizations within the project's timetable. Early on, project advisory board members voiced concern about the intention



of piloting the workshops internally with a specific arts organization: to ask an organization to allow the majority of their team to spend the day together engaging in this workshop would require a strong relationship with both leadership and staff, as well as substantial planning on the part of the organization so as not to interfere with the programming schedules set many months, even a year or more, in advance.

Building a relationship of that depth takes time, and while some project advisory board members had pre-existing relationships with local organizations, we lacked the capacity to build on those individual dynamics within a one-year timeframe, especially when taking into account the pressures and realities of a strict programming schedule on the organizations we wished to work with. We also did not have the financial resources to be able to compensate organizations for staff time, and found that while some organizations have designated professional development opportunities for their teams, they were typically already scheduled by the time that the project team was in contact with organizations.

As a result, the project shifted to open registration to staff working with any arts, culture, and heritage organization, as well as independent artists and consultants in the sector who routinely worked with, or have worked within those organizations. This not only allowed us to hear from a wider range of voices in both cities, it also offered participants the opportunity to engage with peers from outside of their organization and without having to navigate any internal dynamics that could have made it difficult to be vulnerable.

Limitations in the timeframe and budget also meant that initial plans to follow up with organizations after they had received the policy recommendations and outreach map could not be conducted before the project deadline, although the project advisory team remains invested in continuing this work.

Results

The response to the workshops was overwhelmingly positive; in closing circles, participants shared the importance of having spaces to be able to share their experiences in the sector, and the joy of being able to explore those experiences through the lens of popular theatre. Many found the popular theatre exercises to be a powerful way of exploring power dynamics that might otherwise be invisible; they also spoke about the capacity of the workshops to foster connection, encourage openness and vulnerability, and challenge unspoken assumptions.

For many, the workshop was their first opportunity to discuss issues within the arts, culture, and heritage sector that they had witnessed or experienced in a space that was without judgment or expectation. Rather than coming forward with a complaint, a process which can lead to investigations or mediations that are often just as, sometimes even

more, painful and disruptive than the issue being addressed, these workshops offered them an opportunity to discuss moments of discrimination, conflict, or harm that they have experienced within the sector without feeling the need to explain how they were impacted or justify the harm that has been caused.

Participants in both workshops had different roles in their organizations: some were in leadership positions and others were not, but most identified that they occupied positions of power and authority in different spaces in the sector, whether they were on a board of directors elsewhere or working in community spaces. Several spoke about bringing a popular theatre approach to their work and conversations, or expressed a desire to continue having social justice and equity conversations through popular theatre, potentially establishing a local troupe for that purpose.

Because there was no time for follow-up interviews to determine the impact of the policy recommendations on the organizations, we are left to rely on the feedback received from direct participants and a limited number of responses from organizations; all of these responses expressed appreciation for the space to discuss, and for the recommendations and community resource map, but whether the recommendations will be implemented into organizational policies remains to be seen.





Lessons Learned

The project demonstrated that employees and independent contractors working in the arts, culture, and heritage sector are craving opportunities to discuss the ways in which systems of oppression impact their professional lives and work without being constrained to traditional complaint and investigation mechanisms. Throughout the workshop exercises, participants were offered the freedom to explore the ways that power dynamics, systemic oppression, and discrimination are endemic and yet often invisible in their workplaces, without fear of judgment, repercussions, or even triggering mandatory investigations that are often intrusive and rarely offer solutions.

Rather than seeking punitive policy measures, participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to explore the complexities of these issues as part of the process of identifying what kinds of organizational policies and procedures they would like to see in place. While we initially anticipated the suggestions and recommendations to be focused on specific policies or protocols, what we found was that the vast majority of participants were more concerned with a lack of engagement in, or transparency regarding, the policy-writing process within organizations. There were several expressions of frustration regarding a consultant-oriented approach that involved limited or cursory engagement with employees, volunteers, or community members, despite the fact that they are disproportionately likely to be affected by those policies.

Using a popular theatre approach to discussing racism and oppression in the workplace offered participants the freedom to more easily identify the changes they would like to see in their own organizations and across the sector more broadly; most immediately connected their individual experience to structural and systemic issues, emphasizing that while most organizational anti-oppression and anti-racism policies are focused on individual actions, the reality is that those policies are insufficient to address the deeply-rooted systems causing the most harm.

One of the biggest lessons throughout this project was the need for organizations to incorporate more creative and playful approaches in their efforts to decolonize, develop more robust DEI frameworks, and create safer, more welcoming spaces for staff, volunteers, and communities. Methodologies like popular theatre can be easily dismissed due to their unstructured nature and emphasis on play and fun, but this is precisely what makes them such an essential tool for organizations who are committed to equity and justice. Throughout the process, popular theatre allowed both participants and facilitators to be vulnerable and empathetic in a way that cultivated stronger bonds. It also offered a framework for exploring difficult topics in a way that reduced the likelihood of escalation and conflict.

Organizations seeking to put their values into practice would be better served by exploring popular theatre as an opportunity not only to directly engage staff at all levels in the process of developing and reviewing policies and procedures related to anti-racism and anti-oppression, but to build stronger team relationships by fostering empathy and connection.