

# WHAT'S ART GOT TO DO WITH IT?

The role of arts and culture in a community's survival during a global pandemic

By Kari-Lynn Winters



## INTRODUCTION

The positive policy impacts of having a vibrant arts and culture community ticks many boxes. The arts and arts education promote innovation and are found to have a positive impact on an artist's self-fulfillment and confidence, on the inclusion of diverse populations, and the acceptance of marginalized communities across Canada, including our Indigenous Peoples. A lively arts and culture scene is also known to increase quality of life for all local residents, contribute to the economy, as well as attract and retain a younger demographic (Conteh and Phillips, 2019).

However, in March 2020, artmaking and artful educational practices came to a halt as communities in Niagara and all over the world faced global shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. New protocols, public lockdowns, medical and service disruptions, employment losses, travel bans, and border closings were put in place in order to slow the spread of the deadly disease. These restraints not only created feelings of confusion, isolation, and hopelessness, but also financial devastation. The effects may not be fully understood for years to come.

Locally, creative industries in Niagara that relied on patrons and audience members were some of the hardest hit since public gatherings were strictly forbidden and punishable with hefty fines. Art organizations across Niagara, like other regions, faced difficult decisions of whether to cancel their upcoming seasons or worse: close their doors for good. Their decisions impacted

artists, audiences, and local businesses alike. But performances with reduced audiences were not financially feasible. Additionally, many local arts organizations rely on charity in order to support their educational and outreach programming. Economic uncertainty and cultural strife made this fundraising even more challenging. The national picture is grim. Statistics Canada (2021) numbers show that the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector has been, by far, the hardest hit industry during the pandemic, with its real gross domestic product (the monetary value of the goods and services produced in the industry) cut in half over the course of the pandemic, from February 2020 to December 2020.



## METHOD

This policy brief builds on the Niagara Community Observatory's (NCO) 2019 research that focused on the culture sector's economic value to Niagara. Updating those numbers, as of 2020, there are approximately 1,200 creative and performing artists in the region. Performing arts companies support approximately 786 jobs, and that doesn't include the promoters, agents/managers, and independent artists, writers and performers.<sup>7</sup>

But the value of this sector to the community is more than economic and this brief seeks to expand on the argument that the arts nurture "an ecosystem of inclusivity and respect for diversity" (Conteh & Phillips,

2019, p. 8). Using vignettes from art-based qualitative research that occurred in the Niagara region before COVID-19 pandemic, the participants' stories remind our local communities of how art supports its citizens, leverages social awareness, and promotes inclusivity. These vignettes highlight human experiences. They were chosen based on the themes mentioned above and include Niagara residents from diverse communities. This assemblage celebrates artful practices, suggesting why the arts continue to be important to the lives of Niagara citizens, and should be supported by policy makers and stakeholders even during a global pandemic and during the community's recovery.

## VIGNETTE #1: THE ARTS BOLSTER SELF-CONFIDENCE AND MENTAL WELLNESS

Some might argue that art stems from an individual's emotions and thoughts, working its way outward (Blatt-Gross, 2017). Others suggest that art is socially-constructed – a result of society's influence, values, and collective practices and are mediated inwards through an individual's creative interpretations. Perhaps another option is that artmaking is simultaneously individualized and collective, facilitating joint endeavors of identity, connection, self-expression, and inclusivity.

In a study conducted at Start Me Up Niagara, Margaret (pseudonym), a middle-aged, Niagara woman, used artistic modes (e.g., photography, dance, drama, mask-making) to voice ideas, build a sense of belonging within her community, and refute/proclaim her civic engagement. This study highlighted the experiences of eight marginalized individuals, facing significant life challenges such as addiction, mental illness, poverty, homelessness and unemployment. The study took place over a six-week period, culminating in two public performances.

Margaret, who had struggled with poverty most of her life, talked about her lack of resources and motivation, stating, "It gets you down. Poverty is a lifestyle people don't expect to live." However, Margaret came to the project with an open mind and an equally open heart. Through journaling and arts-based practices she voiced her perspectives on being homeless. Her work was introspective at first, starting from inside and working its way outward (i.e., mask-making into writing into drama into dance/movement). Margaret held up her mask and

read her journal entry. She spoke about being a good and strong person, stating that when you are homeless "self-esteem elevations are not recognizable [to others] because of external appearances."

When asked to unpack this idea through dance, she illustrated strength and boldness—at first. Her body demonstrated expanded, powerful movements. Then, as she noticed others watching, she shrank in size and displayed less force. She had become aware of the ways that others positioned her. "I'm not a bad person," she stated, [...even though....] "my appearance isn't appropriate for others to look at."

External forces (e.g., other people's watching eyes) seemed to change her embodiment. For Margaret, this study became intricately connected to rebuilding her own identity and creating spaces of belonging. By the end of the project, Margaret's strength returned. She was a consistent and valued member, who led scenes with expanding confidence. Through bodily expressions, poetry, and mask-making, she appeared to thrive.

Through art, Margaret displayed how poverty positioned her. She believed that having an outward appearance of shabby clothes and unkempt hair made onlookers interpret that she was not a good person. She refuted this idea artfully, while creating healthy spaces of inclusion. These artistic expressions not only allowed Margaret to interact with others and build connections, but also to build self-confidence, take risks, and negotiate a braver identity.

<sup>7</sup> Source: *Emsi Labor Market Analytics, 2020*

During her introduction of the play, she had this to say about her masks and her artistic process: “I started here. (*Margaret holds up neutral white mask that is not shown here*). But ended up here.”



## VIGNETTE #2: THE ARTS PROMOTE SELF-ACTUALIZATION, COMMUNITY-BUILDING, AND RECONCILIATION

To better understand critical issues of forced migration, marginalization, truth and reconciliation, and co-existence, a group of creative scholars, alongside international and domestic graduate students, gathered to build a play. The scenes were shaped in different ways, through poetry, music, literature, movement/dance, and drama. In this way, playbuilding became our methodology. The original aim of the project was to mobilize the research findings of Dr. Snežana Obradović-Ratković’s doctoral dissertation, “Teachers Without Borders: Exploring Experiences, Transitions and Identities of Refugee Women Teachers from the Former Yugoslavia,” through the arts, while at the same time, initiate conversations and develop relationships between refugee/immigrant and Indigenous women in the Niagara region.

Snežana shared her experience of coming to Canada in scenes she created alongside other actors. These embodied, poetic scenes about displacement illustrated simultaneous emotions: confusion, excitement, frustration, and resistance. Snežana stated, “It was exciting at first. And then it became challenging.” In addition to language challenges, she (and the other actors) felt that they couldn’t be fully themselves and that their lives were in limbo—between two worlds. She went on to suggest that art helps people achieve self-fulfillment and realize their personal potential. In this way, Snežana believed that art is a human need. She explained, “Though all 25 members of the team had their own individual struggles, they found strength and belonging through artful practices.” This idea is spotlighted in the poetic scene *We Want to Paint on the Walls of the Cave*.

### We Want to Paint on the Walls of the Cave

All: We want to paint on the walls of the cave.  
As humans,  
Actor #1: we first thought about biological survival.  
Actor #2: But at the same time people thought about art,  
Actor #2 and #3: describing their lives every day.  
All: And that is missing, you know.  
Actor #4: Missing.  
Actor 2: Something is missing.  
Actor #5: Those paintings on the walls of the cave.  
Actor #6: I don’t have it you know. It’s biological  
existence only.  
Actor #3: Only?  
Actor #7: Only.  
Actor #2, #5 and #7: And I’m lucky to have the theatre.  
Actor #8: And our stories.  
Actor #2: And literature.  
Actor #6: Our drawings are already here.  
Actor #2: And people.  
Actor #4: Lucky to learn something new.  
To write a poem.  
Actor #7: Or two?  
Actor #4: My freedom is my teaching.  
All: It makes me happy.  
Actor #4: It keeps me alive.  
All: My office work doesn’t give me  
that motivation  
Actor #1: To be alive.  
All: Alive!  
Actor #4: To be brave  
Brave!  
To paint on the walls of the cave!

Dr. Catherine Longboat, a First Nations participant with original ancestry and knowledge from Turtle Island, could relate to Snežana’s challenges with navigating a whole new world, and with having her culture and language taken away. As an Indigenous woman and Indigenous Knowledge Holder (entrenched in Haudenosaunee/ Six Nations Confederacy/Iroquois and Anisnnaabe/Ojibwa ways of knowing), Catherine has also experienced marginalization and language loss. For example, while discussing a book written by Melanie Florence (an author of Cree and Scottish heritage), entitled *Stolen Words*, Longboat responded, “I was surprised by my own emotions of realizing how much I lost when I could no longer speak the Cayuga language with my Cayuga great grandmother.”

Here, Catherine shared the story of how the residential school system was used as the educative tool to forcefully and intentionally strip Indigenous Peoples of their languages. She added, “Culture and self-esteem were diminished as a means to assimilate First Peoples into the Settler Canadian fabric of colonialism.” Thus, throughout the play, and film, Catherine addressed the story of the Two Row Wampum Belt, expressing how the original peoples and newcomers need to carry out respectful relationships: both need the other despite their different lenses. Language, culture, and expressions of spirituality are important for all the peoples coexisting on Turtle Island, and for future generations.



### VIGNETTE #3: THE ARTS EMBRACE DIVERSE POPULATIONS AND LEVERAGE SOCIAL AWARENESS

Following the viewing of a school play on body image that was presented to grades 4-8 students in the Niagara region, students were given opportunities to participate in a “mantle of the expert” (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) drama workshop. In this workshop, children were asked to take on the role of experienced designers and were given the task to construct the perfect mannequin. Once designed, these elementary students were questioned by the CEO of the company (actually a graduate student in role) about their decisions.

John, a 10-year old boy with autism, called out a few times while drawing his mannequin. It wasn’t clear if he wanted to get the CEO’s attention or if he was demonstrating repetitive perseveration behaviours, as is sometimes seen with children with autism.

Mary (in role as the CEO), noticing John, beelines over to him. The other children seem annoyed. Some tell him to pay attention.

**Mary:** Have you created the perfect mannequin for our company?

**John:** I believe so.

**Mary:** And what is so great about your design?

**John:** We didn’t think about the...um...the design as much as...we

**Mary [interrupting]:** Didn’t think of the design? What! This is my clothing company. The designs are extremely important.

*Audible moans erupt from the others.*

**John [continuing]:** Not as much as who it (the mannequin) is for.

**Kari-Lynn in role as the CEO assistant [to Mary]:** Sorry boss. I don’t know...

**John:** My designs are ....

**Kari-Lynn [to John]:** Please explain.

**John:** Let’s...let’s think about who the designs are for.... Like for Tony....Tony likes to cook and play video games. So, if I made the perfect mannequin for Tony, I would need to think about the mannequin’s hands.

**Mary:** Yes. Why the hands?

**John:** Cause that's what matters to Tony. And Brianna wears fancy shirts. The top part of the mannequin would matter to her.

**Kari-Lynn:** Oh! So you're saying we need to think about the buyer.

**John:** Yes.

*Audible agreement from the others.*

**Mary:** Very thorough, expert. The others could learn a lot from you.

**Kari-Lynn:** I told you we have the best designers here, boss.

*A child puts his arm around John and says, "NICE!"*

Here, John had seemingly not been paying attention. His callouts seemed disruptive. However, in actuality, through role work and drawing, John was able to stand up to the CEO (an adult) and express himself clearly. John demonstrated his own understandings and in doing so, positioned himself as someone who was knowledgeable and empathetic— "a very thorough expert."

Perhaps it was the flexibility of drama that allowed this empathy to happen, a form of expression that required him to think outside of himself. Here, the roleplay captured John's interest and provided a safe environment where he could speak up. When asked later about the drama and about his own challenges, he simply said, "I am very direct."

In traditional classes, callouts and direct responses might be unwanted. In drama however, callouts are valued, as are quiet approaches and even silence. In drama, there is room for silence and for stillness, for action and embodiment, and for callouts and direct responses too. Through dramatic in-role conversations with the CEO, John's peers got insights into John's unique perspective. And these insights positioned him differently—as knowledgeable and as a valued member of the classroom.



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the vignettes above (all from studies that happened before the global pandemic), study participants spotlighted some of the benefits that the arts bring to a community. Here, Niagara locals from diverse backgrounds had opportunities to express themselves, see their ideas be valued, and work collaboratively. But more importantly, according to the study participants, these projects underscored the unique power of the arts to promote inclusivity, leverage social awareness, and boost self-empowerment.

Margaret used artistry to help re-build a stronger and more independent identity. The drama, dance, and mask-making enabled her to see multiple perspectives at one time. The study gave her a purpose—a place to be and a community to be a part of, where she felt comforted, more confident, healthier, and valued.

Snežana and Catherine not only showcased their ideas and feelings to community members, they also spoke about inclusion and building life-long friendships with their fellow participants. But more than that, the

project gave immigrants, refugees, Indigenous people, and international and domestic graduate students opportunities to better understand the narratives of others. This may be because the arts and arts education compel people to lean in, know others' experiences, and empathize.

John, a child with autism who may have felt excluded in the past, played an important role in the "Mantle of the Expert" drama workshop. He had opportunities to stand up for his peers and speak directly to the CEO. It gave the other participants chances to see the value John brought to the group, leveraging their social awareness.

Just over a year ago, the arts were not only thriving in Niagara; they were making a difference in the lives of Niagara community members. That all changed when the COVID-19 pandemic happened. Everything stopped.

Niagara artists are, however, a resilient and creative group. Even as artists and art educators were left reeling in their homes from COVID-19, moments of triumph and

hope followed in the summer months. Theatre companies such as Carousel Players began creating Zoom plays, musicians played music behind thick plastic in Niagara Falls hotels or on outdoor patios at Niagara wineries, and the 2020 St. Catharines Arts Awards went virtual. Everyday acts of creativity, inclusion, social awareness, and even public empowerment popped up, in and around Niagara, bringing connection, new approaches to artful practice, and inspiration back to the community. St. Catharines opened up its main street and brought in musicians.

The arts community in Niagara has historically contributed to the health of the local economy and of its citizens. Even though the sector took a major financial hit in 2020, it has continued to find ways to offer spaces of collaboration, leverage social awareness, and promote inclusivity. Now, more than ever, the arts need the support of individuals, municipal governments, policy makers, and stakeholders in the public and private sectors to help it regain its strength.

The vignettes shared above are consistent with studies, including the NCO's culture brief (2019), that maintain a central element of any community's resilience is the critical mass of cultural activities—making up its life, outlook, creativity and ethos. The arts sector is invaluable in Niagara not merely for its economic value of over \$2 billion in direct and associated spending annually, but also in its effects on the overall quality of life.

Moreover, it is worth noting that for a mid-sized region like Niagara without the economic gravitas or density of large urban places like Toronto or Vancouver, the “soft power” and “cool factor” of a thriving arts sector can hardly be overestimated. Regions known for their performing arts sector can leverage their “hip buzz” to strategically position themselves as ideal places to live and work.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are just a few ideas:

Niagara policy makers and stakeholders should take a proper stock of the region's post-COVID assets in the arts sector. This means understanding, appreciating and promoting the sector well beyond its direct economic benefits. The arts and its intrinsic sociocultural contributions mean that it serves as a critical conduit to a more holistic community life and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Artful Presentations in Public Spaces* should be facilitated to broaden audiences, expand knowledge, and offer spaces for critical and creative thinking, public equity, and social empowerment. Art can also be used to bring diverse communities into newly defined physical spaces (e.g., art in outdoor galleries or street theatre) within the Niagara region.

*Create Educational Programs* that build relationships between mentor artists and community members. This can encourage equity and accessibility, build social

empowerment, expand audiences, frame messages in comprehensible ways that can build compassion for the well-being of others, break language barriers, and broaden the notion of "education" in ways that are not didactic or stifling.

*Target Grants for Businesses to hire local artists.*

This gives artists a sense of purpose and an income throughout and after the pandemic. It expands spaces of civic centeredness (bringing locals together safely) and at the same time facilitates culture. It makes the Niagara region more aesthetic and has the potential to bring beauty and joy to community members. It demonstrates that artful practice is part of the social fabric of Niagara. And it encourages inter-generational and/or family-centered cultural activities, creating safe environments for diverse new knowledge to evolve, while appealing to people's sense that Niagara is a "quality place" to live.



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