

QTBIPOC Community Engagement Toolkit for Theatre Makers

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Background

What is the QTBIPOC Community Engagement Toolkit?

The Toolkit is a resource recommending best practices for making theatre with/among QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) communities. It's important to acknowledge that QTBIPOC communities (like all communities) include a diverse range of people, who each have different experiences and perspectives. The Toolkit doesn't attempt to speak on behalf of QTBIPOC communities. Instead, it offers a series of questions for consideration. These questions emerge from the social justice practice of Fay Nass, a QTPOC artist, educator, and leader, who has a long history of collaboration with their peers. Along with questions, the Toolkit includes examples from *Mother Tongues*, an arts project that Fay led as the Artistic Director of the Frank Theatre. *Mother Tongues* explored the experiences of queer EAL (English as an Additional Language) communities.

Who is the Toolkit For?

The Toolkit can be a resource for non-QTBIPOC artists and organizations seeking to understand how (or whether) they can meaningfully collaborate with QTBIPOC communities. It can also be a resource for QTBIPOC artists and organizations seeking to know more about how their peers have approached meaningful collaboration.

Why is the Toolkit Needed?

On Turtle Island (a name used by some Indigenous people for what settlers call North America), power within the arts has been - and continues to be - often held by people who are white, cisgender, and heterosexual. Because of this, the needs and experiences of white, cisgender, and heterosexual communities are often prioritized. In contrast, QTBIPOC communities face barriers, harm, and exclusion. There are even more obstacles for those who are QTBIPOC and EAL, immigrants, low income, D/deaf, disabled, and/or neurodivergent. Additional privileges have been - and continue to be - granted to those who are anglophones, citizens, wealthy, hearing, able-bodied, and/or neurotypical.

Currently, funders are encouraging arts organizations to actively include QTBIPOC artists and audiences. The push for change is important, but beyond inclusion, QTBIPOC communities need to be leaders, shaping the future of the arts. They have first-hand knowledge of the industry's injustices and are already creating alternatives. The Toolkit aims to uplift QTBIPOC leadership, by sharing learnings that come from arts projects built by and for these communities.

Statement from Fay Nass About Their Artistic Practice

My work exists beyond a Eurocentric and colonial context. I have an extensive methodology for creation and rehearsals. I have been developing this methodology since 2010 as a response to colonial and hierarchical structures that we often work within and that enable injury to marginalized and culturally diverse folks. I have used this methodology for a decade, not only in community-based projects, but in everything I work on.

In my devised theatre work, I use interview questions and exercises to lead the group in telling their stories visually and via text. Later, I shape a piece by linking ideas and finding a through-line. It is important to my practice that I am not forcing a particular narrative, but rather guiding the participants to share honest perspectives and reveal themes that are important to them in a safe space. In this way, there is a lot of space and time for processing. We eat together; we do not follow a rigid and structured schedule. Participants feel empowered: each person is a leader and an active participant. The methodology for all my work is built in trust, empathy, and an ethical, non-hierarchical creation approach.

I favour process over product, and in this authentic, open approach, create personal agency in the most organic and equitable way possible. Also, I engage active listeners to unpack heavy material if project participants wish to talk to a professional to better contextualize their experiences.

Disrupting White Supremacy Culture

As a QTBIPOC artist, educator, and leader, Fay Nass intuitively works in ways that disrupt white supremacy culture. White supremacy culture is a term describing the beliefs and practices of institutions that privilege whiteness. In Tema Okun's writing on challenging white supremacy culture¹, she articulates several values that resonate deeply with Fay, including:

- Complexity over either/or thinking:
- Community over individualism

¹ Tema Okun's writing on white supremacy culture builds on the work of many others, including (but not limited to): Andrea Ayvazian, Bree Carlson, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Eli Dueker, Nancy Emond, Kenneth Jones, Jonn Lunsford, Joan Olsson, David Rogers, James Williams, Sally Yee, Grassroots Leadership, Equity Institute Inc, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Challenging White Supremacy workshop, the Lillie Allen Institute, the Western States Center, and the contributions of hundreds of participants in the DR process.

- Power sharing over power hoarding
- Transformational relations instead of transactional relationships
- Real equity over equity washing
- Self and community care instead of over working
- Vulnerability over defensiveness

The Toolkit explores how these values showed up in Fay's work on the Mother Tongues project.

Fay Nass' Community Engagement History with the Frank Theatre

In 2016, Fay Nass acted as an EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) consultant for Q2Q: A Symposium on Queer Theatre and Performance in Canada, hosted by the Frank Theatre and Simon Fraser University. The symposium brought up urgent conversations about white supremacy in the queer community. In response, Fay collaborated with QTBIPOC peers on creating *The Pink Line*, a devised performance addressing racism in queer spaces. *The Pink Line* demonstrated the positive impact of community-engaged devised projects that centre QTBIPOC artists. It also inspired Fay to further explore the specifics of queer and trans immigrants' experiences.

In 2018, Fay became the Artistic Director of the Frank Theatre. The year after, the company partnered with Rainbow Refugee on *Diaspora*, a series of workshops with queer and trans immigrants and refugees. *Diaspora* became *Be-Longing*, a theatrical performance on film, which was collectively created by three artists from Iran (Fay Nass), India (Meghna Haldar), and Taiwan (Sammy Chien). *Be-longing* resonated with a wide range of audiences, receiving presentations at the Cultch, the Madrid International

Film Festival, the New York City International Film Festival, and the Nice International Film Festival.

In 2021, The Frank Theatre and Buddies in Bad Times co-hosted a second Symposium on Queer Theatre and Performance in Canada, as a follow-up to the 2016 conference. Data collected at the symposium shed light on the specific experiences of queer and trans EAL communities. This motivated the Frank to launch a multi-phase arts project engaging these communities, called Mother Tongues.

Throughout Fay's work as an artist, educator, and leader, they've witnessed how theatre projects can build social support for QTBIPOC peers, while advancing their artistic careers. Past project participants have formed lasting relationships with colleagues and achieved significant professional successes. At the same time, there continues to be a lack of QTBIPOC representation in the performing arts. QTBIPOC communities are drawn to theatre, but hesitate to engage because of a large number of barriers. Research clearly demonstrates this, including the survey and panel discussion that the Frank conducted in 2018, called *Envisioning the Future of Queer Theatre*.

Best Practices for Making Theatre with QTBIPOC Communities

Identity (Community Over Individualism)

Mother Tongues acknowledged that our identities matter – that we are not just individuals, but community members tied to larger histories and social movements. The

project was led by QTPOC director/facilitator Fay Nass, with support from QTPOC facilitator Jen Sungshine (who guided some of the early sessions). The majority of the project's participants were also QTBIPOC. This met an important community need. Many participants described the isolation they've felt because of a lack of dedicated QTBIPOC spaces. As one person said: "Most events that we've attended are very queer, masc, and white presenting, and not all of us feel comfortable. We're always fighting to find our space." Participants emphasized that they couldn't bring their full selves to primarily white queer environments. "It's so hard to find spaces that welcome us as a whole. A part of our identities has to be separated, either as a queer person or a South American person." *Mother Tongues* addressed this by centering QTBIPOC leadership and participation.

Reflection Questions:

- What communities/social groups are you part of?
- As a theatre maker, what privileges do you have? Privilege is when a social group has advantages because they are in a position of power.
- As a theatre maker, what oppression do you experience? Oppression is when a social group faces barriers because they are not in a position of power.
- How does your identity support and/or limit your ability to meet the needs of QTBIPOC communities?

Culture

Embracing cultural difference was at the heart of *Mother Tongues*. As a multi-lingual project, it accounted for how every culture understands queerness and transness differently. Director Fay Nass made their cultural lens apparent throughout the process. They also held space for participants' cultural perspectives. One example of this came

up during introductions. Often, there is an expectation that people share their pronouns when they introduce themselves. Fay invited a more expansive discussion, by asking participants: what's your opinion about sharing pronouns? The question was informed by Fay's own experience as an Iranian: "In Farsi, we have a third person pronoun that's singular and then plural. The beauty of Farsi is that it allows space for interpretation... it's interesting how notions of identity exist when the system of your birth has a specific shape. I have always felt more genderqueer in Iranian settings, even when they're more homophobic."

Reflection Questions:

- What cultures do you come from?
- What cultural values have you learned?
- How will these values show up in your work with QTBIPOC communities?

Relevance (Real Equity Over Equity Washing)

Mother Tongues acknowledged the importance of pursuing actual equity, rather than the illusion of equity, by listening to those who are most impacted by oppression. The project emerged from Fay Nass' own experiences as a QTBIPOC artist, along with feedback given by the wider community through surveys and consultations. To further ensure community relevance, Mother Tongues had a multi-phase structure, which allowed for flexibility and input from participants. Though Fay planned the first phase beforehand, they didn't plan the second phase until they worked with participants and learned about their needs. After this, Fay decided that the second phase would involve making a short documentary film. They have yet to plan the third phase, but are considering setting up artistic mentorships for each participant.

Reflection Questions:

- What are the goals of your project?
- To what extent have the goals been decided based on what you/your organization needs vs. what QTBIPOC communities need?
- What flexibility is there for goals to change in response to the needs of QTBIPOC communities?

Decision-Making Power (Power Sharing Over Power Hoarding)

Mother Tongues recognized that oppression thrives in environments where power is hoarded by the few rather than shared among many. The project placed power in the hands of its QTBIPOC participants, inviting them to decide how (and whether) they'd be involved in each phase. This was important for several reasons. Participants had many different relationships to being "out" (being public about their queerness and/or transness) - especially in front of their families. As one person said: "I can see the beauty and possibility of this for other queer BIPOC people - that they're able to communicate with family and that they can find that unity together. But it's hard for me to apply it to my own journey." Furthermore, participants had many different relationships to art-making. Some were emerging artists seeking to develop their practices. Others worked in non-artistic fields and were seeking a sense of belonging. Many wanted both of these things. By allowing for flexibility in how/whether each person would be involved in each phase, Mother Tongues accounted for a variety of perspectives.

Reflection Questions:

- Who will make decisions?
- What opportunities will there be for participants to make decisions about their own involvement?
- What decisions will you make in consultation with participants? If you'll make decisions without consultation, what will the impact on the participants be?

Trust Building (Vulnerability Over Defensiveness)

Mother Tongues recognized that vulnerability is necessary for trust-building, especially within communities that regularly face harm and exclusion. As a director, Fay realized that they couldn't simply expect others to share intimate personal experiences. They needed to open up and take risks as well. Fay answered all the questions that they asked participants, approaching the process as a fellow community member, rather than an authority figure. Setting a tone of mutual openness invited trust to develop. As one participant expressed: "I'm so baffled by how close I feel to all of you, even through a screen. It's closer than I've been with people in person, and in such a short amount of time." The whole team's commitment to vulnerability also allowed for a deeper engagement with the project's themes. As another participant reflected: "All of you, through your generosity of sharing yourselves and your knowledge, have really put into focus the relationship to language and the power of being someone who's EAL."

Reflection Questions

- Who will be asked to share personal information and experiences?
- Will vulnerability be expected from both the organizers and participants?
- If vulnerability isn't expected from both, how will trust be built? How will you address the power imbalance?

Care (Self and Community Care Instead of Over Working)

White supremacy culture prioritizes people's productivity over their wellbeing – especially when these people are BIPOC, queer, trans, EAL, immigrants, low income, D/deaf, disabled, and/or neurodivergent. It was thus crucial for Mother Tongues to care

for participants and value their emotional labour. The Frank compensated participants for being present and sharing - without expecting them to also deliver artistic content. Fay prioritized emotional processing and debriefing, making time for it even when they had other activities planned. They also established community agreements (a set of guidelines for how to work respectfully with each other). Above all, Fay balanced discussions about painful experiences with more affirming conversations. As one participant said: “this workshop was very helpful for me to better understand myself... We have to pass through bad situations, which is sad, but... we have a community to support us, and we're not alone.”

Reflection Questions:

- What emotional labour does your project ask for? What are you giving participants in return?
- How will caring for yourselves and each other be part of the project?
- What practices do you have in place for preventing and addressing harm?

Accessibility

Access needs (a concept that comes from disability activism) are the things that people require to participate in the world. Everyone has them - but the needs of privileged

groups are often prioritized. Accessibility was a key consideration for Mother Tongues. Given the diversity of QTBIPOC communities, the participants brought a range of needs. Fay responded to this by offering a variety of ways to engage. Activities included larger group discussions, smaller group conversations, individual writing exercises, collaborative visual brainstorms, and solo creative assignments in mediums of participants' choosing. Additionally, the themes of language, gender, and sexuality were explored through not only an intellectual lens, but also emotional, political, spiritual, and embodied lenses. While not all needs could be met at all times, Fay maintained a dialogue with participants about how best to support their ways of being.

Reflection Questions:

- What access needs have you anticipated in your project? How will you meet these needs?
- Have you offered different ways of participating, so that participants have options?
- What needs (if any) have you not considered? How could you meet those needs?

Difference (Complexity Over Either/Or Thinking)

White supremacy culture encourages fixed and limited perspectives, rather than flexible perspectives that bring together a variety of viewpoints. Throughout Mother Tongues, Fay paid close attention to participants' differences, striving to make space for these differences as much as possible. For example, some participants were very comfortable with the English language, while others were more comfortable with their first languages. Since English was the shared language among the group, it was easy for

the confident English-speakers to take up more space. Fay, along with supporting facilitator Jen Sunshine, noticed this and actively made room for participants to speak their first languages, even if not everyone could understand what was being said.

- How will you embrace the fact that every community member is unique and no-one's experiences are alike?
- How will you avoid generalizing or prioritizing some community members' experiences over others?

Impact (Transformational Relations Instead of Transactional Relationships)

In oppressive institutions, relationships are only considered valuable because of the personal gain or profit they can bring. The main goal of *Mother Tongues* was not to profit from multilingual queer and trans people, but to help them build community and gain a deeper understanding of themselves. The project put participants' personal growth above the desire to create and rehearse a theatre production for public consumption. This required compromises, but impacted community members' lives in a lasting way, which extended beyond the timeline of a performance. As one participant shared: "This workshop has allowed me to open up to other people about my queerness... I've also been looking at the world a little differently, finding things that I didn't know were there... whatever comes out of this, even if this is it, it's been so rich." Another participant added: "By being here with everyone, I feel less alone, in a good way. My neuroses make sense. Yes, it's language, it's culture, it's queerness... My queerness and EAL identity affect my work... These things are not isolated. Identity, language, what you put in the world – it's all connected."

Reflection Questions

- What will happen after the project?
- How will you ensure that there's a lasting benefit for QTBIPOC communities?

Credits & Acknowledgements

Creative Team

Director, Curator, & Facilitator: Fay Nass

Co-Facilitator for Phase 1: Jen Sungshine

Community Participants:

Dalia Shalabi, Merlin Simard, Louis Lin, Cindy Kao, Ada Yim, Kimberly Ho 何文蔚, Elías Arce Gutiérrez, Camila Roman, Daniela Roman Torres, Tanaz Roudgar, and Angelic Proof.

Process Documentation & Report Writer: Veronique West

The Frank Theatre Staff

Artistic Director: Fay Nass

Artistic Producer: Anais West

Interim Producer: Maria Zarillo

Youth Program Producer: Patricia Trinh

Administrative Assistant: Ada Yim

Funders/Partners

The Canada Council for the Arts

The British Columbia Arts Council

The City of Vancouver

The Vancouver Foundation

Works/Methodologies That Inspired the Toolkit

[The Anitafrika Method](#)

[Manifesto for Ethical Research in the Downtown Eastside](#)

[The Feeling of What Happens](#)

[Divorcing White Supremacy Culture](#)