



# Leveraging Community Arts for Immigrant Integration: *Mabelle Arts' Welcome to the Neighbourhood Program*

Project Report  
January 2026



**Cover image:** Park Playtime at Mabelle Arts, 2025.

**Left:** MABELLEMarket, 2023.

**Top:** Indigenous Planting Workshop at Mabelle Arts, 2025. Credit: Katrin Faridani

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# Acknowledgements

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The report is the result of collaborative effort spanning more than two years, from 2023 to 2025. We wish to express our gratitude to all those who contributed to its development. We extend our deepest thanks to the staff at Mabelle Arts—particularly Annie Katsura Rollins and Daniela Galaviz—whose insights, experiences, and dedication to community arts practice shaped this research profoundly. Their willingness to share candidly about both successes and challenges, and their commitment to centering process over predetermined outcomes, informed every aspect of this work.

We are specially grateful to the newcomer artists and workshop participants who shared their stories, experiences, and reflections through interviews, focus groups and informal conversations that took place spontaneously during community-arts workshops. From seniors to youth, from those living in community housing on Mabelle Avenue to those traveling across the GTA to participate, the voices of these diverse individuals are the heart of this report. We also thank the settlement partner organizations, including Polycultural Immigrant & Community Services, Newcomer Women's Services, WoodGreen, and several others, whose staff and clients generously shared their perspectives. They informed us about how community arts complement and strengthen traditional settlement services, helping us understand the vital role these partnerships play in creating welcoming communities.

We wish to acknowledge those who engaged with this research at public events and conferences, offering their feedback, experiences, and insights that enriched our understanding of arts-based integration work across different contexts. We also thank the broader community of practitioners, researchers, and advocates working at the intersection of arts and settlement, those who understand that integration happens not just through services delivered, but through relationships fostered when mutual and caring interactions happen in a space that feels safe. We personally observed how this magic happened during community arts workshops when communities created together through shared acts of exploration, imagination, and creation.

The opinions and arguments expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Mabelle Arts, Toronto Metropolitan University, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, or Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.



# Writers, Researchers, Creators

**Alka Kumar**, the Research Lead on this SSHRC funded project, **Leveraging Community Arts for Immigrant Integration**, is a Senior Research Associate and Project Coordinator at the Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Migration at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), Toronto, Canada. Carrying her own 'lived experience' of migration, her research in the migration field stems from her positionality as a migrant and a practitioner in the immigrant serving sector; one of her key objectives being to support new Canadians and other individuals in building their capacity, sharing their stories, and helping amplify their voices. In addition to her focus on economic integration issues for skilled immigrants, she explores alternative methods in knowledge production in migration that can help create inclusive and safe environments, including arts-based methods, creative practices, and participatory research approaches. Alka holds a PhD in Peace and Conflict Studies from University of Manitoba, with a focus on migration and labour market integration, and a prior doctoral degree in English from Pune University, in India. Her most recent co-edited book (with Anna Triandafyllidou) is *Migration and Identity through Creative Writing* (2023).

**Karian Chen** is a designer and urban planning graduate with degrees from OCAD and TMU. As a 1.5 generation immigrant, she has always been genuinely curious about the stories of diasporic communities—how their lives unfold, how they navigate belonging—fascinated by the power of storytelling to reveal these experiences. When she first arrived in Canada in middle school, she attended an after-school arts workshop that wasn't designed specifically for immigrants, but it became one of her first experiences of welcome—a place where creative spaces brought people together, where she could simply be present with others seeking connection. Years later, this research project with Mabelle Arts brought her full circle, allowing her to rediscover what drew her to those warm-hearted spaces while witnessing the tremendous effort organizations invest in helping newcomers settle and experience belonging at so many levels.

**Luisa Pereira Seabra da Cruz** is an arts researcher and filmmaker. A graduate of the MA Communications and Culture program at Toronto Metropolitan University, she was a student fellow at CERC in Migration and Integration between 2023 and 2025, and a Newcomer Artist Ambassador for Mabelle Arts the same year. As an immigrant herself, she is interested in the many ways that immigrant artists build networks of support and mutual care, and how they bring new ways of knowing, relating and working in the arts and culture landscape. Luisa worked on the report's graphic design and additional writing.

## Acknowledging other Contributors and Collaborators

We are grateful to the **Research Assistants** who participated in implementing the research project in the early stages, **Asra Khan** and **Dorian Davidson**. As members of the research team, they made significant contributions to the research-sharing design ideas, and participating in data gathering and analysis, as well as contributing to the blog series as writers (these blog posts are included in the Appendices section of this report, and they are also available on the CERC website, on the project page).

**Asra Khan** holds a bachelor's degree in environmental design from OCAD University and is currently a second-year Master of Urban and Regional Planning student at Toronto Metropolitan University. She is passionate about city-building approaches that prioritize creativity, social impact, and belonging. Committed to supporting immigrant and newcomer communities by ensuring their needs and voices are meaningfully reflected in planning and design processes, Asra's arts-based research and participatory community engagement helps her create environments where diverse residents feel seen, valued, and connected.

**Dorian Davidson** has a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and a minor in Urban Studies and is currently a Master of Planning student at Toronto Metropolitan University. Dorian's academic work explores participatory community planning methods, resistance to gentrification pressures, and alternative forms of economic thought. He is passionate about creating urban imaginaries and spaces of hope, and he focuses on participatory arts practices as a form of communication and placemaking.

We acknowledge with gratitude the contribution of **Zhixi Zhuang, Co-applicant** on this research project and an Associate Professor at the School of Urban and Regional Planning, at Toronto Metropolitan University. Founder and Director of the [DiverCityLab](#), her research explores growing diversity, and challenges related to inclusion, with specific focus on ways in which immigrant and racialized communities have impacted urban landscapes in the GTA, inscribing places with important cultural, historical and political meanings. With Zhixi's expertise in arts-informed research to engage immigrant communities, her perspectives on immigrant integration and place-making, civic engagement and inclusive community building were helpful and her guidance is appreciated.

We appreciate the guidance and support of **Anna Triandafyllidou**, also **Co-applicant** on this research project; she is an internationally renowned sociologist and migration expert and has held the Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Migration and Integration at Toronto Metropolitan University since 2019; she is also the Scientific Director of [Bridging Divides](#), funded by the Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF). In addition to Anna's innovative interdisciplinary contributions to academic scholarship and policy engagement in migration, both in Canada and globally, she is committed to exploring novel ways to creatively expand impact and mainstream understandings of migration narratives and issues, including through the use of arts-based methods like documentary films, online digital storytelling platforms, and educational videos and toolkits.

We are grateful to our partnering community arts agency, **Mabelle Arts**, for this opportunity to work with them, and through this relationship, to discover and learn in depth about the magical world of community arts. We are especially appreciative of the contributions and care that **Annie Katsura Rollins** embodied; and in her role as **Newcomer Engagement Lead** and later, **Program Manager**, of the **Welcome to the Neighborhood program**, she brought to this partnership her leadership, expertise, and passion helping demonstrate the superpower of community arts. Towards the later part of this collaboration, Annie moved on to another opportunity, and **Daniela Galaviz** stepped into her shoes; and in her role as a **community arts facilitator and collaborating lead**, Dani too showed us how special welcoming spaces can be created, using arts-practice and tools for building community; and how through this process, supportive relationships can be fostered that can easily turn strangers into friends.

We are thankful to the following individuals who reviewed this report and provided their valuable feedback: CERC Migration colleagues, Zhixi Zhuang, Jérémie Molho, Evelyn Siu, Grace Esford; and Elizabeth Rucker, Director of Co-Creation, Mabelle Arts.

We also acknowledge a CERC Migration project that came just before ours that delved into aligned issues. Led by Jérémie Molho, and titled Fostering integration through the arts (FIT-ART): Learning from the Toronto Arts Council program for newcomers and refugees, it lighted the way forward for our partnership with Mabelle Arts; and it produced a [report](#) that highlighted important themes relevant to the role of the arts and of arts funding in integration, for immigrants and newcomer artists in the Greater Toronto Area.



# Executive Summary

## Mabelle Arts' *Welcome to the Neighbourhood* (WTTN) Program: An Arts-Based Model for Newcomer Integration

### Objectives and purpose

This report is based on a cross-sectoral study that focused on better understanding (a) how WTTN, a community arts program, helps foster a sense of attachment and belonging to the local community among participants; and how inter-community connections are supported that lead to a more inclusive and resilient urban environment, and (b) whether and how participation in this project improves employment prospects for newcomer artists, through creating more opportunities for networking and learning about the creative economy in the GTA so they may integrate more easily into the labour market.

It is important to note that WTTN focuses upon two distinct cohorts of newcomers and immigrants—one being newcomer artists and creatives; and the other is immigrants and newcomers who are non-artists. For newcomer artists, introductory

orientation sessions and training opportunities are available to help them learn about the arts-ecosystem in the city. For non-artists, WTTN works in partnership with settlement agencies and other arts organizations, engaging newcomer communities using community arts activities, to support them in their journey of integration, belonging, and social inclusion in the GTA.

Mabelle Arts works not only with racialized communities but also local area residents in Etobicoke, doing outreach and providing arts-based programming. Culturally relevant content is a key element in these workshops. Another aspect is ensuring that barriers to access are reduced through the provision of transportation, hospitality, childcare and other resources for workshop participants.

### Methodology

Data collection was done using the following **methods**:

- Content analysis of documents and reports related to WTTN;
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with WTTN participants;
- Detailed and semi-structured interviews with Mabelle Arts staff members;

### Participants:

- WTTN participants: participants of the Newcomer artist training program, artist ambassadors, and lead artists who had completed the three-year training and were working with Mabelle Arts or with their partner agencies in the community arts sector;
- Settlement staff directly involved with implementing community arts programming in partnership with Mabelle Arts facilitators, and their newcomer clients;
- Seniors and youth cohorts who are local area residents living in the Mabelle Park neighborhood;
- Mabelle Arts staff members.

## Key Findings

### STRENGTHS:

#### **Mental health and emotional well-being**

Known as social prescribing, community arts practice plays a therapeutic role by providing newcomers with crucial and meaningful spaces to find relief from settlement stressors, while remaining culturally appropriate, non-stigmatizing, and conducive to meaningful connection.

#### **Community arts as social infrastructure**

At the collective level, community arts practice functions as a form of social infrastructure. It fosters relational community-building among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, resulting in a stronger sense of belonging, reduced isolation and anxiety, expanded social networks, and improved access to essential community resources.

#### **Reframing integration and the sense of home**

Community arts empower newcomers as storytellers and cultural creators who actively contribute to and shape host communities. These renewed narratives, expressed through arts practice, help reframe newcomer integration processes.

#### **Community arts as social capital for creatives**

Community arts programs help newcomer artists build social capital, helping to move them towards opportunities for economic inclusion, by connecting them with established practitioners and networks typically inherited through privilege.

### CHALLENGES:

#### **Community arts play a limited role in addressing employment barriers**

Despite ongoing efforts, community arts programs are limited and inadequate, often due to short-term durations and restricted funding. As a result, they provide insufficient opportunities for long-term training, paid apprenticeships, mentoring, or the cultural knowledge needed to help artists turn their ideas into concrete projects in an unfamiliar environment.

#### **Systemic workforce-related challenges facing newcomer artists**

Several systemic workforce-related challenges are highlighted, including lack of credential recognition, precarious immigration and employment status, risk of burnout and tensions, and concerns around economic sustainability.

#### **Challenges in measuring and evaluating impact of community arts programs**

It has become challenging to evaluate community arts programs due to the misalignment between funders' priorities of measurable outcomes and the programs' core objective of helping newcomers foster a sense of belonging, an impact that requires flexible, informal, and conversational methods to capture deeply personal and relational experiences.

## Key Recommendations

#### **Partnerships between community arts agencies and the settlement sector are crucial and must be scaled**

Collaborations between the community arts sector and employment support programs must be expanded as they are a way to expand durational impacts of integration and belonging; helping provide relief from multiple post-migration stressors.

#### **Removing barriers to access**

The holistic model of infrastructural support offered to participants by WTTN was found to be highly beneficial; it provided resources for transportation, hospitality and childcare to ensure that key barriers to accessing community arts support are removed. It is critical to ensure that such a model of support is funded and remains integral to the user experience of workshop participation.

#### **Cultural competency and safety must be at the heart of community arts programming**

One of the key design features at the heart of WTTN is cultural competency. Facilitators are paired with participants who share a similar ethnic and cultural background with workshop participants, and this model of intersectoral collaboration is effective and impactful.

#### **Need for more comprehensive support for newcomer artists**

The Newcomer Artist Training program delivered by Mabelle Arts and other partner agencies should be longer, more consistent, and address multi-layered needs of artists so it can bridge the gap between learning and practical implementation of arts projects. Mentorship practices, funding supports, paid internships, and grant writing workshops were also emphasized by research participants as a way to access long term employment opportunities in the arts sector.

#### **Economic opportunities leading to identity affirmation**

The economic dimension of community arts deserves emphasis for more than financial reasons. For newcomers who identify as professional artists in their home countries, arts-related employment opportunities are also about restoration of professional identity, validation of expertise, and continuation of cultural legacy.

#### **New ways needed for measurement and evaluation of impact**

Standard metrics are inadequate and misaligned when measuring impact of arts programs, and evaluation design and strategies must include nuance, flexibility, and complexity.

#### **Need to differentiate between arts education and community arts**

While arts education is about teaching participants arts techniques, for example, rock painting, music or performance art; the purpose of community arts is to build community and help foster social inclusion.



# Introduction

## “Do you feel like the place you're in is home?”

Many little stories come together when we begin to share the overarching narrative of the journey of this research project. Beginning to think about it in 2022, we formally embarked upon this project once we received funding from SSHRC in mid-2023. A partnership emerged between an academic centre—the Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Migration and Integration at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU)—and Mabelle Arts (MA), a not-for-profit agency that employs community arts to support integration not only of newcomer artists in the GTA, but also of immigrants and refugee population groups

The Welcome to the Neighborhood (WTTN) program, the focus of our research study, was designed and applied for in 2018, the process led by Karen Kew, then Managing Director of Mabelle Arts; and the funding agreement negotiated with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) helped found it. The primary objective of our joint research was to better understand how community arts, as practiced by WTTN from 2020-2025, have impacted and transformed the lives of their newcomer participants and other multiple stakeholders involved in the process.

The culmination of our more than two-year engagement with the program, this report aims to delve deep into the world of community arts, as presented by several interlocutors who have engaged with and personally experienced it: newcomers, refugees, local area residents who belong to communities in the Etobicoke region in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA); as well as newcomer artists who participated in the Mabelle Arts training program, and who continue to be associated with it as partners and part-time staff, lead artists and artist ambassadors. Many of the regular participants—seniors to youth to newcomer groups—are residents in the low-income community housing blocks on Mabelle Avenue, living in close proximity with Mabelle Arts, and their recently developed location in the middle of Mabelle Park, named the ‘Belle.’ This reimagined Mabelle Park was inaugurated and opened to the community in October 2024, the “first park in Canada designed in response to the unique needs and desires of residents living together in a high-density, low income tower community” ([Mabelle Arts](#)).

Employing a partnership model, this community arts organization also works in a variety of neighbourhoods and localities across the GTA, doing outreach and providing arts-based programming to facilitate supportive integration-focused infrastructure to newcomers in general, and to newcomer artists in particular. The ‘warmth of welcome’ model WTTN employs to support newcomers—from children to youth, and in fact, all its participants—began with it being grounded in a key question: **do you feel like this place you’re in is Home?**

It is pertinent to reiterate at the start that the program centres *process* as a way of building on the *experiential* and *relational* potential of the collective and of community arts to support participants in getting acclimatized and integrated into their new environment; move out of their isolation and experiences of loneliness and diffidence; and start their journey towards finding a sense of community, fostering relationships through participating in shared acts of exploration, imagination, and creation.

It is often a journey of learning and gaining confidence—through the building of social and professional networks, and acquiring cross-cultural communication skills—that individuals can move towards place-based integration, gradually becoming comfortable in their local communities where they begin to experience a sense of safety and belonging. This further helps create reflection spaces where participants can be thoughtful about building bridges between their past and their present, feeling empowered to envision a future, not in isolation but supported by others who they can reach out to in times of need, be they friends they have recently acquired, or others living in the same building or down the street who they are now able to identify as members belonging to their own community.

# Building on Previous Knowledge...

Before we begin to share the learnings from our research study, especially insights based on the data we collected through conducting interviews and focus groups, we want to acknowledge previous research and knowledge that shaped and guided our work. **A summary of highlights is presented below, and for a detailed Literature Review section, please see the Appendix C.**

## Community Arts as a Pathway to Newcomer Integration and Belonging

So, **what exactly is community arts?** Although the answer resists a simple definition, Deborah Barndt (2008, p.354) calls it “a process of co-creation.”

The **process-centred approach at the core of community arts** creates what McLeod et al. (2020, p.88) describe as “**non-evaluative collaborative spaces**” where participants can experiment, fail, and try again without judgement.

The **political dimensions of community arts**—as a field and as practice—**positions participants as agents of change**. When newcomers share their migration stories through theatre or document their experiences through collage, they are doing what Walker and Oliveira (2020, p.189) describe as **claiming the right to “contribute to a definition of themselves” rather than being defined by others**.

## How Creative Practice Builds Belonging

Beauregard et al. (2020) identified interconnected mechanisms to explain **how artmaking becomes community-building**; through the **creation of “contact zones”, where different cultural traditions meet and mix**; acts of “**hybridization**” happen from the mixing of traditions, where new forms of expression emerge.

Zhuang and Lok (2023) found that newcomers **actively seek ‘third spaces’ beyond the private space of home and the formal world of work** where they can gather informally and **where different identities can coexist, where they can build relationships or simply be themselves**.

## Economic Integration Through Creative Practice

The Work in Culture (2021) study reveals how the **arts sector—known for its seasonal employment, project-based contracts, expectation of unpaid “exposure” work, and deeply insular professional networks creates layers of economic exclusion**. Newcomer artists face what Parzer (2021, p.106) describes as a **double burden: having to “start from zero” materially while simultaneously fighting for recognition as legitimate artists rather than being seen solely through their refugee or immigrant status**. The study highlights another layer of **structural barriers**, as newcomers search for “art” opportunities while Canadian institutions organize under “culture,” creating a fundamental disconnect that prevents access to resources.

## Advocacy and Neighbourhood Transformation: Artivism Dimension (Art plus Activism)

Community arts serve not only individual integration but **collective advocacy and neighbourhood transformation**. The concept of artivism—**art as activism**—reveals how **creative practice becomes a tool for social change and community development**. For example, fourteen years of community organizing through arts has culminated in the transformation of Mabelle Park.

**Research on creative placemaking** extends this analysis, showing how **co-created spaces signal belonging while transforming neighbourhoods** (Arroyo, 2020). Effective placemaking centres immigrant and refugee artists, avoiding cultural tokenism while supporting authentic representation. **This approach transforms not just physical spaces but residents' mental maps, creating attraction and connection points that counter neighbourhood stigmatization.**

## Towards a Substantive Citizenship

**Citizenship**, in its formal sense, is often defined by **legal status**: who belongs within national borders and who does not. Yet, **the question also is, how citizenship *feels like* and is lived**. **Substantive and affective notions of citizenship** (Fortier, 2016) are helpful when thinking about forms of recognition, participation, and belonging as they allow people to **experience themselves as citizens**. In this context, community arts offer an entry point for pursuing these questions, as they demonstrate how collective expression and creativity sustain a sense of belonging that exceeds legal frameworks.

Cultural Studies scholar Anne Ring Petersen's concept of the **postmigrant epistemic community** (Petersen, 2021) suggests that **societies shaped by migration must learn to think *from* migration rather than *about* it**. Here, postmigration refers to the critical focus of the **ongoing impacts of migration on cultural and civic life**, rather than a hypothetical timeline in which migration occurs or ceases to exist. **Such a way of thinking insists that migrants are not external to the social fabric; rather they are a major part of its constitution.**



**Top & Right:** Paintings by artist Pooja Kumar when visiting Mabelle Avenue, 2023-2025.

# Program Overview

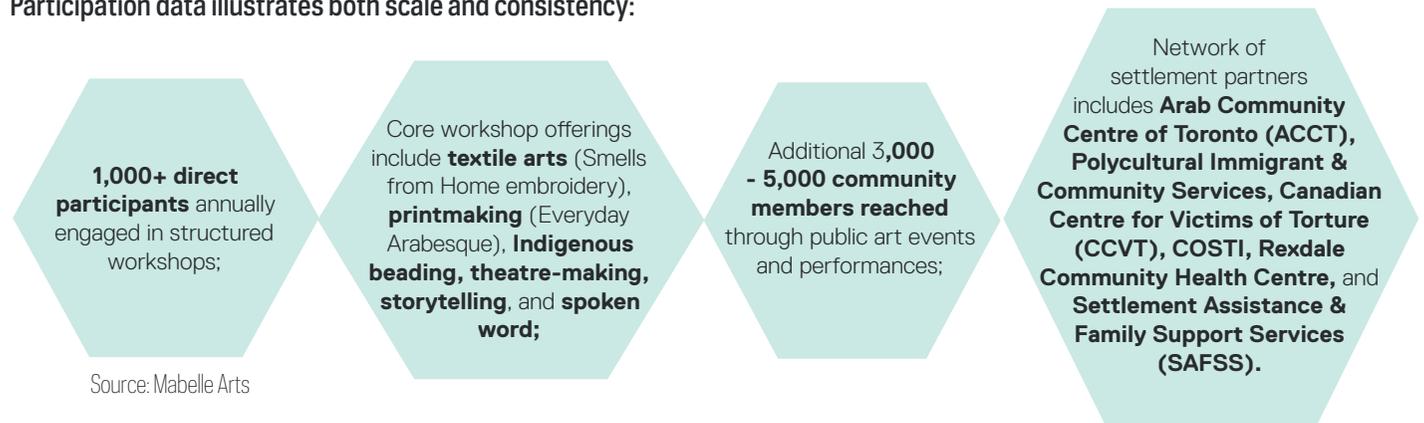
## Welcome to the Neighbourhood: A Program Overview and Context

Mabelle Arts' flagship program, "**Welcome to the Neighbourhood**" (WTTN), represents an innovative approach, being the first community arts program that received its five-year funding under Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's (IRCC) contribution agreement—structured specifically to achieve the goal of operating in partnership with the immigrant serving sector. In this sense, it marks a significant investment in reimagining settlement services through the lens of creative practice.

This distinctive partnership model positions Mabelle Arts as a bridge between the arts and settlement sectors. Rather than providing direct settlement service, the organization collaborates with established settlement agencies across the Greater Toronto Area, delivering arts-based programming at no cost to newcomer clients served by partner organizations. This approach addresses a critical gap in traditional settlement services by introducing creative methodologies specifically designed to foster social connections and community belonging.

(On a sidenote, it is relevant to add here that, logistically, the most recent iteration of the organization's funding structure has shifted from this model of partnership with the immigrant serving settlement sector; and the new expectations are for WTTN to build its own client base. While this is a very significant shift, it is not directly relevant in the context of this current study as this report is based on a review of WTTN before these funding changes were initiated or implemented; and as such, they are beyond the scope of a detailed review. However, in the sections on Key Findings and Recommendations in this report, the themes raised may indirectly amplify the potential repercussions of this policy shift in the future).

### Participation data illustrates both scale and consistency:



## Program Structure and Key Components

The program's structure consists of four interconnected activity streams that work synergistically to support newcomer integration:

**(a) Direct Workshop Delivery** forms the foundation of the program, providing sustained 4-6 week workshop series directly to clients of settlement partners. These workshops incorporate multiple art forms, from embroidery and storytelling, Indigenous beadwork to music and mask-making. Participants work together on collective art projects, with visiting guest artists, and this diversifies their exposure to creative practices. It is important to state though that the underlying goal of WTTN is not only to make a beautiful piece of art but rather to create a space for individuals to come together so they find common ground and shared goals upon which supportive relationships may be fostered. The workshops are experiential, and they combine art making with storytelling. Further, they provide evidence that the act of making art together serves to build connection, culture, and to share the human experience, and this can in turn help build the capacity of participating individuals to express the unspoken through the language of art. In other words, when facilitators work with non-artists on projects through the WTTN program — be they newcomers, immigrants, refugees or neighborhood residents—it becomes clear that the process of artmaking is a purposeful way to leverage the arts to build community.

**(b) Partner-Funded Programming** extends the program's reach by pairing community arts organizations with settlement agencies for year-long collaborations. These partnerships have created a network effect, spreading arts-based methodologies throughout the settlement sector. Some of the collaborations include:

- Jumblies Theatre with CultureLink
- Community Arts Guild with SAFSS (Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services)
- Muse Arts with Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture
- Arts4All Creative Society with JobStart
- Shadowland Theatre with Newcomer Women
- Arts Starts with For Youth Initiative

**(c) Pop-up Workshops** serve as both relationship-building tools and programming laboratories, allowing Mabelle Arts to test approaches with new partners to reach broader audiences. For example, the 2023 "Walk with Amal" initiative showcases the unique potential of this approach. Produced by Luminato, Mabelle Arts participated alongside many other community arts organizations across Toronto; and the project engaged over 400 Mabelle Avenue neighborhood residents in creating elements for a giant puppet performance that symbolically welcomed a Syrian refugee girl to Toronto. This international puppet project brought awareness to the resiliency of displaced refugees as communities and artists around the world gathered to artfully welcome and walk alongside Amal, an 11 foot puppet Syrian refugee girl who is searching the world for her mother.

**(d) The Newcomer Artist Ambassador Program** represents a meaningful workforce development initiative, providing a three-year pathway for newcomer artists through their foundational training in community arts. This is coupled with hands-on apprentice-like opportunities (that include mentoring) for artists to facilitate workshops with partnering settlement and arts organisations who work with newcomer, immigrant, and refugee groups.

- Year 1: Foundational training for 20 artists in community arts facilitation
- Year 2: Extended training and paid mentorship for 5-8 selected participants
- Year 3: Professional placement and employment support
- By 2024: 17 ambassadors gained paid employment through the program



**Above:** Details from "Smells from Home" embroidery workshop, 2020.

## Labour Market Pathways and Leadership Development for Newcomer Artists

A defining feature of WTTN is its progression model that moves beyond short-term participation to cultivate newcomer artists as facilitators, mentors, and community leaders. This progression is deliberate and multi-staged:

- **Initial Engagement:** Participants join workshops and develop artistic confidence while building relationships with peers and facilitators. Oftentimes, these opportunities to be engaged in hands-on art-making activities and creative conversations with peers and fellow artists become affirmative spaces that help individuals who are newcomers to the city and the country realise—for the first time—that there are possibilities here in Canada where they can re-claim their identities as artists.
- **Training and Co-facilitation:** Selected participants receive structured training in facilitation techniques, cultural safety, anti-oppression practices, re-indigenising arts, creative accessibility, grant writing, and project design. This helps open pathways for socialising and networking among peers with more experience and understanding of the Canadian arts ecosystem, as well as making related job sectors more visible—for example, jobs in arts-education, arts-administration, digital marketing, and other fields that are arts-and culture-oriented. Opportunities for artists to showcase their artworks and other forms of arts-practices involving dance, music, documentary making, and other forms of digital storytelling are other areas that become available to them

for exploration, be it via gig-work or through procuring more stable jobs in the arts-sector. Learning from several artists who participated in the research, it became obvious that even when they have more stable employment in the arts, or in related (and unrelated job sectors), they continue to facilitate community-arts workshops with interested individuals and partnering organizations through gig-work, thereby staying engaged with work they feel passionate about and that helps them affirm their identity; as well as contributing to supporting others, and strengthening the sector.

- **Independent Leadership:** Ambassadors lead their own community arts projects, often in collaboration with partner organizations, and are paid for their work. Some artists graduated from the program have transitioned to being Artists in Residence at Mabelle Arts. Many ambassadors have transitioned into employment in arts organizations, settlement services, and municipal programs, or have launched their own artistic ventures. This not only strengthens the cultural sector but also creates labour market pathways for newcomers, addressing one of the most persistent barriers to integration.



## Key Features of WTTN



**Above:** Snippets of Newcomer Artist Training Workshops, 2025.

Credit: Alka Kumar

**Left:** Indigenous Planting Workshop at Mabelle Arts, 2025.

Credit: Katrin Faridani

### Accessibility Measures: Reducing barriers to access for participants

- Transportation support (two-way transit passes provided to participants)
- Free concurrent childminding and children's workshops
- Interpretation services in multiple languages
- Hot meals integrated into programming
- Materials and equipment provided at no cost

**Cultural Anchoring Projects** draw on participants' own traditions, cultural ways, and heritage, ensuring that the act of creation affirms rather than erases identity. Examples include Indigenous beading with teachings on symbolism and medicine, and Arabesque printmaking exploring Middle Eastern patterns and Arabic calligraphy.

**Trauma-Informed Practice Facilitators** are trained to recognize and respond to the mental health impacts of displacement, migration, and re-settlement. The Rexdale Community Health Centre partnership describes arts workshops as "social prescription" for mental wellness.

**Outreach and Community Engagement** is proactive and relationship-driven, combining formal referrals from settlement partners with informal recruitment via community leaders and participant word-of-mouth. Public events serve as entry points, inviting passersby to join future programming. As noted in program reports, "many participants first came to Mabelle Arts through a festival or open street event, and returned later for more structured workshops."

This layered approach ensures that newcomers who might not seek out arts programs—due to language barriers, lack of awareness, or unfamiliarity with the arts—still encounter and access opportunities.

### Funding and Resource Allocation

The program's funding is multi-sourced, blending federal support (IRCC), municipal arts council grants, private foundations, and in-kind contributions. Resource allocation reflects the program's emphasis on both artistic excellence and social support:

- Substantial portion dedicated to artist and facilitator wages, ensuring fair compensation for creative labour
- Accessibility supports (transport, childminding, interpretation) embedded as non-negotiable expenses in budget planning—as a way to reduce barriers to access for participants
- Materials, equipment, and venue costs prioritized for high-quality artistic experiences
- Funds allocated for public presentations extending visibility and impact in relation to the broader community.

## Challenges, Adaptive Strategies, and Program Impact: Year-wise Focus

Throughout its implementation, the program has encountered and addressed several persistent challenges:

### Digital Fatigue and Online Barriers (2020-2021)

- Some challenges include youth juggling online schooling; seniors living in isolated settings with a lack of resources; and amplified language barriers exacerbate these difficulties.
- As a counterpoint, with the intent of addressing these barriers, MA has facilitated youth workshops in the summer; senior-focused daytime programming; and native-language segments that provide community-arts programs for those who need them.

### Geographic and Economic Accessibility (Ongoing)

- Challenge: Participants are dispersed across the GTA, and inadequate transportation budgets make it difficult for them to travel to locations where arts-workshops are held.
- Response: Multiple program locations and the provision of hybrid options often help interested participants to access these services more easily.

### Partner Capacity and Sector Burnout (2020-2023)

- Challenge: Settlement partners are often struggling with recruitment, and feel overwhelmed. Both newcomers and settlement agencies prioritize direct, linear, and straightforward settlement and employment goals to achieve integration-successes; and community-arts engagements are often a hard sell in such an environment.

- Response: Integration with existing programs (e.g., ACCT's Amal Project), flexible scheduling, and multiple entry points that can support newcomer, immigrant and refugee clients get exposure to community-arts programming through 'experiencing' it in an engaged hands-on way by participating in workshops has been a way for newcomer participants to understand its benefits, specifically as a way to build friendships, find their own communities, leading to positive impacts on their well-being.

### Economic Pressures in Arts Sector (2023-2024)

- Challenge: Limited placement opportunities for trained artists, and often all this kind of training leads only to precarious gig-work, not a real job, opportunities to build a career within the arts-eco-system being severely limited and insufficient as the cultural environment is also unfamiliar for newcomers. Oftentimes, for creatives who are familiar with the arts-and -culture space, being born and raised here in the GTA, (and more generally in Canada), the arts-space is fragile, competitive, and unstable, and individuals have to undertake work to implement and deliver multiple projects-working to cobble financial resources together to make a living for themselves and their families.
- Response: Internal employment creation, additional mentorship funding, self-employment and skill development are some ways to address these challenges.

## Program Impact Summary

By 2024, the WTTN had achieved:

- **Direct service delivery to 1,000+ newcomers annually through sustained workshops**
- **Engagement of 3,000-5,000 community members in public events**
- **Employment for 17 newcomer artists through the ambassador program**
- **10+ active partnerships between arts and settlement organizations**
- **Development and distribution of a sector-wide digital toolkit**
- **Creation of sustainable models for arts-based settlement services**



Right: Park Playtime at Mabelle Arts (2025). Credit: Katrin Faridani

# Research Design and Methodology

The qualitative data for this evaluation were gathered using twenty (20) semi-structured interviews and two (2) focus groups (with a total of eighteen (18) individuals). Research participants represented diverse stakeholders within the Mabelle Arts' program ecosystem. Based on their roles-as settlement staff or agency clients; facilitators within a partnering community arts organization; or those directly engaged with Mabelle Arts program, WTTN-like newcomer artists, artist ambassadors, and lead artists-a variety of perspectives were highlighted.

The breakdown of their roles and positionalities provided below are evidence of this diversity, and can help in better understanding the multiplicity of perspectives that emerged.

- **Settlement Sector Representatives:** community connections facilitators and settlement workers from partner organizations including Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services, Newcomer Women's Services Toronto, WoodGreen Community Services, and other settlement partners provided insights into how community arts programming intersects with broader settlement service delivery.
- **Newcomer Artists:** individuals who participated in the Newcomer Artist Training program shared their experiences navigating Toronto's community arts landscape as recent immigrants, offering firsthand accounts of barriers, opportunities, and transformation.
- **Artist Ambassadors:** graduates of the training program who transitioned into facilitation roles provided unique perspectives on both receiving and delivering community arts programming, bridging participant and practitioner experiences.
- **Lead Artists:** experienced community arts facilitators working with Mabelle Arts discussed facilitation approaches, partnership dynamics, and the complexities of culturally responsive arts practice.
- **Workshop Participants:** newcomers who attended Welcome to the Neighbourhood workshops but were not part of the Newcomer Artist Training program offered perspectives on community-level impact and accessibility.
- **Organizational Partners:** representatives from Arts4all, Community Arts Guild, Shadowland Theatre, and other agencies reflected on inter-organizational collaboration and systemic approaches to arts-based newcomer support.
- **Mabelle Arts staff members** who played a role in shaping and implementing WTTN.

When planning for the "Meet the Artists" section of the project report (see Appendix A), artists participating in WTTN were asked if they would like themselves and their work featured in it. They have freely chosen to participate and have contributed the following self-narratives and images.

The objective to include such a segment is to help showcase the important and purposeful work these artists do as community arts professionals. This section was also envisioned as a space where they could share their stories and their arts-practice trajectories. It helps highlight the challenges these artists have faced, being situated in the precarious arts ecosystem in the GTA, as well as their resilience and their contributions to community-building through their arts practice. It can also help the reader learn more broadly and deeply about community arts-especially their significance and relevance for immigrant integration-an area within the arts that is somewhat lesser known and not so well understood when compared to well established and 'professional' arts practices that create more traditional works of art we see displayed in museums and in art galleries.



# Research Results: What We Found

Analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts highlighted the following interconnected themes:

## 1. Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

At an individual level, the most consistent theme highlighted in the research relates to therapeutic dimensions of community arts practice, participants describing arts engagement as providing a crucial and much needed break from multiple settlement stressors, creating for them the ‘capacity for present-moment awareness through creative practice,’ and a meaningful space for mindfulness and real connection. Also known as ‘social prescribing,’ community arts programs, operating outside clinical frameworks, can address wellbeing in ways that feel culturally appropriate and non-stigmatizing. For newcomers, social prescribing is powerful when programs are culturally relevant, co-produced with participants, and supported by peer leaders who share lived experience (Kellezi et al., p.8-12). In this sense, initiatives from Mabelle Arts mirror the aims of social prescribing: they create safe, culturally grounded “third spaces” where newcomers can connect, heal, and build community through creating art together.

Particularly in the case of women-majority of participants in the program being women—the mental health implications were clear as participation in community arts programs helped women express complex emotions, develop confidence through building networks, which many saw as ‘life-changing.’ Their experience of participation in these workshops helped them navigate new worlds with a stronger sense of self, or at least with more ease.

The language participants used to describe these experiences was noticeable in its consistency. A facilitator from agency B noted that one of their participants declared: “this process is completely a healing experience for me.” Similarly, a lead artist recounted that one of the workshop participants, arriving in Canada from traumatic circumstances, asserted: “I’ve tried so many kinds of therapy and they don’t work, but I’m here, and I’m creating this, and I am very happy... I feel this is better than therapy.” These unsolicited comparisons to clinical therapeutic modalities suggest that participants perceived community arts as addressing psychological needs that conventional settlement services were not able to meet.

## 2. Community Arts as Social Infrastructure

At the level of collective benefit, community-building (through community arts practice) was experienced as ‘relational,’ as meaningful relationships were fostered through arts practices, between strangers coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds; and these then led to individuals experiencing “a sense of belonging that creates, like, a new you.” Such positive outcomes, as expressed by participants, were a result of newcomers connecting with each other and expanding their networks; and this process was instrumental in getting them out of their isolation and anxieties, additionally linking to much needed community resources.

The architectural metaphor of the arts functioning as a “bridge” appeared repeatedly. One of the research participants, a lead artist with MA, described community arts as “kind of, like a bridge... to connect people and to bring people together and to empower them... a safe platform for them... just to be seen and valued.” This “bridging” role and purpose ascribed to the arts operated across several dimensions: connecting newcomers to each other, linking them to established community resources, including providing points of connection between immigrants and members of receiving communities.

Language barriers, often cited as primary obstacles to social integration, were reframed through arts practice. A program manager noted that “communication through art is something also like, you know, it doesn’t need language. So, language is not a barrier anymore, because there is the visual dimension”. This kind of accessibility—going beyond the linguistic—expanded participation possibilities while validating non-verbal forms of knowledge and expression.

*“The act of actually doing something together, like having a task, a practical task, allows people to bond in a different way. Emotionally and physically, the idea that you are kind of mirroring each other, or listening to each other, or physically moving, making sounds, doing those things, actually lets people process things that have happened to them in a different way.”*

—Artistic Director

### 3. Reframing integration and the sense of home

The fundamental shift for many newcomers and immigrants happened when through participation in community arts they began to feel different from when receiving services. For example, when seeking settlement services, newcomers are seen as economic units, workers filling labour shortages, or problems to be solved. Community arts sees them as storytellers and cultural creators, skill sharers and collaborators who come with many assets and have great potential to shape communities and contribute to their new homes and societies. Through the creative work of building connections and expressing identities, it became more possible to experience belonging and agency as well as the capacity to see that they don’t have to reject the past in order to feel at home in this new place; and in fact, this led to reframing the ‘loss narrative’ to a sense of ‘portability of home’, shifting for many participants their relationship to migration itself.

The program’s very name—Welcome to the Neighbourhood—signals these geographic and social positions, and participants described how arts practice facilitated what one of the arts-based organizational partners termed “a sense of belonging through being able to accept a sense of belonging to another place... you don’t have to reject the past in order to exist here.”

This capacity to hold multiple geographic and cultural identities simultaneously emerged as central to how participants understood integration. One of the Latin American artists described how workshop activities involved “remembering where I come from, remembering who I am, or bringing those aspects of myself to the puppets I use as my arts-practice”. Rather than requiring assimilation or cultural erasure, the arts-based approach created space for participants to bring their full selves, including memories, languages, and cultural practices from elsewhere, into their present Toronto context.

*“It was very impactful in a way where it... allowed them to think of... home as not something that they’re leaving, but something that they’re bringing with them. And for a while, they’ve always thought of it as like... it’s separate, and it’s not something you can carry, it’s not something you can bring.”*

—Settlement worker

## 4. Workforce development issues for newcomer artists: program successes and challenges

While participants articulated substantial benefits, they also identified significant challenges and structural gaps. These limitations emerged across operational, systemic, and philosophical dimensions.

On the one hand, the Newcomer Training Program offered to newcomer artists by Mabelle Arts through WTTN provided them with professional infrastructure that helped them access several entry points in the arts-ecosystem in the GTA, with potential for pursuing employment opportunities. One of the ambassadors now employed at a community-arts agency in the GTA, reflected: “It gave me a job. I gave jobs to others through that... the impact was very, very specific in my professional development here in Canada.” This direct employment pathway was complemented by what another participant, a settlement worker, termed “an open door to so many other opportunities, like mentoring, networking and volunteering.” helps create important initial pathways for potential employment for newcomer artists; this happens through connections made with other artists and a sharing of information, resources and part time work opportunities for workshop facilitation. The Ambassador program for artists further created what might be understood as supported entry into facilitation work. An artist ambassador described it as follows: “Currently they gave me a project with one of the arts agencies. So, it’s like a one-year contract... This is my first project I’m doing right now... This is the first time it really builds up my artistic skills. I’m so proud, encouraged and gained confidence within myself.” This structured pathway from participant to facilitator represents a model for how community arts organizations might function as professional development infrastructure rather than solely as service providers.

However, these resources are also extremely limited and inadequate—being both short-term and also able to support a very small number of newcomer artists. The program could not provide enough opportunities for long term training, apprenticeship and mentoring or the cultural knowhow that could support individuals in implementing their ideas into action through building a concrete project in an unfamiliar environment.

Facilitators and partners described difficulty securing consistent attendance, attributing this to competing demands on participants’ time, family and caregiving responsibilities, and other barriers like transportation costs. Further, in light of the existing perception, and also to a great extent, internalised understanding and value-orientation that “the value of the arts always comes kind-of second to everything else” exacerbates challenges for newcomers as they are managing multiple settlement priorities simultaneously.

Participants emphasized the need for better support structures for artists doing facilitation work, emphasizing that the emotional labour of community arts practice, particularly with populations experiencing trauma, was inadequately resourced.

*“it’s gig work, workshop to workshop, so there’s no stable job, which makes it hard to sustain a career. We can’t survive on volunteer terms; arts is our career and we need fair pay for our time and expertise.”*

**–Lead Artist**

## 5. Community arts build social capital for artists and creatives

Beyond individual income for newcomer artists, community arts programs build the social capital essential for creative sector navigation. Through collaborative projects, newcomer creatives develop relationships with established practitioners who can help them decode funding applications, introduce gallery connections, or explain the unwritten codes relevant for navigating Canadian arts professionalism. These networks, typically inherited through privilege or academic pathways, become accessible through the lateral entry point of community engagement. The impact extends beyond individual artists. Immigrant cultural traditions become economic assets through artisan economies and heritage preservation (Arroyo, 2020, p.32); arts and culture becomes understood as essential to business district vitality rather than a superficial and decorative addition.

*“Working with other people who are coming from elsewhere has... made me realize even more the richness of the world and the ideas and incredible deep knowledge and stories and experiences that people have to offer... it feeds your sense of humanity as a whole... every person matters, because every person has a story that’s their life to tell.”*

— Artistic Director

## 6. Challenges in measuring and evaluating impact of community arts programs

Although it is important and beneficial to track progress of any project and measure its success, it is not easy or straightforward to achieve this purpose when it comes to evaluating the impact of community arts programs. One of the reasons for this is a misalignment between the fundamental interests of funders (they want concrete results and numbers) and core objectives of a community arts program (helping people feel less lonely and experience a sense of comfort in their new environment); how can the evaluation process be designed to meet both these opposing needs and goals that exist on opposite ends of a spectrum? For example, how can we measure the moment when someone finds their voice? Or how do you quantify the value of feeling, for the first time in months, like you belong somewhere?

This is especially problematic and not doable if traditional methods are employed, like asking participants to fill out formal written feedback forms at the end of workshops. For some participants, language is a barrier; and for all attendees, given that the tone of the workshop is ‘relational’ rather than a delivery of concrete knowledge-based content, ways to ascertain feedback must be informal and conversational, flexible and responsive to where participants are and what they need.

## Systemic Barriers for Newcomer Artists

Beyond program-specific challenges, participants articulated systemic barriers shaping newcomer artists' experiences in Toronto. These structural issues are beyond the ability of any single organization to address, yet they fundamentally shape the employment trajectories of these individuals.

### Credential Recognition

The persistent non-recognition of artistic training and professional experience from other countries created profound frustration. A newcomer artist asked: "What kind of qualifications I need?... the studies for newcomers, is very expensive, and I don't want to study the same that I study in Colombia... actually I have that qualification, yeah, only they are not from Canada" (Newcomer Artist). This devaluation of non-Canadian credentials forced accomplished artists into precarious service work while pursuing opportunities to practice their craft.

### Cultural Capital and Networks

Multiple participants emphasized that "a lot of employment happens through networks" (Artistic Director), yet newcomers by definition lacked the social capital and professional networks that facilitate access to opportunities.

### Linguistic Barriers

While arts practice was described as transcending language, administrative and grant-writing processes were managed by gatekeepers who were linguistically proficient. "I don't think you can be an arts facilitator if you don't have a strong language confidence" (Newcomer Artist, Mabelle Arts), identifying language as a barrier to leadership roles even when arts skills were present.

### Market Dynamics

Several participants contrasted Toronto's arts funding ecosystem, characterized as state-centric with weak market infrastructure, with contexts where art purchasing and private patronage created additional revenue streams. One of them argued, "The money for the arts is always donation thinking... and not having the arts mixed in everyday life... here is like... Arts Council giving money to the artists, the artists, they produce their art and nobody sees it" (Lead Artist, Mabelle Arts).

### Economic Precarity and Immigration Status Restrictions

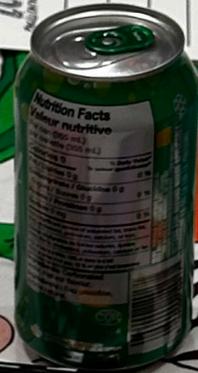
The structural undervaluation of arts work generally was compounded for newcomers managing settlement costs. In addition, work permit limitations prevented some newcomers from accepting paid arts engagements even when offered, creating situations where newcomer artists could contribute labour but not access compensation. This economic model made sustained arts practice untenable for those without other income sources.

While Mabelle Arts created meaningful access points and supported professional development for newcomer artists, it operated within—and could only partially mitigate—systems that systematically devalue non-Canadian credential, underpay artistic labour, and concentrate opportunities within networks from which newcomers are structurally excluded.



COMMUNITY ART  
 FACILITATOR INTERVIEW

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
 FROM: \_\_\_\_\_  
 ART HEART: \_\_\_\_\_  
 CURIOUS ABOUT: \_\_\_\_\_  
 INTERVIEWED BY: \_\_\_\_\_



COMMUNITY ART  
 FACILITATOR INTERVIEW

NAME: Parvaneh  
 FROM: Irania & England  
Colors & Calm

ART HEART: Storytelling, Mark of Childhood & Joy of painting and colors that connect with memory

CURIOUS ABOUT: Networking & connections  
hearing stories, Newcomer opportunities  
Exploring Clay

ART SYMBOL: 

INTERVIEWED BY: Glida

COMMUNITY ART  
 FACILITATOR INTERVIEW

NAME: Glida  
 FROM: She/her  
Iranian - Beirut  
family, chaotic city  
tiny details

ART SYMBOL: 

ART HEART: experimentation, storytelling, easy through children's illustration - creating a new world.

CURIOUS ABOUT: and connect with newcomers,  
style . growing with time.



# Recommendations

## 1. Partnerships between community arts agencies and the settlement sector are crucial and must be scaled

These collaborative relationships must be expanded as they are a way to expand durational impacts of integration and belonging; including through helping creatives in finding innovative ways to share their creations with wider audiences (this would be an opportunity for them to feel validated and to make some money too). All this in turn creates a positive ripple-effect on mental health and well-being for newcomers, immigrants and other vulnerable and marginalized groups. Integrating 'experiential' community arts programs with employment support programs in a supportive and non-judgemental environment makes individuals feel valued, helping provide relief from multiple post-migration stressors.

## 2. Removing barriers to access

The Mabelle Arts model of community arts is founded in the principle of 'radical and warm welcome,' and during its first five years, the program has provided a holistic infrastructure of support to participants, with transportation, hospitality and childcare being integral to the user-experience of workshop participation. It is critical to have sustainability of these budgetary provisions, especially when working with vulnerable population groups, and during current times when food insecurity is at an all-time high and an unaffordability crisis is ongoing.

## 3. Cultural competency and safety are important factors

This is a key design principle shaping Welcome to the Neighborhood, and an important factor leading to its success. Mabelle Arts facilitators share a similar ethnic and cultural background with workshop participants; and everyone may not speak the same language, but the language of art still connects them. This model of facilitation, grounded in welcome, in intersectoral collaboration; as well as in storytelling and in strategies of co-creating something together with strangers who become friends, is a model of community arts that has proven to be effective and impactful. It is critical then to ensure not only that such a successful model continues to be funded and support newcomers, racialized and marginalized groups, and local area residents, but we must also advocate for these partnerships between the community arts sector and settlement agencies to expand and grow. This can create more possibilities for this program, Welcome to the Neighborhood, to be viewed from a 'best practice' perspective, with potential for others to learn from it, so it continues to grow and may also be replicated in other jurisdictions.

## 4. Need for more comprehensive support for newcomer artists

The Newcomer artist training program being delivered by Mabelle Arts and other partner agencies should be longer, more consistent, and address multi-layered needs of artists so it can bridge the gap between learning and practical implementation of arts projects. The importance of mentorship practices, funding supports, paid internships, and grant writing workshops was emphasized by research participants; and this study highlighted that more opportunities were needed that support portfolio development, peer learning, and networking spaces too where resource sharing could happen, and newcomer artists could connect with each other and with established artists, including to learn about employment options in the arts sector.

## 5. Economic opportunities leading to identity affirmation

The economic dimension of community arts deserves emphasis for more than financial reasons. For newcomers, particularly those who were professional artists in their home countries, economic integration through creative practice represents not just financial necessity but restoration of professional identity, validation of expertise, and continuation of cultural legacy. When community arts programs create these economic bridges, they address what settlement services alone cannot: the need to be recognized not just as surviving but as contributing, not just as employed but as professionally fulfilled, not just as economically integrated but as culturally valuable.

## 6. Measurement and evaluation of impact

We need to highlight that standard evaluation metrics are not only inadequate but are also misguided when it comes to measuring the impact of community arts programs. New ways must be considered and implemented—of studying and understanding changes that may have occurred in individuals and in their ground realities—as a result of their participation. These measures need to include nuance and must honor complexity, when documenting impact. For example, instead of forcing community arts into clinical evaluation frameworks, we might develop what participants themselves value: stories of transformation, evidence of community building, documentation of cultural preservation and evolution. As Salma et al. (2023) found, the benefits of arts engagement, enhanced social connection, cultural identity strengthening, and collective empowerment resist simple metrics but are nonetheless real and profound.

## 7. Need to differentiate between arts education and community arts

These two arts-based practices are easily and often confused but they are quite different. While arts education is about teaching participants arts techniques, for example, rock painting, music or performance art, the purpose of community arts is to focus on the 'process' of being in a community setting, and creating something together in a collective space. Going through such an experience, finding other community members and expanding one's network can often feel supportive, especially in an environment that is new and unfamiliar; and this in turn can help address loneliness, leading to an enriched sense of self and a place of feeling belonging. For individuals and communities that are marginalised and excluded in society, either because they are coming from another place or from challenging life circumstances—like newcomers, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, and other vulnerable population groups—this can be an important space and a positive experience.



## Action Steps for a Path Forward

Given the key challenges highlighted through this research, what might sustainable, transformative community arts programming for newcomers actually look like?

First, stable funding embedded within larger systems is crucial. Rather than existing on the margins through project grants, a sector like community arts needs what Turri et al. (2025, p.7) call “statutory funding within healthcare”, or within settlement services, education, or municipal infrastructure. The Genesis Centre model in Calgary, where the city invested \$70 million while maintaining community-led programming (Guo & Guo, 2016), offers one promising approach. Programs like Mabelle Arts, which receives funding through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) contribution agreements, demonstrate how community arts can be recognized as essential settlement infrastructure rather than optional enrichment.

Second, genuine newcomer leadership, not just participation, proves essential. Mabelle Arts’ Newcomer Artist Ambassador program exemplifies this, creating pathways for participants to become facilitators, mentors, and eventually staff members. As Kellezi et al. (2021) emphasize, those with lived migration experience should be designing and delivering programs, not just receiving services (p.5).

Third, we need new ways of understanding, through a grounding in deep listening and a proactive willingness to learn; documenting impact that honours complexity, and continuous recalibration. Rather than forcing community arts into clinical evaluation frameworks, we might develop what participants themselves value: stories of transformation, evidence of community building, documentation of cultural preservation and evolution. In other words, maintaining a human-centred approach while navigating institutional demands for efficiency, measurement, and evaluation.

Finally, community arts programs should navigate the delicate balance between providing safe spaces for cultural preservation and creating bridges to broader community integration. Beauregard et al. (2020) describe programs as “contact zones” where different cultural signifiers combine into “hybridized wholes” (p.443). This suggests community arts’ unique capacity to support what participants described: maintaining connection to home cultures while building new Canadian identities.

One of the challenges of moving forward, as discussed by community arts practitioners, is that community arts work requires not just funding and partnerships but people willing to sit in uncertainty, to earn trust slowly, and to believe that the act of making something beautiful together can be revolutionary.

# Conclusion

# Moving Forward: Art as Integration, Integration as Art

The stories emerging from Mabelle Arts—of finding voice through storytelling, discovering purpose through teaching traditional crafts—reveal community arts as far more than supplementary programming for newcomers. Rather, these programs are what Barndt (2008) calls “collaborative processes of naming and challenging current power relations” (p. 355), creating spaces where newcomers transform from settlement service recipients to community creators.

The literature confirms what practitioners know intuitively: belonging cannot be mandated through policy or delivered through services. It emerges from countless small acts of creation and connection. Community arts programs facilitate these moments not by forcing integration

but by creating conditions where relationships can flourish naturally. Yet we must be honest about the distance between vision and reality. Despite documented effectiveness, community arts programs remain peripheral to settlement service infrastructure, receiving minimal sustained investment compared to employment and language programs. This disparity points to persistent assumptions within policy frameworks that prioritize economic integration metrics over paying attention to more holistic social and cultural dimensions of belonging.

Moving forward requires reimagining integration itself, not as newcomers adapting to static Canadian culture but as the ongoing co-creation of community through cultural exchange. It means recognizing community arts not as supplementary programming but as essential infrastructure for welcoming communities. Most importantly, it means listening to newcomers themselves when they tell us what they need: spaces to create, opportunities to contribute, and the chance to be seen as artists and culture-makers.

As the research consistently demonstrates, art makes connection possible in ways that transcend language and cultural barriers. In the end, this may be community arts' greatest gift: creating spaces where integration happens not because it must but because in the act of making something beautiful together, strangers discover they have become something more.

# Appendix A

# Get to Know: Community Artists

The artists featured here were asked if they would like their profiles and work to be shared for this segment of the report. They have freely chosen to submit these. The objective to include such a segment is to help showcase the important and purposeful work these artists do as community arts professionals, as well as share their background and their stories. This section also creates an opportunity to highlight the challenges these artists face, being situated in the precarious arts ecosystem in the GTA, as well as their resilience and their contributions to community-building through their arts practice. It can also help the reader learn more broadly and deeply about community arts—especially their significance and relevance for immigrant integration—an area within the arts that is somewhat lesser known and not so well understood than more well established and “professional” arts practices that create more traditional works of art we see displayed in museums and in art galleries.

# Kobena Ampofo

Kobena Ampofo was born on a dark Tuesday morning in Kumasi. We grew up there and have since also lived in Accra, South Bend, Chicago, Brampton, and now Toronto. As a practitioner led by curiosity, we often think of witchcraft as our foundational practice. We explore various arts through conjuring new (for us) realities into being, and finding new ways to communicate beyond (human) language.

Our formal artist journey began at the University of Notre Dame's department of Art, Art History, and Design where we developed our foundational skills in Industrial Design, studying form and function through a North American lens. Upon graduating in 2013, we explored creating various print and digital media as a graphic designer and then as a website developer, before joining a yoga teacher training program at Bliss Yoga Accra where we learned and practised facilitating somatic grounding for ourself and others. These experiences prepared us to dive deeper into our motivations as an artist and our desires for developing our craft, leading to the creation of works that we hope can connect with and support others in their own journey of engaging their curiosity about themselves and the world around them.

Our first showing was with the "In the Flesh" online exhibition in 2020 where we debuted the Shadowmancer series. Since then, our research and exploration of various crafts, practices and histories have informed our artistic practice in a quest to encounter and commune with spirits within and beyond our body. Our experience of collecting stories on the history of the Ghanaian coast during a residency with Saman Archive, especially oral and spiritual histories from elders and townspeople was incredibly eye-opening and a major inspiration in developing the "Notes on Making Jollof" digital collage series, which was exhibited at the 2024 Toronto Outdoor Art Fair. Most recently, our art was part of the 519's group exhibition "In What We Carry, We Become" for the "In Each Other's Magnitude" project held at the Wildseed Center for Art & Activism. We are also part of the 2024/25 Cohort of the VUKA Performing Arts Residency at Theatre Passe Muraille where we are working on a solo performance piece showing at the end of 2025. In the future, we hope to better archive our artworks under our Nipazeen platform to make our process more available to the similarly curious.

In March 2025, we connected with Mabelle Arts in a Community Arts training session and have since learned more about community-arts facilitation as well through their Newcomer Ambassador program. We have also received support from the Brampton Arts Organization both in our individual and community arts journeys. These training sessions built on our skills developed in facilitating somatic movement and meditation at Bliss Yoga, allowing us to support at various Mabelle Arts events and support others in learning to share their own arts practices with new communities in ways that encourage participants to focus on play and remain curious about themselves and each other.



# Jessica Tseng

I am a snail. It takes me time to live and breathe.

I am a visual and movement artist. My passion is to work with people to explore together the beauty inside us. I did my BFA at York University, and then returned to Hong Kong where I lived and developed as a community artist for over a decade. I am currently based in Toronto, and still consider Hong Kong to be home.

There are so many definitions of 'artist' that it would be hard to say when my 'journey as an artist begin'. But my 'artistic journey' definitely started somewhere deep in my upbringing.

My artistic career has focused on working with others as a community artist. I have facilitated visual, crafts, fabric, drama and dance programmes for a wide range of audience including immigrant youths, seniors with dementia and visual impairment, adults with complex disabilities, students with developmental disabilities, students in post-earthquake regions and rural women's group.

Being back in Toronto with my family after more than a decade, I am exploring and reconnecting with the city's changed ethnic, social and cultural landscape. So much is different from Hong Kong: how we get to workshops, what language(s) to use, the contexts and subtexts, the politically correct thing to say, where we get art materials, and where we hangout and recharge after leading a particularly draining session. Like many other immigrants, I am on a journey to reshape my identity and hopefully to plant my root.

These differences also brought magical moments: participants appreciating a game I adapted from Hong Kong, being warmly welcomed to new kinds of parties, and finding good facilitating partners who have also left their home to a foreign country.

This journey is filled with struggle; it probably will continue to be, and maybe it should be. The thought of 'home' for me is still Hong Kong; it will probably always be so even when one day my current neighbourhood also feels a bit like 'home'.



# Rishikesh Sharma

Rishikesh Sharma (Rishi) is a Toronto-based community arts facilitator and interdisciplinary artist working with photography, music, and kite-making. Originally from Kathmandu, Nepal, Rishi has always been drawn to creativity and finding ways to express himself. His interest in art began early, but it was when he discovered community arts that his curiosity, ideas and values came together. That discovery made him realise that his purpose as an artist is to use creativity to bring people together and add value to the community.

Rishi's journey started with photography and music. As a child, he carried his small digital camera everywhere, capturing random moments that caught his eye. In 2015, on a cycling trip, he took a photo of a horse grazing in a field. That moment of capturing and looking back at that picture deeply inspired him. In music, he began learning guitar in 2011 and started writing songs in 2020. He uses music and songwriting in his community arts practice, co-creating songs that reflect and represent the voices and experiences of the community.

In 2024, Rishi did a placement at Arts4All as part of his Addiction and Mental Health program. That experience made him realise his artistic calling. Working with community members, he saw how art could help

people connect, open up, and support one another. It became about creating with others and not just for himself. Since then, community arts has become the core of his practice.

Currently, Rishi is focused on facilitating workshops that use art to spark conversations about one's roots, present, and dreams. Through these music and visual arts-based workshops, his goal is to help participants reflect on their life's journey, connect with their present stories, and imagine what lies ahead.

He sees himself both as an artist and a facilitator, someone who helps people express themselves and find common ground. In a world that often feels isolated, he wants to bring people together through art by making it accessible to everyone.

Looking ahead, Rishi wants to build a sustainable practice at the intersection of community arts and mental health. He hopes to travel, learn from artists in different countries, and bring those experiences and learning back to Canada and design art programs from the wisdom gained. His long-term goal is to contribute to the arts and culture sector by creating spaces that are inclusive, collaborative, and meaningful.



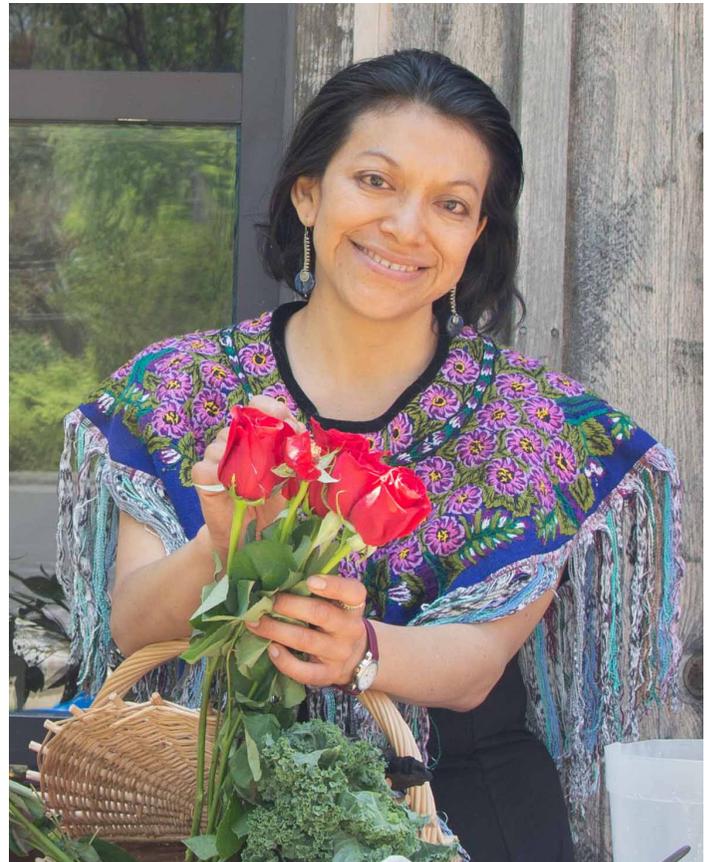
# Mercy Verdugo

Mercy Verdugo is a multidisciplinary artist with over 20 years of experience as a visual artist, actress, poet, arts advocate, and community facilitator. Her artistic journey has taken her from working in the heart of the Mexican jungle with immigrant children and families to leading workshops in Toronto for seniors and women with lived refugee experiences.

As the founder and director of ATELIER, a Mindful Art and Constant Creation project in Chiapas, Mexico, Mercy developed community-centred workshops that enriched the neighbourhood by fostering creativity and connection. In Toronto, Mercy continues her mission of accessible art-making through "Paper Garden" (Paper recycling) and "Los Colores de la Tierra" (The Colours of the Earth), her innovative natural dye painting project. She has collaborated with organizations and festivals such as MUSE Arts, MABELLE arts, Working Women Community Centre, Access Alliance, DPNCHC, the Newcomer Women Organization, FIPGRA, and Casa Maíz, bringing meaningful artistic experiences to diverse communities.

Mercy's contributions were recognized with the Toronto Arts Council Newcomer Mentorship Award in 2023.

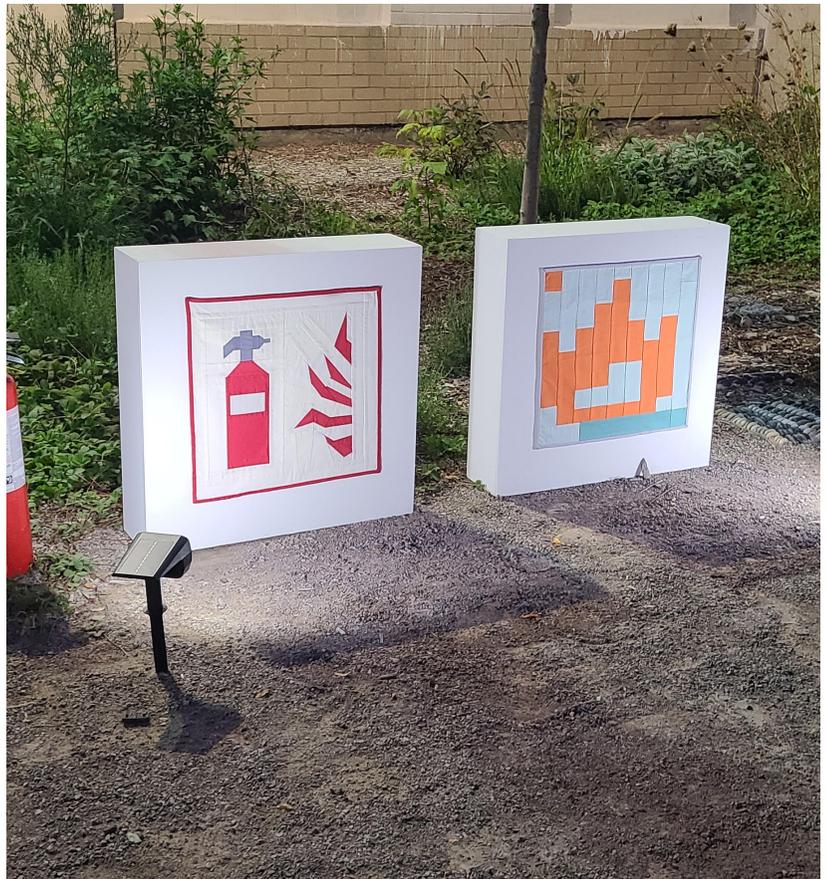
Since 2021, she has been part of the Welcome to the Neighbourhood program at Mabelle Arts as a Newcomer Artist Ambassador, continuing her role as a leader and advocate in the arts community. Her work continues to inspire and empower, building bridges between art, culture, nature and social engagement.



# Chico Togni

My name is Chico Togni and for more than 20 years I've been making large sculptures, and creating situations and happenings that take place in structures built with discarded wood, cardboard, metal and other found materials. I received a B.F.A. in Sculpture from The São Paulo University (USP), Brazil, in 2005, and since I exhibited internationally, from South to North America and Europe, most recently in Paris, France, and Leipzig, Germany. I was also an Artist Research Fellow at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. and an artist in residency at Cité International des Arts, Paris, and Museumsquartier Vienna in 2021.

Recently, since I moved to Toronto, I started experimenting with quilting and developed the Bellaroché Stories, an expanding series that narrates the trajectory of rocks, power tools and visual puzzles, a work in progress which I continue to produce at the studio with Mabelle Arts. Slowly with time and development of the sculptures and installations, the works became more and more community based and normally involve dozens of people to happen and to be made. It was a long journey before Canada, exhibiting in many countries in partnership with the artist Kadja de Paula, my partner in art, love and life, a long process of leaving a politically and economically chaotic Brazil. In Canada I'm still looking for some stability as a visual artist, a career that is somewhat impossible anywhere in the globe, although social structure in Canada makes everything a little more human and hopeful.



# Daniela Galaviz

My name is Daniela Galaviz, and I am a multidisciplinary artist, performer, facilitator, and arts promoter. My primary art forms are watercolour and clowning, but I frequently explore other disciplines and materials. I am from Mexico and I began my artistic career there by enrolling in the arts-focused high school CEDART "Ignacio Mariano de las Casas", an educational center part of the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature of Mexico (INBAL). This place undoubtedly marked my way of seeing the world and working with the arts. When I finished, I studied a bachelor in Performing Arts at my local University. Along with my studies, another important experience that defined my way as an artist was volunteering 4 years as a Hospital Clown for the non profit organization "Risaterapia".

After graduating from university, I joined the non-profit / theatre company "La Otra Banda" (Now La Otra Bandita) located in the Tepetate neighbourhood, in Querétaro, Mexico, where I worked creating drama performances for theatre and for the street. In 2017, I was co-creator and administrator of Teatropolis, a cultural space (2017-2020) in the historic center of the city of Querétaro. At the same time, I worked as a teacher in different educational institutions, teaching Visual Arts and Drama to young people.

It was through this experience that my interest in facilitating educational and community spaces was born. This led me to study a Master's Degree in Educational Technology at ITESM and later a postgraduate degree in Arts Education and Community Engagement at Centennial College.

I am passionate about the power that the arts have and the joy of creating in our personal day to day lives and what creating with other people does to our human relationships. I see myself as a

community artist and builder, community arts requires something different than just being an artist. Being with people, sharing and creating is an art by itself!

What brought me to Canada 3.5 years ago was to improve my quality of life in the economic sense and live in a safe place where I can walk on the streets. My goals in Canada are creating a way for me to live from my art, and this for me can look in different ways. I don't need to be a famous artist. I just want to have time to do my art and do art with people while making a good living. In my time here, I have started an arts collective, and we have been performing and exhibiting around the city.

I love Toronto. I love that it is a city where I can find people from all the corners of the world and I can meet new cultures and know about diverse perspectives. Of course I miss some aspects of my culture, Latin culture is warmer in a way. But I love Canada's love for nature and how they take care of it, I love the parks, I live near High Park and it is the best.

I hope to stay in Canada but the future still looks unsure. I have done everything that I was supposed to do but still I don't know if it will be enough to stay. It has been hard to process, dealing with so much uncertainties but in the end, the final decision is not mine. So, instead of imagining my future in a specific place, I think of what I want to have and what I want to be doing. I am working on a arts-based business and my hope is that it will grow enough so I can make a living wherever I go. I want to keep using art as a medium for community growth and mental health aid. And wherever I go the certainty is that there is always going to be art and people.





# Appendix B

# Blog Archives: Leveraging Community Arts for Immigrant Integration

Field notes from research assistants Karian Chen,  
Dorian Davidson and Asra Khan.

To read the posts on the web, visit:  
[https://www.torontomu.ca/cerc-migration/research/themes/project-brief/  
community-arts/blog/](https://www.torontomu.ca/cerc-migration/research/themes/project-brief/community-arts/blog/)

# Finding Home Through Thread and Needle: A Visit to MABELLE Arts Crafternoon Workshop

By Karian Chen ■ January 31, 2025



On a chilly, rainy afternoon, I made my first visit to Mabelle Avenue, a historically underserved, high-density, low-income inner-suburban neighbourhood in Central Etobicoke. I was not sure what to expect as I walked through the rain toward the MABELLE Arts centre, passing rows of rental apartments that seemed oddly quiet in the gloomy weather. As part of my ongoing research project with Dr Kumar, Dr Zhuang, and my colleagues, Asra and Dorian (all part of the research team on this project), I attended their “Crafternoon” workshop—a community-driven initiative that explores the concept of home through textile art.

The contrast between the gloomy weather outside and the warmth inside the centre was striking. Upon entering, I was immediately enveloped by the sound of laughter and animated conversations, with the space brightened by warm yellow lighting and tables adorned with crafty tablecloths, snacks, and an array of textile materials.

Annie, the Program Manager, welcomed me with a personalized hand-drawn name tag—a thoughtful touch that I noticed was extended to every participant. The workshop’s primary goal was to create textile pieces inspired by personal interpretations of “home,” which would ultimately contribute to a larger collaborative project. Interestingly, we were not the only researchers present; a furniture design student from Sheridan College was also there, participating in the workshop while gathering community input for redesigning the concrete benches in MABELLEpark.

As someone completely new to textile arts, I found myself staring at the wooden embroidery hoops, sewing kits, and fabric varieties with a mix of curiosity and uncertainty. However, the workshop’s collaborative spirit quickly emerged when a participant across from me noticed my hesitation and walked me to the craft station and kindly guided me through the basics.

What made the session particularly meaningful was how each piece of art became a gateway to personal stories. One participant stitched a house with a palm tree, sharing how it represented her Portuguese heritage despite growing up in the Caribbean. Another stitched a willow tree that was in the rear of her apartment building nearby, a familiar item that was immediately recognized by others from the same building.

Other than conventional symbols, one participant created an embroidery of a blue car, the first car she drove as a teenager, which evolved into a storytime of her memories of childhood. The woman who had helped me earlier also shared her work—an embroidered apartment building inspired by the view from our workshop window. As she explained her piece, she gestured toward the building outside, describing how its familiar silhouette had caught her eye while she worked and reminded her of what home meant in her current life.

Between stitches and stories, I caught glimpses of what makes this space special. A former program participant, now finishing her internship as a program assistant, was celebrating her upcoming job with the City of Toronto.

As I worked on my own piece, memories of watching my grandma mend my clothes when I was younger surfaced. I found myself wishing I had learned at least a trick or two from her—perhaps something to remedy on my next visit. Yet sitting there, among neighbours sharing stories while creating together, I understood something profound about how communities are stitched together, one story at a time.

Walking back to the subway, I took another look at MABELLEpark. What I had initially seen as just another neighbourhood park now held new meaning. This was the first park in Canada designed with direct input from a low-income, racialized community, as mentioned by MABELLE Arts’ Executive Director Leah Houston in an interview with CBC at MABELLEpark’s grand opening. After spending an afternoon watching neighbours create and share stories through simple stitches, this fact resonated differently. It reminded me of the insights from one of our research interviews with a Settlement Counsellor, who noted that many of her clients attend these workshops simply seeking community and moments of peace. Now I understand why. Community arts here is not about creating masterpieces or achieving artistic perfection—it is about creating a space where people feel welcomed, where they can relax, chat, discover some talents or interests that they did not know they had, or just simply be present. For these participants, these workshops offer something precious: a chance to belong, to connect, and to find moments of joy together, even on the gloomiest December afternoon.

# What We Carry — Art and Identity in a New Land: Part 1

By Dorian Davidson and Asra Khan ■ March 11, 2025



What does it mean to speak without words? Especially in a city as diverse as Toronto, where the melange of different cultures and identities makes for what many call a truly interwoven community. Yet this same diversity presents its own challenges for newcomer immigrants trying to navigate spaces without the comfort of their first language. Attempting to relate and share culturally specific experiences, and in a ‘foreign’ language, is far from easy. In fact, ask anyone struggling with a limited vocabulary and a lack of fluency, and they will tell you how deeply frustrating the experience is. In these moments of disconnect, we observed newcomers reaching for something more profound than words. A shared human language that needed no translation.

On February 11th, the “Welcome to the Neighbourhood” program created a space where art could be the common ground for newcomers. This workshop was the last one among a series of six, conducted at the Belle, on 38 Mabelle Avenue in Etobicoke. This series of workshops was conducted by Mabelle Arts in partnership with an immigrant-serving agency, Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services, and the Canadian Opera Company. When we got there, we saw long tables set up with art supplies sprawled neatly from end to end, in their main art- and activity space, a big room overlooking Mabelle Park- filled with natural light streaming through large windows. Among the many markers, construction papers, and coffee cups, were newcomers who had been provided materials to create their self-portraits, a task they were completing during this final workshop session in this series.

During these six workshops, in response to specific prompts related to home and everyday tasks, places, and events from their past, memories were re-kindled for every participant, and each had created an art piece that represented themselves and the country or geographical region they came from, as they best envisioned this task.

We (Asra and Dorian) observed the “Welcome to the Neighbourhood” workshop with our project lead Alka Kumar. We

arrived as researchers but left feeling like friends with the participants. Though strangers at first, as we spent time learning about each personal story and how their art piece connected to their vision of themselves, it made us reflect on our own connections to our identities and personal histories.

One of the first people to present was a woman who worked on a portrait with textures and colors that represented her Ukrainian culture. She created the figure of a woman who wore a traditional dress with blonde hair and blue eyes. She wanted to create the traditional markers of a beautiful woman.

In responding to this task of creating a self-portrait, another young woman was reminded of her wedding ceremony, with herself as an Indian bride dressed in gorgeous finery for her special day (she had a photo of this on her cellphone that inspired her to create her artefact). This opportunity also helped her connect the dots between her past, her culture, and her heritage with the reality of her present as she is now constructing her new life in Canada, living in the Mabelle Park neighborhood with her husband.

At another table, an Iranian man constructed a 3D building. He merged cardboard, pipe cleaners, and construction paper, to tell a story of his Iranian roots. Before retiring and moving to Canada, he worked as a civil engineer in Iran where he built many hundreds of buildings similar to the one he now produced on his canvas. The building he constructed became a gateway to his memories, so vividly bringing to life his past without uttering a single worded description. He described each region of Iran proudly, prompting a telling of unique stories about the different cultures, customs, and cuisines unique to each area of the country. All of these came together to paint the unique vision of not only the man's life experiences but the many blends of culture Iran has.

One participant fondly recalled his love for soccer and sports, while also displaying how he missed his family and the life he once had back in Türkiye. He expressed his connection to his



country through a red-striped-yellow soccer jersey displaying his favourite team back home. The image struck a stark connection to his identity, his hobbies, and his nationality.

Another workshop participant who grabbed our attention explored through her art the experience of feeling torn and living between two worlds- her self-portrait represented a heart that was divided between Iran and Canada. The artist worked with felt materials to symbolically represent her choice to come to Canada to be with her children, while another piece of her heart longed for her family and life back home. She spoke of the burden of coming to a new country and the pull of wanting to reconnect with the life she once had, a life that is strongly tied to who she still is, and will always be. The art piece

touched and resonated with many in the room as it was not only her unique story but had elements of shared experiences and emotions many newcomers carry within themselves.

As the event progressed, the collaborative space was filled with light laughter, many compliments, and roaring applause. People found ways to connect through shared experiences, even ones they couldn't find the words to express. Through creativity, it became natural and easy to connect with one another. Art became a universal language that allowed everyone to speak about their journeys and their roots, as well as their memories and their hopes for finding belonging in their new home.



# What We Carry — Art and Identity in a New Land: Part 2

By Dorian Davidson and Asra Khan ■ April 3, 2025



## Asra's Reflection

As I sat with newcomer artists at MabelleArts, watching them create and connect with others, I appreciated the inviting space around me, full of friendly smiles and excited chatter. I mused to myself, as I reflected, too-maybe regular people sharing their stories, backgrounds, and experiences are at the heart of community arts spaces...

This post is Part Two of the two-part blog series about the Mabelle Arts' run community-arts program, Welcome to the Neighborhood (WTTN) that Dorian and I, Asra, observed on February 11th. If you have missed Part One, do read it on the CERC website, March 11, 2025.

I wish now that I had reached 38 Mabelle Ave in Etobicoke somewhat earlier, and had the privilege to participate in this workshop, rather than just observe it. Each individual in this workshop seemed to be busy and motivated as they created their own art-piece around the theme of 'self-portraiture.' Watching what was going on around me, I noted that this self-exploration enabled newcomers to discover new parts of themselves, or maybe these were simply important pieces they had forgotten they carried within; pieces that could break through only in a safe environment where creative expression could thrive. There was an ease about the evening as it flowed without any specific schedule we were asked to follow. As always, snacks were handy through the evening, along with hot and cold beverages.

As participants began working on their art pieces, the carefree buzz of conversations and each person's true engagement in the workshop tasks allowed for natural interests to emerge easily. In our role as observers that evening, we could easily tell that meaningful bonds formed between people who might otherwise never have met.

Having arrived in Canada as a child 25 years ago, I understand that finding a space to connect with others is as important

as it is overwhelming. The transition leaves you searching for familiar anchors in an unknown place. When I observed people talk about their culture's rich fabric, from bridal dresses to architecture, to sports, it was clear to me that people felt connected to the differences. The varied experiences that workshop participants talked about became connecting points. These cultural touchpoints transformed into pathways that helped people understand where others were coming from. They also helped them realize they are not alone in experiencing this confusing transition to a new space.

Newcomers with varying expertise in art feel connected to community arts spaces. These spaces provide a unique shared environment where newcomers can feel connected to their roots and to their rich cultural heritage. And they can learn from each other too.

Watching these participants find connection through art, being seen, with their work being appreciated by others in the room suddenly made them feel whole again. It was obvious that they felt proud sharing their heritage; and this also somehow revealed their need to feel connected to their roots and connect with others. Some participants were hesitant to speak directly about their homeland at first. However, the 'process' of creating their piece inspired by their experiences- using construction paper and fabrics that reminded them of their childhood landscape, or creating a traditional bridal gown from their culture- had mysteriously opened doors to natural and affirmative sharing.

It became clearer to me that day that integration into a new environment happens not just with language but through these moments of cultural and social exchange as well as through forming emotional connections. These spaces matter because they recognize that we all need places to be fully ourselves, share our stories, and connect with others through something meaningful. For newcomers navigating the challenges of starting over, creative communities offer artistic outlets and genuine human connection.

## Dorian's Reflection

Being in the Mabelle Arts space allowed me to experience art through a different lens. I have always appreciated the beauty and history that rest in celebrated art pieces, housed safely in famous galleries and museums around the world. What struck me from those experiences was that art isn't just about beauty, it's about connection. Each piece was a window into another time, another life, another way of seeing the world. And now, I was feeling that connection more intensely. Mabelle Arts left me more engaged, even moved, by this participatory experience of community-arts. The stories, personal experiences, and histories attached to each participant's piece were so unique that even though I had just met everyone for the first time, I was able to feel very connected to them. In attending this arts programming workshop and hearing each artist talk about what their piece meant to them, and even how it came to be, I learned new things about different countries and cultures, including Ukraine, Iran, Mexico, Turkey, and more.

Art was not just a history lesson today or for aesthetic pleasure, and I began to see art as an exercise that has the potential to bring people closer to each other. In that same

vein, despite being a researcher with intentions of observing the processes occurring in the community arts space, I felt welcomed more as a guest and even felt compelled to participate in the activities myself. That is the true beauty of Mabelle Arts, and the uniqueness of their process of facilitating community-arts programs. The fact that they have the ability to create a natural and safe environment where a variety of individuals and groups can let go of their inhibitions and immerse themselves in a space where they experience being heard and seen is special. It is perhaps community arts in its truest and best form.

A lot of creative disciplines and projects that fall under the Arts' are often dismissed as a hobby, not taken seriously by adults to engage with for themselves. Creative learnings in younger generations, too, are often discouraged and are not seen as a practical and stable way to earn a living. This workshop made me think how this is such a reductive way of engaging with the arts! In no other medium can you express yourself with just a few pieces of paper and whatever you have around your living space. That is the true power of community arts, the ability to communicate your personal identity and culture without saying any words at all.



# Weaving New Narratives: My Evening At A Newcomer Artist Training

By Karian Chen ■ May 27, 2025



*What follows is a blog-style reflection on my recent visit February 18, 2025 to Mabelle Arts' Newcomer Artist Training workshop, part of their signature Welcome to the Neighbourhood program, where I participated as part of my current research project.*

The workshop started a bit late because of the weather, but honestly, I did not mind, as the care put into preparing the space told me we were in good hands for whatever lay ahead.

As I stepped inside, the transformation was immediate. Annie and her team had worked their magic again, turning an ordinary room into a creative haven. Each place at the table featured a thoughtful welcome gift—notebooks and vibrant pens—while patterned tablecloths splashed colour and excitement across the space. It reminded me of their December Crafternoon workshop, where they'd used the same technique: creating warmth through colour and texture, making strangers feel instantly at home.

Annie's opening words revealed something different about this gathering. This was not just another session in the community arts program that Mabelle Arts runs. Rather, as Annie describes it, it is the 'jewel in the crown' in the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) funded Welcome to the Neighborhood (WTTN) program; and it helps support the first of its kind training that uses community arts specifically for newcomer artists integration into the arts scene in the GTA. Some members of the National Film Board (NFB) team were present that evening, as NFB were partnering with Mabelle Arts on this project. For them, the objective of this partnership was to observe and document the newcomer artist training workshop, the camera following these newcomer artists, not just during this session, but also beyond, keeping track of their journeys as they continued to pursue their professional goals in the GTA and in Canada.

Instead of making us do those awkward circle introductions that I usually dread, Dani had us try something different. We

formed a circle and took turns sharing unique fun facts about ourselves, with an interesting twist: whenever someone shared something you connected with, you stepped forward. What struck me was watching how the physical distance between us kept shrinking throughout the activity. Something about physically moving closer to people as you learn about them changed the energy of the room. It was not profound in some grand way, but it was effective—the room felt smaller and more intimate, somehow warmer by the end of it.

Next came an interview activity where we paired up and got handwritten question cards to decorate. I partnered with a woman who also speaks Cantonese as her first language, and something interesting happened when we switched from English to Cantonese—the careful construction of English sentences fell away, and suddenly we were just two people sharing stories with a new level of ease and depth.

Instead of having to draw exact portraits of our partners (which would have made me nervous about my drawing skills), we just had to draw something that reminded us of them. This took away the pressure of trying to make "perfect" art, and opened the door to metaphor and feeling, which I appreciated.

When we came back together to introduce our partners to the group, I was surprised by the range of artistic backgrounds in the room—everything from traditional painting to filmmaking, textile art and sculpture, music and dance too. As Annie observed, there is something powerful about hearing your own story reflected back through someone else's perception, especially in a room full of fellow artists who understand what it means to create.

The dinner break was not merely an intermission but an integral part of the community-building experience. The generous spread (with enthusiastic encouragement to take leftovers home) created an atmosphere of abundance and care. After mouthfuls of food, conversations flowed more freely, and laughter echoed through the room.

The second half of the workshop felt more like a discussion or seminar. Using a colourful Venn diagram taped to the wall, the facilitators, Annie and Dani, invited us to explore the intersections between public art, community arts, and arts education. Everyone was encouraged to share their thoughts to fill in the blank spaces.

One of the participants shared how funeral rituals in her African culture function as community art, with families coming together to decorate tombstones as acts of remembrance, celebration, and mourning. Across the circle, another participant's eyes widened in recognition as she described similar practices in Mexican culture. It was a beautiful moment of cross-cultural connections too—people realizing they'd been practicing some form of community arts all along, simply under different names and contexts.

Another interesting aspect for me was learning about the political side of community arts. Some participants shared stories from their home countries where community art, like communal art walls (and graffiti), became more than just creative expressions during times of political tension. It became a pathway for people to fight for freedom and social justice, speaking out despite censorship. These stories made me think about the role of community arts in society in ways I had not considered before.

What I became aware of most starkly by the end of the workshop was how much the room itself had transformed! When we first gathered, there was the typical reserve of strangers—cautious smiles, careful distance, measured words. By evening's end, that reserve had melted away. It showed how quickly a sense of community had developed during just the course of a few hours.

This workshop felt so different from the Crafternoon session I attended in December. Crafternoon was more like a casual community hangout—people came to explore and create without any particular goals. This Newcomer Artist Training workshop had a different energy and purpose. These artists came with specific intentions—they wanted to understand Toronto's art scene, explore job prospects, and figure out how to establish themselves here. Many had practiced art professionally in their home countries; they arrived with clear identities as artists and creators, and they carried deep reflections on their craft which they freely shared.

Annie also shared something else I found interesting - that this workshop was also designed to teach participants the how-to of facilitating workshops in community arts. We were encouraged to pay attention to how she and Dani led activities, almost like an informal training in facilitation. We were learning not just by participating, but by observing how they created a safe, creative space where everyone felt not only seen and heard, but they also felt comfortable sharing their stories and their perspectives.

Walking home after the workshop, I found myself thinking back about the nourishing space I had just left, and how such environments are so important in a big city like Toronto. For newcomers especially, finding your place (and your voice) can be challenging. But for a few hours, I saw a group of strangers connect through art and stories, creating something meaningful together that had not existed before we all showed up, a temporary community that left permanent impressions.



# Appendix C

# Building on Previous Knowledge: Extended Literature Review

## Community Arts as a Pathway to Newcomer Integration and Belonging

So what exactly is community arts? The answer resists a simple definition. At its core, community arts represents what Deborah Barndt (2008, p.354) calls “a process of co-creation”—a collaborative exchange between those with artistic training and community members at various skill levels. But it is much more than shared art-making.

Think of it this way: when newcomers gather at Mabelle Arts to create quilts or perform stories, they are not just learning techniques. They are participating in what researchers have identified as a form of “cultural democracy” (Crehan, 2011, p.81), redistributing creative power from elite institutions to everyday people.

This process-centred approach creates what McLeod et al. (2020, p.88) found in their Newfoundland study: “non-evaluative collaborative spaces” where participants can experiment, fail, and try again without judgement. Unlike formal art classes focused on technique, or therapy sessions aimed at healing, a variety of community arts together occupy a unique middle ground, creative enough to inspire, supportive enough to hold vulnerability, and informal enough to feel accessible.

The political dimensions matter too. Community arts—as a field and as practice—does not just bring people together; it positions participants as agents of change. When newcomers share their migration stories through theatre or document their experiences through collage, they are doing what Walker and Oliveira (2020, p.189) describe as claiming the right to “contribute to a definition of themselves” rather than being defined by others.

## How Creative Practice Builds Belonging

The pathways through which community arts fosters integration are both subtle and powerful. Studying programs in Montreal, Beaugard et al. (2020) identified three interconnected mechanisms that help explain how art-making becomes community-building.

First, there is the interactive process itself, the simple yet profound act of creating alongside others. When newcomers work together on a mural or rehearse a performance, they engage in what researchers call “collaborative meaning-making.” As one participant noted, even without shared language, “you can communicate through art.” The physical act of creating, of passing materials, problem-solving together, and celebrating small victories builds connection in ways that transcend verbal communication.

Second, community arts creates what Beaugard et al. term “contact zones”, spaces where multiple cultural traditions meet and mix. These are not just cultural exchanges, they are acts of “hybridization” where new forms of expression emerge from the mixing of traditions.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, community arts enable collective voice. When participants work together to create a quilt while sharing what home means to them, telling stories of ‘back home,’ and sharing the meanings they ascribe to their memories of left-behind spaces and loved ones, they are transformed. They are no longer isolated individuals, rather they become connected communities. This shift from “I” to “we” represents a fundamental transformation in how newcomers see themselves, not as strangers in a strange land but as contributors to an evolving community story.

The concept of “third spaces” helps us understand another dimension of how community arts works. Zhuang and Lok (2023) found that newcomers actively seek spaces beyond home and work where they can gather informally, build relationships, and simply be themselves. Community arts organizations like Mabelle Arts function as these crucial “third spaces,” neither the private sphere of home nor the formal world of work, but something in between where different identities can coexist.



**Top:** Painting by artist Pooja Kumar when visiting Mabelle Avenue, 2023-2025.

## Economic Integration Through Creative Practice

The economic challenges facing newcomers in Canada are well-documented: credential recognition barriers, lack of “Canadian experience,” unfamiliarity with local labour markets, and professional networks that operate through invisible cultural codes. The *Work in Culture* (2021) study reveals how the arts sector’s particular characteristics—seasonal employment, project-based contracts, expectation of unpaid “exposure” work, and deeply insular professional networks—created additional layers of exclusion. Newcomer artists face what Parzer (2021, p.106) describes as a double burden: having to “start from zero” materially while simultaneously fighting for recognition as legitimate artists rather than being seen solely through their refugee or immigrant status. There is another layer of structural barriers, as newcomers search for “art” opportunities while Canadian institutions organize under “culture,” creating a fundamental disconnect that prevents access to resources (*Work in Culture*, 2021).

This is where community arts programs—like Mabelle Arts’ Newcomer Artist Training—can operate as bridges between newcomer artists’ existing expertise and Canadian creative economies. Unlike mainstream arts institutions with their hidden prerequisites and unspoken rules, community arts organizations create what Charlton et al. (2013) call “ladders of opportunity”, structured pathways from initial engagement to skill development to entrepreneurship (p.38). Their study of three marginalized Toronto neighbourhoods documented how these ladders function: youth begin with free workshops, progress to teaching assistance, develop entrepreneurial skills through community markets, and eventually launch businesses in music production, graphic design, or fashion.

The economic mechanisms operate at multiple levels. At the most basic, programs provide paid opportunities that recognize artistic skills. For newcomer artists accustomed to being told their art has no Canadian value, this first payment represents profound validation.

As one of Stern and Seifert’s (2010, p.86) study participants noted, recognition matters as much as honorarium; being paid confirms professional identity in ways that transcend monetary value.

Beyond individual income, community arts programs build the social capital essential for creative sector navigation. Through collaborative projects, newcomers artists develop relationships with established practitioners who can decode funding applications, introduce gallery connections, or explain the unwritten rules of Canadian arts professionalism. These networks, typically inherited through privilege or academic pathways, become accessible through the lateral entry point of community engagement.

The impact extends beyond individual artists. Immigrant cultural traditions become economic assets through artisan economies and heritage preservation (Arroyo, 2020, p.32). Programs like Little Mekong in Minneapolis demonstrate how cultural traditions become critical components of economic corridor success, with arts and culture understood as essential to business district vitality rather than decorative additions.

The economic dimension of community arts deserves emphasis. For newcomers, particularly those who were professional artists in their home countries, economic integration through creative practice represents not just financial necessity but restoration of professional identity, validation of expertise, and continuation of cultural legacy. When community arts programs create these economic bridges, they address what settlement services alone cannot: the need to be recognized not just as surviving but as contributing, not just as employed but as professionally fulfilled, not just as economically integrated but as culturally valuable.



**Top:** Painting by artist Pooja Kumar when visiting Mabelle Avenue, 2023-2025.

## Advocacy and Neighbourhood Transformation: The Artivism Dimension

Community arts serve not only individual integration but collective advocacy and neighbourhood transformation. The concept of artivism—art as activism—reveals how creative practice becomes a tool for social change and community development. This dimension proves particularly relevant in contexts like Mabelle Avenue, a historically underserved, high-density neighborhood in Central Etobicoke where Toronto Community Housing towers house highly diverse, majority-racialized residents. Here, fourteen years of community organizing through arts has culminated in the transformation of Mabelle Park.

Research from similar Toronto neighborhoods provides compelling evidence of activist art's concrete impacts. Charlton et al.'s (2013) study examined three marginalized Toronto neighbourhoods—Malvern, St. James Town, and Weston Mt. Dennis—all characterized by high poverty, significant newcomer populations, and infrastructure challenges. In Weston Mt. Dennis, when railway safety concerns threatened children, created an outdoor art gallery along dangerous tracks. The creative intervention prompted city funding for proper fencing, now adorned with murals, while community gardens flourish where children once risked injury, showing how art achieves tangible policy changes and infrastructure improvements (Charlton et al., 2013, p.19).

The beautification dimension creates what Lavrinec (2014) calls “symbolic appropriation of neighbourhood space” (p.16). When residents participate in decorating poles and facades, they develop networks of trust and mutual help while materializing community connections through physical transformation. This dual function, aesthetic improvement and social network building, characterizes successful community arts interventions.

Research on creative placemaking extends this analysis, showing how co-created spaces signal belonging while transforming neighbourhoods (Arroyo, 2020). Effective placemaking centres immigrant and refugee artists, avoiding cultural tokenism while supporting authentic representation. This approach transforms not just physical spaces but residents' mental maps, creating attraction and connection points that counter neighbourhood stigmatization.

The Mabelle Park transformation shows these principles in action. With \$3.5 million raised for reimagining the space, the project represents Canada's first park designed specifically for high-density, low-income tower communities (Mabelle Arts). The Community Use Framework, developed through playful conversations with over 200 residents, identifies four interconnected functions: nature connection, work opportunities, relationship building, and care exchange. This multifunctionality reflects what Zhuang and Lok (2023, p.2) identify as the particular importance of “third spaces” for marginalized communities. In neighbourhoods where private living spaces are

cramped and public services limited, community spaces must serve multiple roles, as workplaces for informal economies, gathering spots for isolated residents, cultural venues for heritage preservation, and safe havens for children's play. Mabelle Park thus becomes not just a park but social infrastructure, a platform for economic activity, and a hub for cultural expression and community resilience.

## Towards a Substantive Citizenship

Citizenship, in its formal sense, is often defined by status: who belongs within national borders and who does not. Yet, here we are interested in considering how citizenship feels like and is lived. Substantive and affective notions of citizenship (Lister, 2003; Fortier, 2016), in this sense, are helpful when thinking about what forms of recognition, participation, and belonging allow people to experience themselves as citizens. In this context, community arts offer an entry point for pursuing these questions, as they demonstrate how collective expression and creativity sustain a sense of belonging that exceeds legal frameworks.

We can, then, take a step back and focus on how community-based art practices contribute to the experience of citizenship as participation in cultural life, and as a means of shaping social and political inclusion. Substantive citizenship asks: what must be in place for individuals, especially newcomers, to feel and enact belonging? In the case of Mabelle Arts, and of the artistic field in general, immigrant artists are able to share practices and ways of knowing, which trickles down to their audiences and participants as well. Such aesthetic negotiations of lived experiences can reveal the emotional, social, and institutional infrastructures that underpin inclusive citizenship.

Cultural Studies scholar Anne Ring Petersen's concept of the postmigrant epistemic community (Petersen, 2021) suggests that societies shaped by migration must learn to think from migration rather than about it. Here, postmigration refers to the critical focus of the ongoing impacts of migration on cultural and civic life, rather than a hypothetical timeline in which migration ceases to exist: it insists that migrants are not external to the social fabric, but is a major part of its constitution. In the Canadian context, we can apply this concept to community arts practices, since they are traditions of social practice rooted in critique of the dominance of Western mass cultures, on one hand, and the cultivation of civic engagement through creative collaboration, on the other (Barndt, 2008, p. 352-353).

In this sense, community arts practices and institutions in Canada, such as the work of Mabelle Arts, are a springboard for examining substantive and postmigrant understandings of citizenship—one that values epistemic and artistic community building as both means and end to deepen public understandings of citizenship as an evolving relation rather than a fixed status.

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**Above:** Indigenous Planting Workshop at Mabelle Arts.(2025). Credit: Katrin Faridani

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