

WEAVING THREADS BETWEEN MUSIC AND SOCIAL EQUITY IN NEW YORK CITY

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ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Scholar at New York University, I undertook a program of research that explored how music and the arts are addressing complex social issues, such as social inequity, and bringing about positive change in communities. In this article I explore some of the insights generated from my Fulbright, by weaving threads between my experiences of music research, life, belonging, proximity, and action in the Big Apple.

Keywords: Arts • music • social equity



THOUSANDS OF INVISIBLE THREADS

As I sat alongside hundreds of new Fulbrighters in the windowless ballroom of the QT Hotel in Canberra, the sense of connection and camaraderie was palpable. We were in this together and relished being in a space where we could openly share our collective excitement. It was February 2020, and we were due to fly out to the US in the coming months. We were floating on cloud nine, oblivious to the global catastrophe that was about to hit us all. We were warmly welcomed into the global Fulbright community and told that the links we were building now would last a lifetime.

My University's Vice Chancellor Professor Carolyn Evans, a former Fulbright Senior Scholar, was one of the guest speakers. Her words struck a particular chord with me. She said a Fulbright weaves "1000s of invisible threads." I have long been drawn to weaving and threading metaphors as a way of working through creative ideas and processes. I wrote those words down on the hotel notepad and carried them with me to New York City and back as a reminder. The weave of threads that Carolyn spoke of so aptly describes the connections that I made with colleagues and organizations, but also with life, culture, and ultimately myself in New York City.

THREADS THROUGH MUSIC RESEARCH

I was originally due to go to New York University in 2020 to work with my host, Professor Barbara Hesser at New York University (NYU) on co-editing the 5th edition of *Music as a Global Resource Compendium* for the United Nation's (UN) 75th Anniversary. Instead, due to the pandemic, Barbara and I worked on the compendium virtually with the help of a team from NYU and

Griffith University, and we launched it in 2020 online (see Hesser & Bartleet, 2020). I was grateful to be able to make these connections, especially during such a challenging time, but I confess I did feel a tinge of disappointment that we couldn't launch it at the UN Headquarters as in previous years.

With the compendium under our belts, when I eventually made it to New York City in April 2022, Barbara and I had plenty of time to reflect on the unique global view of music our work had revealed. I learned so much from my time with her. She is not only a leading music therapist and trailblazer in her field, but also a wise and experienced champion of music across so many diverse contexts, including the UN.

My Fulbright also enriched my current Australian Research Council Future Fellowship research, which is examining the role music can play in addressing social inequity and bringing about positive change in communities. In line with the Fulbright ethos, soon after arriving in New York City, I quickly shifted my approach from one of data collection to connection. Rather than fronting up to musicians and organizations to extract ideas about my topic, I decided to focus on building relationships, and establishing foundations that would last longer than a one-time conversation.

This led me to meet with many leading musicians and arts organizations, attend their concerts and events, and have conversations with them about how they are using the arts to address a raft of pressing social issues. I also exchanged ideas around social justice-oriented practice, research, evaluation and impact with colleagues at a range of institutions and bodies, and shared what I was learning through keynote presentations, workshops, classes, and volunteering with social purpose NGOs, including a local food pantry in East Harlem. Through these experiences, 1000s of threads were formed not only between people, but also ideas, places and experiences.

THREADS OF LIFE

A major reason for choosing New York City was so that I could spend time with my host Barbara at NYU, but also because New York is home to a distinct cluster of renowned musicians, arts organizations and NGOs who have been driving innovative and creative practices in the field of social equity. This was my third visit to New York. The first time I visited was a few months after September 11, and the second time was a few months before Barack Obama was elected President. This time New York was coming to grips with the impact of the pandemic. There was a major surge in gun violence sparking the perennial debate about gun control laws. The Supreme Court reversed *Roe vs Wade*, settling off protests around reproductive rights, meanwhile Ketanji Brown Jackson made history as the first African American woman to be sworn in as a Supreme Court Justice. Inflation kept surging, and the political divisions continued to rage as the January 6th Hearings commenced.

For my family, coming to understand and connect with New York City meant getting out every day, walking the streets, riding the subway, and engaging with as many arts, culture, and food experiences as we could. Highlights included seeing 90-year-old John Williams conduct his music at Carnegie Hall; witnessing the closing night of Australian composer Brett Dean's opera *Hamlet* at the Met; cheering on the Knicks at the Garden; dancing at the free summer stages; sitting on FDR Drive with 10,000's of New Yorkers watching the Macy's fireworks on the 4th July; visiting Broadway; visiting Positive Exposure an NGO using photography to change the way we see disability; visiting the deeply moving Jean-Michel Basquiat King Pleasure exhibition; playing my trumpet as part of Taps Across America on Memorial Day (pictured above); and so much more. These experiences lit my husband, my twin daughters, and myself up creatively. However, it was not just the constant excitement of these events that made the deepest impression. It was the day-to-day reality of living in New York City, and calling it temporarily our home. Family life continued, our kids were typical tweens, and we shopped every couple of days at our local Key Foods grocer.

THREADS OF BELONGING

Spending time in New York City prompted me to reflect deeply on my own migrant story alongside my research topic. I was deeply moved by a visit to the famed Tenement Museum, where I imagined the experiences of countless migrant families, traipsing up and down these wrought-iron stairs. Culturally separated from where they came from, yet culturally nourished by the small yet significant practices they did each day to remind themselves of who they really are. We heard stories of how many were undocumented, working in exploitative conditions, and at the mercy of their fears. Inequities and injustices seemed to abound as they broke their backs to remain above the poverty line. So many threads severed on one end, yet threaded into a new weave on the other. Because such a large part of New York's population is riddled with this transience and displacement, I found questions of belonging were ever-present. Not just culturally, but socially, economically, and politically.

These experiences made me wonder how these complex questions of belonging relate to broader conceptualizations of community, and how then these experiences relate to more macro issues of social equity. It inspired me to explore ways in which the arts carve out a space for exploring how these individual experiences might connect to systemic forces and factors that can shift inequities like those experienced by New York's early migrants in the Tenements. I found powerful examples in the Ford Foundation Centre for Social Justice's exhibition 'Everything Slackens in a Wreck.' This exhibition of new works reflects on Asian migration to the Americas in the 19th century and tells the story of over half a million indentured workers who were taken

to plantations as replacement labor following the abolition of slavery. The art works allowed us to see and hear truths about these inequities (past and present), but also told stories of how the artists have created a sense of belonging through their work.

It was not just in the silent rooms of an art gallery, hidden from the street view, that I saw this search for a sense of belonging. In New York City, we experienced a constant public showing, rehearsing, and sharing of cultural identities, and a public thinking through how these have shaped and been shaped by American culture. A memorable example was when we joined thousands of New Yorkers in celebrating the inaugural Japan Parade for Japan Day down Central Park West. Eighty community organizations marched in a colorful display of Japanese culture in America with singing, dancing, Taiko, Gagaku, Kendo, Karate, marching bands, celebrating 150 years of Japan-US relations. Because everything in New York City is so compressed, you cannot ignore these expressions. However, I came to wonder whether this proximity actually changed anything in terms of broader social equity.

THREADS IN PROXIMITY

When I was in the Tenement Museum shop, I picked up a book, *Tales of Two Cities: Stories of Inequality in a Divided New York* (Freeman, 2015). I was struck by the cover, an image so quintessentially New York City of a homeless person lying outside an exclusive Manhattan store. It led me to wonder what kind of an impact this proximity has on how people see each other in this city. This was not a theoretical question, as we were living this every day in the city. While technically on the Upper East Side, and a short walk away from mind-blowing privilege, our E97th Street apartment was placed at the intersection of the famed Mt Sinai hospital on one corner, a daytime strip for our homeless neighbors on another, the Islamic Cultural Centre of New York Mosque on the other, and 'Projects' (social housing blocks) and a church and childcare on the other. Experiencing the proximity of extreme privilege and poverty was part of our daily experience.

When I met a colleague from Boston University, Professor André De Quadros and discussed this, he made the point that we need to think beyond proximity, to spaces where people actually engage in dialogue and relationships. In other words, we connect the individual to the community, and transform proximity into a more liminal space that promotes reflection and connection. I experienced what he meant during an online session he hosted for the Race, Prison, Justice Arts project he has been running for many years for incarcerated artists. There was a powerful energy in the room with over 80 people on the line, some of whom are incarcerated, their family members, and leaders from Boston University's Prison Arts Project. We listened to a collect call from one of the incarcerated artists, Truth, as he shared a poem entitled "Ruminations of a Rogue Prophet." This came from *Explanations from Exile*, a literary initiative he started at the prison in 2016, as

a truth-telling process that is part of restorative justice programming. This dialogic space went well beyond proximity. Truth's work opened up a space to speak to the systems of power. I was struck by how these spaces created by the arts can allow us to play with, rehearse, engage, and have dialogues about more equitable relations. Spaces to re-story lives, open up pathways to different futures, and to listen to and be heard by others, including decision-makers who pull the policy strings.

THREADS OF ACTION

One of the highlights of my Fulbright was meeting NYU Professor Steve Duncombe. He has a long history of practice and research in my field, having co-founded the Centre for Artistic Activism. When I described my research to Steve, he immediately identified that I am not just looking at how music and the arts can lead to outcomes like individual self-determination, community building and social cohesion. Rather, I am looking at how those outcomes might flow up to a systemic level, and bring about a more equitable world. For him, in order to do this, we have to be clear about our intent, and how we really know if we have achieved this intent (see Duncombe & Lambert, 2021).

Steve's ideas about intention in artistic activism resonated with another memorable experience during my Fulbright. We attended the Tribeca Film Festival where Robert De Niro presented the rap artist Common with the Harry Belafonte Voices for Social Justice Award. An Academy Award, Emmy and Grammy-winning artist and activist, Common has been deeply engaged in social justice and advocacy work around mass incarceration, mental health and voting.

What was so powerful to hear in Common's story is that he has found a way to come to know his intentions, to find a sense of belonging. Through hard work and reflection, he is creating a dialogic space to be with others that goes well beyond mere proximity. He is using rap as a way of not only telling truths of people impacted by an unjust justice system, but re-writing stories and lives with a focus on hope. However, he also understands that the racial inequities he is seeking to address are operating on the systemic level, and through his NGOs he is taking action hand-in-hand with politicians, policy-makers, decision-makers, and community leaders to address these macro issues.

His art is allowing him to weave threads through those dimensions from the individual to the community to the social, and back again.

This rich tapestry of experiences (1000s of invisible threads) collectively wove together to provide the greatest learning experience of my career so far. The threads of these experiences allowed me to see connections between the personal and the social, the micro and the macro, and how the arts and culture can create powerful pathways for moving between these perspectives.

A RICH TAPESTRY IN THE MAKING

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NOTES

1. Duncombe, S. & Lambert, S. (2021). *The art of activism: Your all-purpose guide to making the impossible possible*. OR Books.
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3. Freeman, J. (2015). *Tales of two cities: Stories of inequality in a divided New York*. Penguin.



Professor Bartleet, her Fulbright host Professor Barbara Hesser, and Professor Peter Jampel after a music therapy class at NYU.

BIOGRAPHY

Brydie-Leigh Bartleet is a Professor and Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the Creative Arts Research Institute, Griffith University (Australia). She was a Fulbright Scholar at NYU from 5 April – 5 July 2022 (awarded 2020). Over the past 20 years, her work has advanced our understanding of the cultural, social, economic, and educational benefits of music and the arts in First Nations' Communities, prisons, war affected cities, educational and industry contexts. She can be contacted at b.bartleet@griffith.edu.au
