



Conversation with Antonio Lyons

Ashley Hopkinson

September 30, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about your background and what brought you to the work that you do today.

Antonio Lyons: My name is Antonio Lyons. I'm currently the Director of the Racial Justice EnActors at Georgetown, an initiative started by Anita Gonzalez, one of the founders of the Racial Justice Institute at Georgetown. What we're doing is we're using theater-based practices, applied theater work, to create workshop initiatives or interventions to engage faculty, staff, and students around racial justice issues. And really looking broadly at the ways racial justice issues intersect with other social justice issues, other community challenges or problems — primarily within the Georgetown community. I'm also part of something at Georgetown called the Woodshed Collective, which is a group of artists who are national and international that come together through the Racial Justice Institute as well to exchange best practices and create work together as artists around racial justice issues.

I'm also the board president for the Valerie J. Maynard Foundation, which is a 501(c)(3) foundation that is stewarding the legacy of visual artist Valerie J. Maynard. We're tasked with preserving and promoting her legacy and also helping to shape, guide and educate the next generation of arts practitioners with a very clear, philosophical bent that looks at the cooperative leanings of the black arts movement, which Valerie was a very major part of in New York. So that's the work that I'm doing. So how I came to this work —my mother was a community development person, that was her life's work. And then as an artist, I started very early on working with an organization called the Creative Arts Team as well as the Billie Holiday Theatre. So I've always used art and social engagement around conflict resolution, community development and behavioral change work.

Ashley Hopkinson: The arts and social justice connection is so fluid. What does the connection of art, activism and racial justice look like in your work and how do you think it's distinctive?

Antonio Lyons: The art practice, whether it's commercial art, whether it's art that's created for a particular purpose in terms of social change or shifting behavior in some particular way, it's always reflective of the society and the culture that you live in. It's reflective of the shifts and changes and development of you internally as a person.

Every time somebody engages with a piece of art, they're able to have two engagements that are really critical. They're able to see outside and beyond themselves, and they're also able to see themselves. So it becomes this duality of experiences and sometimes a multiplicity of experiences depending on who the person is or how they're engaging with the art. And because art can do that, that means that it touches something, it moves something at a very visceral level within people.

There's an intangible kind of thing that just happens. So the work that I do harnesses that possibility, that potential, this natural thing that occurs. What I try to do in my work and with my collaborations is to look at the ways the challenges that we're trying to solve can be amplified, and can be housed within an art practice. What is the thing within that practice, within that issue that we can find that can hook and help people to easily identify with it.

So whether it's the issue first or it's the art form first, we have to provide people with a way in that's not imposed or intrusive. That's the secret to the work. The very foundation of it is how do we meet people where they are? How do we create experiences that allow them to innately tap into the thing, which then leads to a place where you can begin to have a larger conversation around how we can do something differently? How do we amplify what already works? How can we begin to ask questions from a real connective, authentic place?

Ashley Hopkinson: I find that everyone who approaches a topic of racial justice, has a unique vision of what they want to accomplish within that work. In the work that you're doing, what would you say stands out about it?

Antonio Lyons: It depends on the form. For work with the foundation, the role that I have isn't on the surface creative work. It is creative in terms of thought processes. The visual arts space is a place that historically has been under represented and under supported in terms of Black artists in particular and other artists of color. Its administration, its curatorial, its preservation—those roles, and galleries and museums have been contextually very white spaces. And the roles of people who are in those spaces, shepherding that work, providing those services, have been primarily white. And so the creativity part for me is, how do I build relationships and alliances? How do I build pathways for young people who are predominantly female-bodied or identified as black or brown to enter into this space that they're insanely curious about and have great desire to be in? Then it becomes the idea that you can create

the pathways but how do we create a container of success? How do we support them fully once they are in that moment?

It starts with how do we build a sense of community and belonging within the foundation that is nurturing and radically transparent to provide them with the tools to support them in a way that they can always come back and get recharged when they go out into these spaces that don't look like them to do the work that they're very interested in doing— that sometimes can be very toxic and damaging.

Also that they enter those spaces knowing that there is a different way of being, that I can be in a professional work space, where I'm treated humanely, I'm treated with love, I'm respected for my intellect, I'm respected for my artistry, and I can thrive in that space.

So I know that it's possible and my expectation that the same should be in these other spaces is not unrealistic. That it should be the norm. So creatively, we're really thinking about how we do that. How do we make sure that we lead with heart?

With the work with the EnActors, it's similar. It's a team of three on a daily basis creating the same ethos but expanding it to think about how do we create work that is as inclusive as possible, work that does not cause more harm than good. That creates stories that authentically reflect the community that we're working with.

It takes deep listening...so you have listening sessions with just regular people, you have conversations with stakeholders and you're gathering stories. You're trying to find out, what is the environment? What are the needs? Where are the places where healing needs to happen? Where are the places where new knowledge needs to be generated? Then we go back to our toolbox and we create those stories; we start thinking about the additional interventions (we need) along with those stories...and activities that allow for a sense of building community. (This needs to happen) before you even begin to have those real hard conversations because people don't like to have real hard conversations with people they don't know or trust.

We have a minimal amount of time to create a sense of connectivity, belonging, and purpose with the group of people that we're working with. They have to feel it for us, they have to feel it for each other before we even enter the work. And that's also part of the process.

Ashley Hopkinson: I can see the creativity in the approach. Once you have created that container then people will speak to you and then people feel safe to share their story with you.

Antonio Lyons: Yes and that also goes with the understanding of what creativity is. So I think creativity is the ability to express something that you're feeling or thinking or dreaming about into the physical world. And maybe it's a poem or maybe it's an improvisation, devised performance. Maybe it's a song. That is creating, it's making something manifest that didn't exist before.

Ashley Hopkinson: Before you invite people into having a hard conversation is there something else you do— how do you have those hard conversations and manage the challenges around what comes up once people start to share?

Antonio Lyons: Very carefully and with a lot of heart and with intention. Hard conversations with ease and with intentionality and with the sense of safety and bravery don't just happen. You have to scaffold that engagement to lead to that particular point.

The first thing that I always lead with is that I am not the expert in the room. The participants are the experts in the room. The members of the community are the experts in the room. My job is to build and hold a container to keep everyone safe.

So that means that even when things get hard and somebody says something that's wild, as can happen, it is my job to not chastise them. But it is my job to disrupt them, to recenter us, to acknowledge that what they said or did may have caused harm.

We have to take a moment to acknowledge that and remedy that. (We have) these moments where we figure things out in real time. How are we going to be together? At the very beginning, we also make rules that the community develops or the participants develop about how we are going to engage with each other.

What's going to make everybody feel safe and comfortable? (For instance), 'I need you not to use the N word or I need you not to refer to me as white. I need you to not start crying as a person who is part of a class where people have been oppressive when you start feeling a little guilty about what has happened or what people in your group have done.'

So you make those rules and then you hold the space and you just take care of people. Often when it's a really, really meaningful process, I am saying very little, the community of participants are talking to each other. We've opened the door for authentic dialogue to happen. Then from that point on, we may prod, we may tease out other learnings. We may look and see who that person is that is sitting somewhere in the middle of the room that hasn't said anything but their eyes and their body language are, how do you provide space for them to be invited, to be audible or maybe they need to write about it or draw.

It's finding the different ways in which people communicate more effectively to make sure their voices are in the room. So it's this constant attention to the whole group and the whole person. (It's important) not to shy away from the responsibility of making sure that everybody leaves that room in a little better place than when they entered. Not comfortable, but better.

Better can be: I walked away with something I didn't know. I walked away doing some introspection in a way that I hadn't before. I walked away with some affirmation that actually (there is) a structure that impacts my life in a very real kind of way. And I'm not crazy for thinking that something was happening.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is your measure of progress? How do you measure advancement in a way that feels authentic to the individuals and organization with expansive justice work that isn't necessarily, "check the box type of work?"

Antonio Lyons: Well, I guess it depends on what you think check the box is, right? So it's qualitative and quantitative. We're building out our metrics at the moment in terms of our monitoring and evaluation for this particular sort of project. In the past, it had to be both qualitative and quantitative. So you have these moments where you give somebody a survey and you're like, "Hey, so these are the hard questions. Did you learn more? Do you know more? Do you feel more after this experience than when you walked into it?" And people can say, yes or no, and that's very real. That's quantitative data. Do you feel safer in your community or with these particular people in your community based on this? Do you feel as if you have more information about where to report when something like this happens to you in this community? Then there are moments where we use activities. There's an activity that we use sometimes called, cross the room.

So let's say it's a group of 10, you have five people on each side of the room, they're facing each other. And there is the space in between. Then you could say something like "cross the room if you like Beyonce more than Rihanna." And those people who like Beyonce more than Rihanna will cross the room and you can see right there. Then you can ask follow up questions. "Well, you ain't crossed the room. What is it about Beyonce that you didn't really like?" You can have those conversations...

Sometimes people write about something. I do work with men and boys and there's a poem that I work with where the poet talks about a young man growing into adulthood. Sometimes, I ask the participants (all men) to shape a still picture that reflects the joy of this young person in the poem. Then you get an idea—these are some ways in which people are envisioning boyhood joy, right? Oh, it's not just football. This character is painting something, or this character is reading a book. This

might be a reflection of what somebody was missing as a child or ridiculed about as a young male child.

Sometimes it's testimonials, particularly with an internship at the foundation. Young people come and say, 'I'm really appreciative that you care about my whole person. This is the first place that I've ever worked where I have felt fully seen and supported.' And these are sometimes post-graduate students. Those stories bring me to tears. I'm like "OK sir, hold it together because imagine a young person in their late 20s and 30s and this is the first experience like this in a workplace?"

Ashley Hopkinson: You talked a little bit about scaffolding to create the experience. What else is needed to create deeper conversations about equity at scale? What has been supportive to you in being able to facilitate these courageous conversations?

Antonio Lyons: Being able to be paid a living wage, that's not just about surviving, but thriving. Being in a space where you feel like that there aren't overseers or guardrails.

Freedom is such a broad word. We all exist in systems and structures so in my own practice, I'm very mindful when I say to collaborators, "Hey, you've got the freedom to dream up any sort of intervention that you'd like, let's do it." I can't then come back with a caveat. Well, it has to be in a language that I can understand. That's not freedom. Your community speaks Yoruba and Spanish, I only speak English, but now I'm dictating that it be in English because it makes me feel comfortable? That can't work.

(Another example) only use theater modalities. Don't bring in any sort of visual arts or music and sound because in this building, we can't be too loud. So if it's essential to your culture and the culture of the community that you're working to have song and dance and laughter, (what then?) If you don't adhere to these things, you'll be penalized in this way? Whether it's you losing your job, whether we will cut your funding, whether we will find somebody else to oversee the thing, and then you become a secondary support to that person. None of those things work. So you have to allow people to do the thing that they have the expertise in doing with full support and very few limitations.

Ashley Hopkinson: That requires thoughtfulness.

Antonio Lyons: It requires common sense. For me, that's just basic common sense. If you have hired somebody to do something that you don't know how to do, let them tell you how you can support them. Not the way that you are going to choose to support them. It's not your skill set.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision makers need to do to create more space for us to have these conversations whether through art or another medium?

Antonio Lyons: It's really based on what we were just talking about. You have to listen and lean into the experts in the room. And I don't mean experts in terms of somebody has a degree in something, somebody's written about the thing, but people who live and are based in a particular geographical or cultural positionality that know the world in a way that you don't, because that's not where you're from.

And where you're from can be where you're from geographically. But it could be that you grew up in that space and you haven't been in that space for 20, 30 years. So you're from the place, but you're not of the place any longer.

So what does it mean to move past ego and make the time to develop new knowledge, new learnings and new understanding of the place and the thing? That requires deep listening and trust.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share something you've learned along the way? Is there a teachable lesson or something that has stayed with you in the work that you're doing?

Antonio Lyons: (One lesson is) I used to live in South Africa for about 15 years. I was working in South Africa on this project— We are Here, which works with men and boys around identity, masculinity, gender-based violence.

My collaborating/ producing partner, a South African woman, was talking to me about how she was feeling around some of the issues that were happening in South Africa around the violence against women's bodies and trans people's bodies and LGBTQIA and I wasn't listening. And I made some suggestions and she blew up. She was just like, "I'm not doing that labor. Why do we as women always have to do that labor? Figure it out. Figure it out." And it was a hard and beautiful moment where I went, "You're right."

So how do we as men or people who have historically oppressed others, how do you stop asking people who have been oppressed or victims or marginalized to solve their own problem or to teach you how to solve the problem that you created?

Ashley Hopkinson: I imagine in the space that you're in (racial justice) you hear a lot about race and equity. So what for you is missing from the conversation? Is there something you wish we were talking more about?

Antonio Lyons: I don't know. The reason I say, I don't know is because there are so many conversations happening. It's so mind-boggling sometimes the amount of stuff that is happening.

People are doing work around farming, race and equity. Incredible work. You have other people who are doing work building Black men up. You have people who are in art equity.

Carmen Morgan, artEquity, those folks are doing incredible work in terms of top-down ground-up work, and changing the conversation around equity in American theater nationally. There's all the reproductive justice work that is happening all over the country, around Black women's bodies. There's the incarceration work that is happening. It's a lot.

The other thing that's happening now, in terms of belonging and healing and self-care, is something that I think needs to be amplified continuously. There's a deepening of the conversation into these areas because so much of the work wasn't happening.

People didn't have time to really reflect on and figure out, how am I doing the work and how is this work sustainable? How am I sustainable in the work? It's too vast. I have no idea what the missing points are. I know that we always need more money, resources. We always need more ways to stay connected and aware of how we're doing this work. We always need more collaborative spaces to do the work. We always need more opportunities to learn more and to share more and exchange ideologies and ways of being together.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you get pushback in the space that you're in? What are you encountering as a challenge and how are you actively working to overcome it?

Antonio Lyons: Yes, I do get pushback in doing the work. It does get exhausting. It does get tiring, and that's when you need community around you. How are you constantly cultivating a community of resources and care? I think that's really important.

Develop an eye towards not only when you need support, but when you see other people and they need support, but they're not used to articulating it. It's something about our ability to really see each other and offer support, asked or unasked, not just when it's most critical, but even in the everyday movement of life.

I find this a lot with highly functioning Black women and Black men. So Black women are so used to carrying all the things and operating at a level of excellence that appears to be superhuman. They don't always know that there are other people who can help them carry that load. They're not used to being able to ask for help because they're not used to people being capable of providing help. Black men often end up in similar places.

And so there have been times when I have said to another friend, "Hey, you know our friend is struggling." "Oh, no, no, it's fine." That's a lie. That's because we wear these masks. So let's have an intentional, you and I, conversation around how to strategically support them with their knowledge and without their knowledge. Let's figure out the plan and let's go tell him what the plan is, like, "look, this is the plan." And I found that people will get very like, "Oh, wow, you see me and you really care. Those things are really, really key."

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you see art and the work that you're doing fitting into a space of collective wellbeing? Where do you see the word collective in the work that you do?

Antonio Lyons: I'm lucky. I'm so lucky I get to be an artist and be in these art-based practices because when people are doing this work, for instance, if you're dealing with mass incarceration and the only aspect of yourself that you're able to utilize is I'm engaging with the law. I'm having meetings, I'm having sessions, I'm grieving with people, I'm getting psychological therapeutic support for people. I don't have to do any of that kind of labor, in that way. I always get to find places of joy in the art. Often in those other spaces, in that way of being, you could be living with your own trauma and other people's trauma and there's no way to let it out. There's no outlet for it. So as an artist, I can pour all of that into the work, like all of it.

So there can be a moment in a five-minute scene where the character goes from, *I have been oppressed at work to spewing that oppression at my partner.* (Through a character,) I have talked about the thing that's happened. I said, I'm sorry to my partner. I have been able to articulate the thing that's happened and I can end in some love.

I can allow that character to take the full journey, which means I also allow the participants in the audience to take the full journey. And the beauty about the work that we do in terms of support theater work or theater's intervention, you as audience member and participant, get to see yourself reflected in this thing that's happening.

You're reminded of your connection to the same thing that happened to you, but you're not actually reliving it or living it. We then get an opportunity to go with those characters as they try to find solutions.

There are parts within it where you as audience and participant are asked, what could have happened differently in this scene? What different choices could this character have made? What would you have liked to say? Ok great. Let's practice that. Tell that character what it is you think they should have said. And then they can say it for you. And then I get these moments as a facilitator holding the space to live

in joy with you when you have the discovery. When all of a sudden you have practiced and you learn a new tool— 'I can do that in my own life.'

There's an activity that I do. It's the most beautiful thing, where I'm working with men and boys and they're asked to choose two masks— that are black and white drawings of African masks. I say, "pick two, one mask is going to be what you think your inside looks like and one that's going to be the outside mask, which you think you project to other people. And then, here are some colored pencils and some crayons, you're going to color them accordingly."

There's nothing more beautiful than to see grown Black men coloring. It is one of those joyous moments. Because they get in there too. They're in the lines, they're like in all the colors. Oh, it's beautiful. They get into it and they're excited. They're looking at other people's stuff and they're laughing and joking. And then they may share, right?

I appreciate that the arts and my art practice in particular, I have an ability to cultivate a space where people can have deep thinking, discovery and joy.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's beautiful. Thank you so much.

Antonio Lyons: You're welcome. Thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*