



Florida Alliance for Arts Education, Fort Lauderdale, FL

## Interview with Sins Invalid – Anti-Racism as Organizational Compass

The following is a condensed transcription of an hour-long recorded interview with **Nomy Lamm** and **Lettie Robles-Tovar** of [Sins Invalid](#), a disability justice-based performance project in the San Francisco Bay Area that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ/gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized. They were interviewed by **Masharika Prejean Maddison**, founder and principal collaborator of [Lightwell](#). The full interview was recorded as part of the National Guild's 2020-2021 Anti-Racism as Organizational Compass series.

If you are using a screen reader to access this article, please note that punctuation has been added to indicate areas where text has been extracted for this condensed version. To access the full recording of this interview and a text-only version of the transcript, visit the Guild's [Resource Center](#).

**MASHARIKA PREJEAN MADDISON:** **Let's start at the beginning. Would love to hear in your own words: What is the creation story of Sins Invalid?**

**NOMY LAMM:** I've been with the organization since 2007, but it began before I was there [ . . . ] Patty Berne and Leroy Moore were friends and comrades and each doing work around disability [ . . . ] there was some funding that was becoming available for disability related work and they, along with two other co-founders, Todd Herman and Amanda Coslor, were brainstorming, "What would we want to do if we could just do anything? We want something that reflects the wholeness of disabled people." So they were like, "Let's do a performance that is about disability and sexuality." So the first Sins Invalid performance was in 2006 and it was going to be a one time event that was featuring disabled people and predominately disabled people of color and queer and trans and non-binary people, I think it was framed as gender non-conforming, and doing work about sexuality. The response [ . . . ] it was so huge. Everyone was like "Okay, what is happening next year?" and "Can I be in it?" and so they're like "Oh, I guess, we should do this again." From that they formed as an organization that started out as a performance project that branched into movement building work and a lot of thought leadership work around the framework of disability [ . . . ] now its almost 15 years later.

**MASHARIKA:** [ . . . ] **How did you each find your way to Sins Invalid?**

**LETTIE ROBLES-TOVAR:** In about the middle of 2020, so it kind of feels serendipitous like it was meant to be [ . . . ] Sins Invalid welcomed me

wholeheartedly. In the past I've been involved primarily with queer and trans organizations that don't center disability, so when I made my way into the Sins Invalid team, it kind of felt like I had found a place where I could really cultivate my work and my identity.

**NOMY:** [ . . . ] In 2006, I was living with my mom and applying for disability and preparing to move to the Bay area [ . . . ] Pretty soon after I moved to the Bay, LeRoy reached out and we met up and talked about performance and disability. I really hadn't had a lot of opportunity. I had specific relationships with a couple of queer disabled folks but I had not been in a full, disabled community so I was just starting to absorb some of that world. And LeRoy was really supportive and then reached out, and for the 2007 show was like, "You should volunteer in the lobby selling tickets at the show." So that was my first involvement with Sins [ . . . ] and then, the next year---and this kind of speaks to how relational Sins Invalid is in the way it develops and grows---the next year, [Patty and LeRoy] were like, "Do you want to be in the 2008 show?" And then after that I became involved. There was the Artistic Core that was kind of like an advisory board that I was on for a couple of years and then I was [ . . . ] performing and then a few years after that came on as staff and have been working as staff in various capacities for eight years or so now.

**MASHARIKA:** **How [has] becoming a part of the Sins Invalid community not only shaped your understanding of ableism but also how [has] being a part of this community shaped your understanding of racism and anti-Blackness in their individual and combined nature [ . . . ]?**

**LETTIE:** I've been disabled for all my life, but I've never identified as disabled before I came to Sins Invalid. I think the way that disability is broadly framed, it's not framed like an identity so it's not something you really identify as or that's a part of you. It's like society kind of makes it something that you don't want to identify with because you being disabled is a very, very hard thing to be in an ableist society. Coming to Sins has expanded my own identity and how I connect with my disability and how I understand how it impacts my life as a disabled person of color. It's helped me see the interrelations

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between hetero patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism [ . . . ] all these things have co-created ableism and all of these things rely on creating a group that is Other. For a large part of my life, I felt as an Other and I wasn't able to consolidate my identity into one whole being. I existed as a fragmented self. I could be Latina, but I couldn't be disabled. I could be queer and trans, but within the queer and trans spaces my being a person of color wasn't something that was really taken into account,



that intersection of being a person of color and also being trans and how that manifests and the specific oppressions that manifests with that. Sins Invalid [...] it's allowed me to recognize myself as a whole individual and embrace every single part of my identity without needing to fragment myself to make myself more palatable so to speak to general society.

**NOMY:** [...] I have had a physical disability since birth and so it was always very much a part of my identity but not necessarily a politicized one and there was some pretty extreme trauma in my early life that was very isolating and when I would be in spaces with other disabled people it would remind me of those experiences of hospitalization and stuff [...] I had done most of my work with queer community and coming into a space with folks who were queer, who were people of color, and who were disabled and really showing up so fully in their wholeness, ... there was like a vibration in my body from that that was, "Oh, this is the place where I need to be. Okay, I'm here now." And I think with that kind of fragmentation that Lettie was talking about, sometimes it's hard to believe that that is even possible. And I hear that reflected over and over by people who experience Sins Invalid, "Oh, all the pieces are together here." And not to idealize it. There's problems and issues, you know, it's life. But the opportunity to be in our wholeness [...]

As a white Jewish person, there's ways that I've been entitled to take up space, act out, that are in some ways really influenced by trauma. I see that in a lot of white, disabled people and white, disabled culture where there's the trauma of ableism

[...] white, disabled people have a lot to learn, including myself, about how to be in community in a way that also holds the responsibility for our own power. Just seeing the ways that Black, disabled people are so impacted by police violence [...] something like 70% of people who experience police violence are disabled [...] racism and ableism are so combined in how people are perceived as non-complying and are automatically read as a threat, which is a very different experience from mine as a white, disabled person. I'm not perceived as a threat, I'm perceived like, "Oh no, touch with kid gloves, kind of thing. Like, "Can you do that? Are you okay?" [...] When we are in community together and see these kinds of differences, we can make more choices about how we are in alignment with each other, how we take up space, and how we use our relative privileges in different kinds of spaces.

**MASHARIKA:** [...] **Something I hear you say is that in this opportunity to be in our wholeness, we are able to make choices. I feel that might be a transition into the [10 Principles of Disability Justice](#) and the choices that you all are collectively, as a community, able to make because of these principles. Would you both mind sharing a bit more about what the principles are and some concrete examples of what the framework looks like in practice. What kind of choices are you making because of the 10 principles?**

**LETTIE:** We can start by listing them off so that everyone is aware of what the 10 principles are:

1. Intersectionality
2. Leadership of Those Most

3. Impacted
3. Anti-Capitalist Politic
4. Commitment to Cross-Movement Organizing
5. Recognizing Wholeness
6. Sustainability
7. Commitment to Cross-Disability Solidarity
8. Interdependence
9. Collective Access
10. Collective Liberation

**NOMY:** [...] The principles came out of practice and also of decades-long movement work on the part of Patty Berne and related communities [...]. This is like the hard-won wisdom that comes from that kind of work. It also becomes a touchstone that we can refer back to, like, "Okay, how are we practicing cross-movement solidarity?" In the past few years, Sins Invalid has been focusing more and more on climate chaos and the impacts of climate chaos on disabled people. We had a show this past October called "We Love

// We can both be disabled, experiencing ableism, and also be racist and enforcing white supremacy in our own disabled communities. //

**NOMY LAMM**

Like Barnacles," holding on tight to our community. Crip Lives and Climate Chaos, that was the tagline. And so, part of that is then building alliance with [Movement Generation](#) who is focusing on climate chaos

and labor. They've also been doing a lot of cross-movement solidarity work. So, bringing their team and our team together. We have this year-long study group [ . . . ] we read each other's work or related works from each other's movements, and talk about. . . the tensions, . . . the resonances. It's really exciting to think about what might come out of this collaboration and we don't know yet because we are practicing and learning by being in community. Another example of disability solidarity [ . . . ] so one of the things that we do in the beginning of any meeting or gathering is talk about our access needs and just share: "Oh, I'm going to be eating," or "I'm going to need to check out for a moment to check in with my attendant." Access needs are so many things. It's also like, "My kid is at their group that they do and I'm going to need to receive a call from them at some point." [ . . . ] Often they're not things that need anything from anyone else but just letting you know so we can all be present together. But sometimes it is like, "Please keep your mouth uncovered while you are speaking because I'm reading lips," or "Please don't have a whirring fan in the background because that could trigger a seizure." [ . . . ] And this goes into collective access, we don't have to just ask for and take responsibility for our own needs [ . . . ] We can work to meet each other's needs and know who's in the room and who's gonna need what and make sure that our events are as accessible as possible to as many people as possible. [ . . . ]

**MASHARIKA: [ . . . ] These are 10 principles that help us co-exist as humans just period. Flat out. How has the leadership of Sins Invalid over time shifted and shaped the principles [ . . . ] and maybe shifted**

## **and shaped you individually?**

**LETTIE:** Sins Invalid was created by Black and Brown people to serve and center Black and Brown individuals and over time, the core message has remained the same. These principles have always been

## // How are we practicing cross-movement solidarity? //

**LETTIE ROBLES-TOVAR**

the guiding force for all of Sin's work and while some individuals have come and gone, they're still part of the Sins Invalid community and they continue to influence all of the work that we do [ . . . ] I think it's important to note that right now, our staff is small and so the majority of us are people of color but we do have two white staff members. The people of color who are part of the organization, we are light skinned. It's important to acknowledge this fact because of the broader phenomenon of colorism within all levels of society and just the way that it impacts us as an organization as well. Even with these principles, we're not perfect and we're working to make our work more accessible [ . . . ] Right now we're [also] working on translating our 10 Principles of Disability Justice into American Sign Language, which is something that is often overlooked because of audism and people assuming that English and ASL are the same thing [ . . . ]

**NOMY:** There have been deaf individuals involved with Sins Invalid from the beginning but not

in the core organizing staff so that's also been something that we've been working to develop more competency with [ . . . ] Not everyone has mobility of their hands and so we're looking at the ways that trying to learn ASL can bring up internalized ableism for folks and also the ways that our framing of ableism is not totally inclusive of deaf communities [ . . . ] We're [also] working on expanding the 10 principles around people with intellectual disabilities or neuro-divergent people [and] creating more accessible language [ . . . ]

**MAHSARIKA: As light-skinned presenting individuals (to me), how are you showing up within your community to recognize and demonstrate the need to call in white, disability communities? [ . . . ]**

**LETTIE:** [ . . . ] I don't think it's enough to bring in darker skinned folks into a space that hasn't analyzed its own internal structures and the ways that it interacts with darker skinned communities. It's not fair for spaces to bring in darker skinned folks without already having done some of that internal work because that just creates a lot of emotional labor for darker skinned folks. It's not their job to call us out on the fact that we may be playing into colorism. It's our own personal responsibility as an organization to recognize that this is happening [ . . . ] We have to be very deliberate in the way that we unpack it and acknowledge it and deal with it because just acknowledging it is the first step, and then we have to take concrete steps into actually fixing something like that [ . . . ]

**NOMY:** [ . . . ] There has been so much siloing. "This is disability related." "This is race related." I hear from folks of color that, in their communities, disability isn't being held as central

[ . . . ] and I have witnessed in white, disability communities that it's as if you've experienced one kind of oppression, you understand all kinds of oppression, and that's just not true. They all operate and function differently. We can both be disabled, experiencing ableism, and also being racist and enforcing white supremacy in our own disabled communities [ . . . ] [For example,] independence has been such a focus of the disability



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#### LETTIE ROBLES-TOVAR

rights movement and it's very important--- not to downplay [the focus on independence] because that's the reason that people are able to live outside of institutions and have in-home attendant care, and have legal protections around employment etc. Also, the focus on independence can negate the kinds of familial and community structures that are part of so many communities of color and immigrant communities and so sometimes what we're fighting for, in white disability communities [as the end all be all], can work against the needs and desires of disabled people of color [ . . . ] Just like Lettie said, this is work

that we have to constantly be looking at, thinking through, and undoing ourselves in order to be better allies and accomplices to each other [ . . . ]

**MASHARIKA: [ . . . ] I want to share that a few thoughts have come up in the chat from our audience today. One is a question regarding space needs [ . . . ]: What would you ideally expect and hope for from a venue that would host your organization if you were using a new space or in a new collaboration?**

**NOMY:** One of the first things that comes to mind is really taking steps to be a scent free and fragrance free space [and] making sure that there's no mold contamination. These are things that are invisible that impact so many members of our community and just literally make it so people can't be in a space. So having a policy both around cleaning products and, for folks that come into the space, a really clear policy around being scent free. Then obviously ramps and if you're having an event space with a stage, make the stage accessible. It's amazing how in many spaces, the space is accessible, but the stage isn't. [There is an] assumption that there won't be any disabled people on the stage.

**LETTIE:** It's so important to be very adaptable and willing to make your space accessible because every individual has very different accessibility needs [that] can change from day to day and from hour to hour. It's very important that you create a space where people feel comfortable expressing their accessibility needs because that's one of the barriers that people don't talk about. A lot of times, disabled people might feel uncomfortable expressing their needs because of the way it might potentially impact

them. Creating a space where it's normalized to say, "Hey I need this." You can just do check-ins over time, [at the] beginning of your meeting, middle of your meeting.

**NOMY:** [Also] a variety of seating options. Sturdy chairs that don't have arms for fat people. Maybe other chairs with arms [for people] who need that to be able to push up to get up. Then comfy spaces for people that need to be able to rest throughout their time. I know that the cheapest chairs are the flimsy ones and those are the ones that are often in public spaces, and they are dangerous. The other thing is the variety of lighting options. Steer away from fluorescent lights and have multiple lamps in the space [ . . . ] people need more lighting and some need less lighting, but when all you have is the overhead fluorescent, it often doesn't work for people.

**MASHARIKA: [ . . . ] I really appreciate the depth of your knowledge and the way that you've held this conversation, which is a complex conversation, doesn't mean it's impossible to have, but you've held this conversation with so much grace and the personal stories that you bring to it. You bring it to life.**