



The Future is Now **A podcast series | ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows**

Podcast by Amirah Sackett

Transcript abridged and edited by Anya Szykitka

Simon Dove:

Hello and welcome to *The Future is Now*, a podcast series from CEC ArtsLink. My name is Simon Dove. I'm the Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. For this podcast series, we asked 10 independent artists and curators from different parts of the world, whom we call the Future Fellows, to talk about the current context of their work and to share their vision for how they see the future of arts practice. In this episode, we hear from Amirah Sackett, based in Chicago, U.S.A.

Amirah Sackett:

My name is Amirah Sackett. I'm a dancer, choreographer, educator, and activist based in Chicago. I weave Islamic themes with dance in my choreography. The style of dance I do is hip-hop, in particular the West Coast style of popping.

To build a more equitable and just society, artists have stepped into a role of speaking out on issues that affect them or the communities they are in. That's why I started doing my work *We're Muslim, Don't Panic*, back in 2011: to educate the public on misconceptions related to Muslims, in particular women in Islam.

The pandemic shaped the way we're making art. Some people rose to the occasion. Others had to just take care of their life for a while, and their creativity will spark post-pandemic. I saw multiple things happening. One, artists embracing new forms. People that were stage performers taking to video. I learned a whole new way of putting my art out there, creating short dance films with my partner in the pandemic, Ahmed Zaghbouni, a filmmaker. It's still a learning process for a lot of artists. These are some heavy times, and some artists don't feel like creating super heavy work when they're already depressed or down.

Aside from professional artists, what's happening in society? During this pandemic, the rise of TikTok, of fun, short little clips that are entertaining. I compare that to World War I and World War II, when musicals skyrocketed. People wanted to escape reality. Right now some people want reflective art, and artists want to create that, and some just want to cheer people

up and entertain them. People are gravitating towards things that make them happy and take their mind off of realities.

The West's perception of women in Islam has definitely changed since I started my work back in 2011. Now we have Congresswomen who are Muslim. We have a lot more visible representation in the media. Muslim voices are being amplified, including Muslim artists. I was part of that movement, in 2011, where a lot of Muslim women were starting to vocalize their truths and starting to create. Now, personally, I feel like, yes, educating people of other faiths about Islam is a mission for me still, but more so it's being subtle and letting my work speak for itself.

You can clearly see I'm Muslim. The themes in my work are universal truths and philosophies that are part of Islam, but I feel everyone can relate to. I've been interested in making work that touches people's hearts in a way that they recognize that truth. Then secondary, they recognize that it's coming from a Muslim voice, and that shows more of our unity than our differences. I would call it a more subtle approach. The title of my newest piece is *Latif*, one of the names of a law, and it means, the subtle.

I've done several virtual programs over the past two years. I was able to teach spring semester dance class at Harvard because it was virtual. That was awesome. A lot of arts organizations are struggling, definitely less work for me than pre-pandemic. Universities are not bringing in artists this year.

The Doris Duke Foundation, especially, has used their funds to support artists. I received a nice grant from them. The grant was about supporting artists so that they didn't have to leave their art and take another job. There has been some great support from foundations, but it has taken a dive, and for a lot of artists, especially in the hip-hop community, it's been difficult.

Using Doris Duke as an example, the shift in supporting an artist, and understanding that I'm not just supporting this artist to produce a piece, but to live so that they can produce pieces, that's something I've never seen before, where it's not like I'm giving you this money and then I want a product, it's I'm giving you this money to support you, because I believe in you as an artist and don't want you to struggle and worry about your basic needs. I hope that's a shift that stays. I hope we can look at artists as valuable members of society that should be supported.

When you're struggling to pay bills, you'll be forced to produce art that wouldn't be done as well as if you had your basic needs met. My creativity goes downhill because I'm focused on those things. When basic needs are met I establish a regular routine of creating, getting in the studio with other dancers, that's when I'm soaring. I would love to see that shift in how organizations give funds to artists, to take into account that without a base of supporting artists' livelihood, there won't be great art. Of course, we'd have to really encourage artists to get better within their forms.

If you're working a job every day, you don't have time to practice your art. You don't have time to elevate and hone your skills. It's one thing being socially conscious artists; it's another to be socially conscious artists who produce art at a high level. That's my goal with encouraging the Muslim community, to work on their skills as artists. It's not enough that

you're Muslim and you want to talk about it. The art that you produce has to be at a high level, and it has to compete on that world stage.

The pandemic has encouraged our artists to support each other, definitely. I've seen more collaborations than in a long time. I've seen dancers who never posted videos, never were really on social media, all of a sudden on social media. They've gotten attention from around the world that previously they hadn't had, because they didn't really have the skills or the time to invest in putting their art out there, or their dance form, on social media. Still, they're not necessarily gaining a lot of income.

In particular, our older generation of artists, especially some of my mentors here in Chicago in the popping scene, we were able to, myself and my partner Ahmed, make a video for one of our legends. We helped him with that social media post. He's in his 50s, he wasn't super savvy with social media. After we did that initial, high-quality video, and he posted on Instagram, people went crazy. People that have seen him dance in person were so excited to see that level of quality in a virtual way. Since then, he's really taken to posting on social media, and I've seen him grow his base and get new opportunities. That's one way we're supporting each other. Since I was collaborating with Ahmed, I was like, all right, who else can we uplift with your filmmaking skills? Who in my community can we work with? The current dance film that we created, called *Latif*, features also two members from my crew here in Chicago, who are not Muslim, but now are honorary Muslims because they're in my piece. No, I'm just kidding.

I am optimistic for the future here, post-pandemic. Any time we go through a huge change as a society, we have to look back at it. We're still in it, so it's hard to know how things have shifted. I literally feel like I'm swimming in it. I have to get on the beach and look back at where I was, to understand how it's changed.

One thing is for sure: the way we produce art has changed, and the way we interact with people, myself as a dancer, teaching Zoom classes, the possibility of using this to reach more people. Artists now can share things, and society is used to seeing it on Zoom. They don't have to attend in person. That's exciting. The possibilities are greater, reaching more people and new audiences. Connecting with artists across the world is being explored way more than before the pandemic. We will keep doing art projects virtually, for sure.

What's nourishing me now, I'm working in Chicago with a team creating pop-up events in our Indian Pakistani neighborhood, a very famous street called Devon Avenue. I live a few minutes from there, where I get my halal groceries and things like that. Mainly it's a street of grocery stores, small shops. There's no art really happening there, no art museum, no events. Myself and a team, including Asad Jafri, who headed up this idea, he's a cultural producer, and his wife Munirah, we've created these events. I love it. It's getting back to my beginnings as an artist. We're popping up on a street corner. We don't have any permit from the city; we're just making stuff happen.

We had an open mic last week, and the way the community gathered, and the interest, and the love: we had ladies leaning out their apartment windows to watch, people stopping in their cars, people grocery shopping and stopping to listen to poetry. It was incredible. This is feeding my soul, doing these events at home, and I didn't have time for that before the

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pandemic because I was traveling, and I hadn't been able to invest in Chicago. Right now, getting back to basics and doing something where it's you and your friends coming up with ideas and just making a show happen, on a street corner, it's giving me so much life. It's so organic and beautiful, and it's benefiting the community. That's bringing me great joy.

Teaching classes in Chicago: I have two students who are 12 years old that have grown so much over the past year from taking class with me. Seeing growth even during this difficult time. Those girls give me life too, because they tell me stories about the school year. Everyone's worried about the youth during this pandemic, and they just have me laughing and laughing about their funny experiences with wearing masks, and kids doing pranks on the teachers in Zoom classes. I'm like, they're going to be okay. Me being in touch with the community directly through the youth and through my neighborhood has been really, really helpful in feeling optimistic.

Pandemic made you look at where you're at, what's around you, and how can I utilize it during this time to create. That was a big blessing and is a continued blessing. Out of anything negative that we experience, there's always positives. There's a lot to be thankful for even during this dark period of human history, but we'll get through it Insha'Allah and we'll be better than we were before.

Simon Dove:

You have been listening to *The Future is Now*, the podcast series from CEC ArtsLink with support from HowlRound. All interviews and post-production is by me, Simon Dove, Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. The specially composed music is by the extraordinary bass player and composer Shri. This podcast is part of the ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows, supported by the Trust for Mutual Understanding, Kirby Family Foundation, John and Jody Arnhold Foundation, and of course, generous individual donors. These podcasts are available to listen to, or download the transcripts at our website, www.cecartslink.org, or at howlround.com.