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Living the Divine Spiritually and Politically: Art, Ritual and Performative Pedagogy in Women's Multi-faith Leadership

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Abstract

Art, ritual and performative pedagogy were engaged as primary approaches to assist self and group reflection within a group of fourteen women committed to multi-faith education and leadership in their communities. In a world of increasing religious/political tensions and conflicts this study asks, what is the transformative significance of an arts and ritual-based approach to developing and encouraging women's spiritual and multi-faith leadership? To counter destructive worldviews and practices that have divided people historically, politically, personally and sacredly, the study reinforces the political and spiritual value of women spiritual and multi-faith leaders creating and holding sacred space for truth making and world making. This study led to a renewal of compassionate leadership within many of the women. This study posits that engaging performative pedagogy within a sacred and creative ritual sanctuary, can assist women to lead integrated spiritual and political lives, while building communities that are respectful, embracing of diversity and capable of learning through diversity.

Multi-Media Introduction



Living the Divine Spiritually and Politically

Autobiographical Beginnings: Multiple Methods and Perspectives

This article is an overview of a dissertation study carried out between 2006-08 in Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, The University of British Columbia. Largely a transdisciplinary feminist inquiry, this arts and ritual-based study of women's learning and leadership traversed in and out of the domains of Art, Education, and Spirituality. Methodologically, the study engaged the tensions and conflicts between the social science hegemony in the field of Education, with its positivist-rationalist methodologies and philosophy, and the fields of Art and Spirituality (Religion) that value post-positivist-arrational qualitative methodologies and philosophy.

I entered graduate work in Education as a practicing artist, not formally trained in education or systematic research. Interested in developing these areas through the lens of the artist, arts-based educational research became the general attractor for my research. Although art and art making have been a location of research for artists historically, little interest among artists has accrued in terms of integrating social science and qualitative research approaches in their work. I agree with Leavy (2009) that the modernist division between Arts and Sciences in a postmodern context of legitimate interdisciplinarity, hybridity, and border-crossings, is no longer tenable. In light of the educational focus of this study, there needed to be a more

holistic-integral and transdisciplinary feminist epistemological approach to fit my intuitive realization of wanting to teach without old biases that favor either Arts or Sciences.

Arts-based educational research offers a “radical ethical aesthetic” (Denzin, 2000, p. 261) that challenges the hegemonic positivist scientific paradigm with its assumed objective truth, privileged deductive methods, and implicit belief in neutral researchers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Leavy, 2009). However, the arts-based educational approach in qualitative research, as found in the seventh moment in qualitative research described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), does not try to eliminate or dominate other approaches, rather it attempts to integrate them, more or less.

I was not a neutral researcher in this study. I chose to practice inductive methodological research within a community of women I had worked with since 1999 as a volunteer conference planning team member, of what was then called the Women and Spirituality Dialogue. In 2001, after much debate and soul searching, the group broadened its mandate and officially became a multi-faith organization and changed its name to the Women’s Spirituality Celebration (WSC). At this point the planning team lost many of its original Christian planning team members. During that spiritually tumultuous time of transition to a multi-faith context, I was reading the work of theologian Carol Christ (1979). This early writing gave rise to my own questions, still relevant today. She questioned:

Where in the history of religion have women’s voices and experience contributed to the molding of tradition? What would it mean for women’s experience to shape theology and religion in the future? The word experience becomes a key term, a significant norm for feminists reconstructing traditions and creating new religious forms. (p. 6)

Experience is a key term within the dissertation and has been a constant quality present in the construction and reconstruction of the WSC conference over the years. As a researcher I wanted to reinforce and challenge the political and spiritual value of the multi-faith work these women leaders were engaged in. In contrast to multi-faith education occurring amongst mainstream religious organizations and led by religious clergy and clerics, this group was led by women, most of whom were not necessarily mainstream religious professionals, and who might not be perceived as religious leaders in their community. The study did not rely on pre-given religious education practices as a way of knowing and learning but rather gave way to spiritual and performative inquiry that was based in *unknowing*—a means which I have found most prevalent in my own spiritual journey for many years. Through participatory action research cycles of reflexive inquiry, research questions emerged and transformed throughout the study.

One of the co-participants described her experience within the WSC planning team which reflect the kind of emergent questions that spontaneously arose during the study:

This is like a refuge – a sacred place at the event and a more intimate space here. What would a women’s church look like? – a place of regular ritual- women need alot more and I’m looking for this church for women that is all about healing and spirituality, they are not separate. The women I meet with the WSC have something to offer that is unique to women no matter what faith – it is safe ground to walk and a place to call home – I quest for place and I still quest.

As an a/r/tographer, I am situated and work within the multiple perspectives of the artist/research/teacher (Irwin and de Cosson, 2004; Springgay et al., 2008). Teaching the women to practice a/r/tography I hoped would assist, and to a large extent did assist, their entry and engagement with the multiple perspectives of the study. My biases included a desire to develop multiple perspectives with the women through 1) multi-faith education and leadership, 2) an educational inquiry, 3) an arts-based inquiry into the education and leadership practices, 4) a spiritual/mindful inquiry and, 5) a sacred epistemological inquiry (see author note). The individual differences present in the group due to age, religious beliefs, class, race, and culture were informed and influenced by these multiple avenues of inquiry and the perspectives they brought.

Theoretical and Political Framework

Led by spirit, art, and the art making process, this study inquired into the importance and difficulties of women’s multi-faith leadership. Their struggles, like many others, reflect a global world’s struggle to live respectfully and, more or less, without fear in the midst of religious diversity and difference (Dalai Lama, 1997, 1999; Eck, 2002). Working in the subaltern of women’s religious and spiritual leadership, this study risks the exposure and questioning of “truth making” (Ahmed, 2003, p. 379) testimonials of the women, in bearing witness to what has been oppressed, repressed, hidden and/or lost. To aid the politically-laden inquiry, the study employed the ritual care of art, care in relationships with others, and care of the Divine Feminine (see author notes).



Bickel, Barbara. (2007). *Her Divine Countenance* (top view). Vancouver, BC: AMS Gallery. The University of British Columbia, (Plaster bandages, paper, fabric, acrylic paint, beads - 38 x 38 x 10 inches). Collaboratively constructed.

The critical political issue of the twenty-first century has been identified by some activists and scholars (e.g., Soyinka, 2004) as “religion.” Executive Director of Cross Currents, The Association for Religion and Intellectual life, Charles Henderson (2009) wrote, “ Since 9/11 there have probably been more words written about the role of religion in our lives, both public and private, than during any other period of history.”

To forestall the conflict and violence that can result from the ignorance of other religious traditions, it is imperative for research, education, and art, to raise awareness and educate for spiritual and religious pluralism. I agree with some feminists (e.g., Christ, 2003; hooks, 2000), who claim that feminist transformation of society is dependent on the transformation of religious beliefs and ideologies. I have come to acknowledge the impossibility of separating religion from politics and propose that art offers an important bridge between the two. This bridge can serve as a resistance to the dominance of a culture of fear through supporting an educative (not propagandist) “culture of trust” (Gibb, 1991) and “community of truth” (Palmer, 1983). This educational challenge requires inquiry/learning/teaching methods that can transform deeply held principles and beliefs leading towards an expansive and compassionate worldview.

Religious communities in our globalizing world are struggling to live in relationship with a variety of other religions and spiritual practices in mutual respect, compassion, and trust. Multi-faith conferences are notable learning sites in that participants can directly confront

distrust and fear of the Other in our society. As an artist/researcher/educator, committed to developing “spiritual and religious literacy” (Dalai Lama, 1997, 1999; Eck, 2002), this study offered a location for inquiring into the personal, historical, political and sacred (Abalos, 1998) motivation behind women spiritual leaders’ commitments to a multi-faith conference.

The problem area, for which the research was initially focused was the need for an education of spiritual and religious pluralism. Religious pluralism, according to religious scholar Diana Eck (2002), addresses the challenges of a global interdependent world, through fully knowing the roots of ones’ own religious faith and being willing to study and understand the roots of other religious traditions -- and in doing so, understand, somewhat, the interrelatedness of all religious traditions. Religious (Dalai Lama, 1997, 1999; Eck, 2002; Fox, 1988, 2000) and educational (Glazer, 1999; Simmer-Brown, 1999, Tisdell, 2003) scholars have been advocating for a corrective practice of spiritual and religious pluralism, which can actively build community among diverse cultures and faiths. In a UNESCO Round Table on “Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue” prior to 9/11, spiritual pluralism was unanimously acknowledged as vitally important in the context of modern globalization to prevent “conflict” and “tragic consequences” (Anon., 2001). In a growing “culture of fear” (Fisher, 2006; Giroux, 2003; Palmer, 1998) ignited by 9/11, it has become evermore imperative to raise awareness and educate for spiritual and religious pluralism (Nash, 2002). Bishop Mark Hanson (cited in Devine, 2006), the current president of the Lutheran World Federation and Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, speaking to 500 religious leaders from all major religions admitted at the International Aids conference in Toronto that, “Our identities have been shaped by our deeply-held principals and beliefs.... When we come together, we deeply distrust the beliefs and practices of ‘the other.’ The current world situation is fostering this distrust, and our political leaders do their part in fostering this culture of fear” (cited in Devine, 2006, p. 2).

Thus, in a world of increasing religious/political tensions and conflicts this study asked, what is the transformative significance of an arts and ritual-based approach to developing and encouraging women’s spiritual and multi-faith leadership? To counter destructive worldviews and practices that have divided people historically, politically, personally and religiously, the study reinforces and challenges the political and spiritual value of women spiritual and multi-faith leaders creating and holding sacred space for truth making and world making. Specifically, an a/r/tographic (Springgay et al., 2008) and mindful inquiry (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998) was engaged to assist self and group reflection within a group of women committed to multi-faith education and leadership in their communities.

A/r/tography and Mindful/Spiritual Inquiry

The theory and practice of *a/r/tography* (e.g., Irwin and de Cosson, 2004), a branch of arts-based educational research, was the major qualitative method utilized in the study supported by mindful inquiry. Mindful inquiry employs critical social theory and challenges the positivist worldview that “factual sciences are the only legitimate form of knowledge, replacing religion, metaphysics, and philosophy as valid knowledge” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 27). It questions the assumption that there is one unified scientific model and that,

... [e]thics, values, and politics have no rational basis, on the ground that they are not scientific [and r]ationality can only exist in the realm of science and not in the ethical or practical realm, which is seen as the expression of irrational or nonrational emotion, will, instinct, or arbitrary decision making. (p. 28)

Mindful inquiry situates the person at the center of inquiry. In addition, spirituality (Buddhist mindful awareness practice) is key to the research method. Although I am not a Buddhist, this unique spiritual component assisted the preparation. As a phenomenological creative act the mindful inquirer prepares and opens sacred space for the research to take place within. Mindful inquiry shares spiritual principles with Buddhism such as: “1. the importance of mindful thought itself; 2. tolerance and the ability to inhabit multiple perspectives; 3. the intention to alleviate suffering and; 4. the notion of clearing, or openness, [and]underlying awareness (p. 39),”

A/r/tography is premised upon the complex and contiguous relationship between the identities and practices of the *a*(artist)/ *r*(researcher)/*t*(teacher) and *graphy* (writing), as they dwell and act within the *a/r/tographer*. The multiple identities of the artist, researcher and teacher are called upon, and when fully performed offer rigor and multiple perspectives to the inquiry. This is a complex inner collaboration that requires the *a/r/tographer* to step outside of what may be a more familiar or comfortable identity into an interrelational process with our multiple selves.

The practice of *a/r/tography* began to emerge and be conceptualized within the collaborative action research of Rita Irwin (Irwin *et al*, 1997). *A/r/tography* draws theoretical understandings from action research, feminisms, post-structuralism, visual methodology, hermeneutics and other postmodern theories in its practice of understanding and integrating “theoria, praxis, and poesis, or theory/research, teaching/learning, and art/making” (Irwin, 2004, p. 28). *A/r/tography* offers a unique qualitative inquiry space that expands traditional notions of art, writing, and inquiry. Qualitative researchers Yvonna Lincoln and Norman Denzin (2005) foresaw and advocated for the emergent qualitative research frontier (“Seventh moment”) that I see *a/r/tography* congruent with:

The performed text [i]s one of qualitative research's last frontiers. It is a version of Victor Turner's (1986, p. 25), "liminal space," an old, but new, border to be crossed. When fully embraced this crossing will forever transform qualitative research methodology. (p. 1048)

The performed text of the dissertation research crosses into liminal space and dwells within the pedagogical (women's) space of unknowing (Britzman, 2006). Within the liminal space of unknowing the research overwhelmed itself transforming known understandings of qualitative research. The holding of sacred space through ritual and a/r/tographic renderings assisted in a significant traversing of new, sometimes transformative terrains, facilitated by the border crossings.

A/r/tographic "renderings" have been developed by a/r/tographers over the past eight years to expand notions of space, time, place, and identities in the research process. Renderings are "theoretical conceptualizations of aesthetic knowing and being" (Springgay, 2004, p. 42) that offer entry points for crossing the boundaries of writing, art making, knowing and living. The renderings include but are not limited to, living inquiry, contiguity, excess, reverberations, metaphor/metonymy, and openings. Through the course of this study the concept of *synechdoche* emerged and was added to the existing renderings to assist in the development of the co-relational part/whole practice of a/r/tography.

Working with this a/r/tography and mindful inquiry allowed me to bridge the somewhat rationalistic process of critical self-reflective and academic writing with arationalistic art making. It opened me to and held sacred space for, a growthful and dynamic relationship between my artist, researcher and teacher identities.

The making of art is an essential aspect of a/r/tographic inquiry. Three different but connected art projects evolved throughout the dissertation. *Re/Turning to Her* was an initial movement-based inquiry into women's spiritual leadership through the body and ritual with Tannis Hugill. *Womb Entering* was the collaborative visual and performative manifestation of the whole group, and *Stillpoint* was the individual visual and performative outcome of my individual response to the study. Art that is spirit-led is demanding, in that its depths cannot be fully experienced through a quick objective glance. It calls to be lingered with. To assist the experience of lingering, DVD's of the art-making process and art are included as essential components, along with art images and poetry in the dissertation. These can be accessed on line at <http://www.barbarabickel.com>

A Co-Inquiring Study

The women spiritual leaders that make up the co-inquiry group of this project are all volunteer members or former members of an annual Women's Spirituality Celebration (WSC) conference planning team. The conference began in 1991 as a Christian women's event on The University of British Columbia campus in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Over the past eighteen years more than twelve hundred women have taken part in this conference. The women in the study come from a variety of religious/non-religious backgrounds and current spiritual practices: Atheist, Buddhist-Wiccan, Christian (Anglican, Baptist, Creation Spirituality, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United), Communist/Jewish, Earth-based, Feri, Pagan/Goddess, New Thought, Reclaiming, Spiritual Feminist, Wiccan and Unitarian. The current WSC planning team defines "multi-faith" as, people of diverse spiritual and religious traditions worshipping together and sharing each others faith practices, while remaining rooted in their own tradition or spiritual practice. They distinguish it from creating a hybrid religion or spiritual practice.

I held multiple roles as researcher and as a co-member of the planning team and co-participant in the study. My research position as an insider/outsider (Smith, 1999), simultaneously affiliated with the university and the planning team, was complicated and at times a personal struggle. The project was framed as collaborative, co-led by everyone, with myself performing as the "curator" of the research project. As part of the inquiry, there was continual and emergent dialogue/feedback between the participants and myself during the data collection and during the artistic creations and writing.

The learning objectives which I established at the start of the research were to: 1) investigate the ritual art making process (using multiple art mediums and forms) of women spiritual leaders, nurturing a "culture of trust," in order to examine and articulate the co-participants' understanding of religious and spiritual pluralism, 2) explore and understand how collaborative art making could be a catalyst for individual and societal change, particularly in challenging the "culture of fear" surrounding religion (i.e., religious self-identifications) and developing compassionate spiritual and religious pluralism, 3) develop and nurture a community of co-a/r/tographers, potentially extending the theory and practice of a/r/tography into the larger community and, 4) articulate a blueprint form for future conference curriculum and pedagogy that incorporates arational and rational learning experiences.

The research questions I implemented at the start of the research were: 1) as women spiritual leaders, how do we understand the nature and impact of our own religious/ spiritual attitudes, i.e., ideology, values, political correctness?, 2) how have our individual spiritual/religious beliefs been influenced by participation in the co-organizing of a multi-faith conference?, 3) how might we further develop an ethical and transformative curriculum of religious and

spiritual education within a multi-faith conference? and, 4) how does collaborative engagement with art both support and extend inquiry into spiritual and religious pluralism/education?

The learning objectives and questions offered an entryway into building a “circle of trust” (Palmer, n.d.) among the women through the visual, embodied, and spoken sharing of stories. One co-participant reflected that through the dissertation project she became “acutely conscious of the need for sacred time in order for art and ritual to be birthed” she then linked it to her understanding of,

quantum theological physics... (The ability to build quantum sacred objects in the dimension of non time non space). It is about being in love and suspending other commitments to leave space for bodies and souls and energies to meet and explore and connect... it is about moving into another sacred dimension...with the tension and discomfort of being pulled by some resistant gravitational destructive paradigm to meet time and production deadlines.

The circle of trust revealed wounds, wisdom and corrective practices that assisted the development of each woman to move closer to becoming an integrated and whole self/leader.

Research Processes

The project spanned a period of eight months while the group simultaneously organized the annual WSC conference. The co-inquiry research process that evolved was complex and multi-layered. It involved group ritual sharing circles at the beginning, middle and end of the study where stories from the co-inquirers spiritual and religious journey were shared. In addition, the co-inquirers spoke to emergent questions, reflected, and shared thoughts on the study, often offering suggestions for the next step within the study. The inquiry processes unfolded during; two weekends and two evenings where we engaged ritual, individual trance (see author notes), art making and creative writing, all of which offered a direct entry into the arational realm of being; a visioning evening where a group trance was entered to conceive the first performance ritual (see author note) for the WSC conference, followed by two subsequent rehearsals; a performance ritual at the WSC conference; two installations of the art in public art galleries, one at the University and another in a local church; two rehearsals for the expanded performance ritual at the University art gallery; the performance ritual at the opening of the exhibition in the University gallery; two a/r/tographic talks in the gallery; sitting the gallery during exhibition hours and talking with the public about the art, conference presentations and reflective writing (creative and letter forms), shared by email with all the co-inquirers, and on occasion with just the main researcher. The data collected through these various processes and events was documented through field notes, digital photography and

video camera. The women took turns as documenter behind the camera lens and a few of the women assisted me in the video editing of the footage. The edited videos make up part of the dissertation and are being used as curriculum material for women's multi-faith leadership education. In addition to the collaboratively generated art making process, the women worked independently on creative writing and art making.

It was never possible to have the entire group present at the same time during any of the aspects of the research process. As the curator of the inquiry, I orchestrated the gatherings and was the only one always present. The recognition that "non-present communication" was at work within the group despite some being physically separate, was recognized and attests to the spirit of collaboration (see author note) that was working its way through the art making experience of *Womb Entering*. One of the co-participants spoke of this experience at one of the gallery a/r/tographic talks,

...we were not all together...at the same time when transference of ideas and information occurred. Each time we gathered we consciously would call in the presence of the others who were not able to be physically with us. And those who were not physically there would at some point say something or bring forward some thing that actually had happened in the gathering... The same information... ended up flowing back in without those of us who were not there even knowing that.

Whenever the group met as part of the dissertation study, a sacred ritual space was created, and the larger intention of the gathering, be it sharing in circle, making art, sharing art made, or visioning the performance ritual, was set. I offered guiding questions prior to the first, and at the last ritual sharing circles to assist the women enter the co-inquiry process, and then to debrief it. The art making process was organic. The group began the art inquiry process by creating individual art pieces during the weekend retreat space together. Large art projects envisioned during the first art making weekend were collaboratively created later (image 2 & 3).



Bickel, Barbara. (2007). *Her Divine Countenance Installation* (post performance ritual). Vancouver, BC: AMS Art Gallery, The University of British Columbia. Collaboratively constructed.

Bickel, Barbara. (2007). *Woman Spirit Shield*. Vancouver, BC: AMS Art Gallery, The University of British Columbia. (Fallow deer hide, Western Cedar and Oak branches, fabric dye, 7x 4 x 1.5 feet). Frame construction and hide preparation: Annie Smith. Collaboratively stretched and painted.



The sacred epistemological structure of the study allowed ongoing entry into becoming through being together and entering the unknown of each moment through art and ritual. Whether it was in a moment of deep listening and silence in a ritual sharing circle, in a moment of hands creating side-by-side, or bodies moving in rhythm with other bodies in rehearsal, the women shared their beings and becoming with one another within the sacred sanctuary co-created each time they met. The generativity of creativity that emerged was profound, considering the time restraints at work in the women's lives. As curator, I found myself reluctantly having to contain the many burgeoning and complicated ideas and passions that arose in the creative process, in order to ensure our ability to complete the projects.

After completing data collection with the group, I spent one month at an artist residency on my own. Using a/r/tography as ritual and mindful inquiry, the intention of the residency was to 'write' the dissertation visually and to integrate my experience as a co-researcher and co-participant in the study. While at the residency I read and reflected upon the transcripts, creative writing, and the field notes, watched the raw video footage and responded with my

hands and body in the making of art in the natural environment of the residency. The artist residency offered the essential experience of distancing (not neutralizing) myself from the research. Stepping away geographically from the study location enabled me to look into the past and future of the study with fresh eyes and an expanded consciousness.

During the one month residency I entered Women's Time through crossing the threshold into ritualizing time. The practice of daily walks, sewing, video shooting and mandala-making embodied rhythmic cycles that transpired through breath, sound, collecting and gathering, dreaming, creating, and unconditional love. Trinh T. Minh-ha (2005) offers that "rituals serve as a 'frame' whose stabilizing effect, experienced through repetition in cycles and rhythmic recurrences, allows us to see things with a different intensity and, ... to perceive the ordinary in an extra-ordinary way" (p. 135). A frame is required to contain momentarily unstable conditions that are outside of our control in a complex multi-lingual and ordinary/non-ordinary world. The residency allowed for a visual and performative analysis, which culminated in an art exhibition and two performance rituals entitled *Stillpoint*.



Bickel, Barbara.
(2008). *Stillpoint*
Art Installation.
Vancouver B.C:
AMS Art Gallery,
The University of
British Columbia,
(Digital
photograph).

New Understandings

With the community of women practicing co-a/r/tography the spiritual and arts-based educational inquiry became a community learning journey. The spiritual unfolding of the group is revealed through the art making process. Nourished by the care and compassion of

the women, the erotic as the Divine Feminine (see author notes) emerged as an individual and collective force, propelling the group to reveal themselves publicly and to celebrate courageously within a mixed-gender audience at the opening performance ritual of the *Womb Entering* installation.

The complexity and fragility of women's spiritual multi-faith leadership was acknowledged and expressed. The need for greater understanding of "restorative learning" (Lange, 2004) and an arts-based educational approach in the work of "decolonizing the Divine" (Alexander, 2005; Fernandes, 2003) came forward as a crucial aspect of affective and effective women's multi-faith and spiritual leadership. It involved walking with each other as we discovered hidden aspects of ourselves. Looking at oneself and each other through the lens of the artist/researcher/teacher on the journey assisted deeper understandings of the self and the work of women spiritual leaders.

The study was a spiritually-led pouring out of art and ritual by women spiritual leaders in the service of stirring up what are often conflicting and dualistic relationships in a world struggling to 'break free' of its predominant ethnocentric religiosity. The work of the WSC and this study verifies that it is possible to break free, but it requires a mindful practice, which includes the holding of sacred space for leadership and the decolonization of the Divine to take place within. This study demonstrates a practice of a/r/tography as ritual while holding an intention of unconditional love. In her closing reflection, one co-participant touches upon the participatory and global aspect that she experienced the group moving towards, as they negotiated a diversity of practices and working styles, in order to engage a spirit larger than the group and the project:

I just think of the pivotal aspect of love in the group, if that is what the world needs, then that is a very global aspect of it that was being done.... I find hope in... my own Christian practice that complexity and polarities are a creation and a wonderful, terrible, beautiful part of what God brings into our relationships and is at home with. If all of our faiths had a place where that kind of diversity, irony and complexity could kind of be laughed at a little bit and create something beautiful. I think that our group dipped into that alot.

From another co-participant a similar yet different perspective was shared:

I pretty much forgot that anybody had a different faith, I mean it wasn't that obvious to me. It felt very much that the [a/r/tographic] process we engaged in, we created our own ritual, that it was a very fluid process. So actually I think this

would solve all the world's problems... [it] was remarkable for me because it sort of brought together I think all the areas of my interests, because it felt like it was working at the personal level, and the larger social political level for me.

It was perhaps an unconscious strategy on the part of myself and the group to channel so much of our energy into the art. The art became a safe and rich location to express ones spiritual/religious beliefs and practices. It became the bridge to share our different spiritual/religious practices without necessarily confronting the differences directly. When the group moved to language many heated conversations ensued around specific words, terms and practices, and what they meant to each person depending on their cultural, spiritual and/or religious backgrounds. The key practice that was developed when these differences arose was to listen with openness, love and respect.

I have come to understand the lived practice of this inquiry as a pedagogy steeped in the philetics (see author note) of loving community (Beittel, 1974). The practices that are brought into the performative/pedagogical discussion of this a/r/tographic study are not didactic or overly heuristic teaching styles. Rather, they are based in the teaching/learning style of philetics, of loving community, and underscore the spiritual, restorative and transformative learning practices that came to be articulated through this study.

Womb Entering: A Collaborative Performance Ritual

The following two video stills (Images 5 and 6) from the collaborative performance ritual of *Womb Entering* visually capture heightened moments of symbolic Women's Time (Trinh, 1999). A rope labyrinth was laid on the gallery floor and became the container within which the performance ritual took place. In ancient Cretan society the labyrinth represented the womb of the Divine Mother (Artress, 2006). In the first image the women appear as haunting forms not yet fully birthed into the world. The art at this point has not been danced into form. *Her Divine Countenance* mask radiates with the collective energies of the individual masks of the fourteen women, like a lotus flower waiting to be picked from the center of the labyrinth. The *Woman Spirit Shield* rests quietly behind the women awaiting the release of its voice. The women are experiencing the last moments of gestation together in the womb, before being poured out into public space of the world as, priestesses, teachers, artists—as Divine women voicing the (w)hole. No words are spoken during this performance ritual of *Womb Entering*. We hear the sounds of the drum, the singing crystal bowl, breathing, and eventually, the reverb-erations of voices toning and merging, becoming (w)hole.



Women's Spirituality Celebration. (2007). *Womb Entering* performance ritual, Vancouver, BC: AMS Art Gallery, The University of British Columbia, (Video stills).



Within the second image, the women are more fully formed and recognizable as individuals. The ritual journey (performance ritual) out of the womb has taken place. The *Woman Spirit Shield* is illuminated and now stands fully upright behind the women, its protective resonance

filling the space. The half-circle formed by the women on the outer edges of the labyrinth is not a closed circle. Its openness frees the circle to extend and include those who have witnessed the birth on the other side. The residue of the ritual birth spreads out onto the labyrinth's path, and the body of visual-writing that has gestated within the womb takes its first breath in relationship with those who have witnessed the birth. Trinh (1999) describes this as "...women's womb writing, which neither separates the body from the mind nor sets the latter against the heart... but allows each part of the body to become infused with consciousness" (p. 262).

These images, captured by the video camera, are fleeting moments in ordinary time as they are re-presented from an originary Women's Time. The ecstatic moment of birth from the womb simultaneously imprints the moment of loss—the loss of memory, of connection, of co-creation within this a/r/tographic ritual inquiry. It is from a place of remembering—of touch, sound, movement, sights, and unconditional love, that this text is formed. The experience of radical relationality and the erotic life force of the inquiry is replayed, only ever-partially through the multiple texts of still and moving images, and written words that were incarnated in the dissertation. Loss of presence known in the moment of the present through the representation of the presentation accompanies the birth experienced in this performance ritual. Peggy Phelan (1993) writes:

Performance is the art form which most fully understands the generative possibilities of disappearance. Poised forever at the threshold of the present, performance enacts the production appeal of the nonreproductive. (p. 27)

A/r/tography as Ritual

The study expands significantly upon current practices of a/r/tography to include a greater understanding of *a/r/tography as ritual*. Ritual provided the ethical sanctuary that is an essential aspect of restorative learning. *Restorative learning*, according to Lange (2004), acknowledges the often disillusioned and divided life of learners in Western society. It offers the learner an opportunity to recover and reinstate displaced ethical values and practices in their life. It requires the creation of an "ethical sanctuary" or sacred space for the learning to be engaged, and a return to a whole experience of the radical relatedness of all aspects of life. This entails a slowing down to reconnect with the Kosmos (see author notes), nature, and nurturing relationships. When these requirements are met, a shift "from having to being" (Lange, 2004, p. 132) has the opportunity to take place. From a restored location, redefining values and meaning, that are supportive of living with integrated ethical, and embodied values and practices can occur.

When an a/r/tographic process is engaged it inherently disorients the a/r/tographer by residing in-between the multiple domains of art, research, and education. As co-a/r/tographers, exploring their individual religious identities and the groups multi-faith identity, the women were unsettling and disrupting rigid binaries and ways of knowing, while being nourished by and nourishing the sacred as a space of restorative and transformative learning. Combining an engaged and embodied practice of restorative learning through ritual with a/r/tography strengthens and enhances the transformative possibilities of a/r/tographic practice.

Rendering Synecdoche

The addition of *synecdoche* to the renderings of a/r/tography assists the theoretical articulation of the radical and relational practice of a/r/tography. Synecdoche invokes creative tension through a trialectic relationship with metaphor/metonymy extending the radical relationality of, matter/ spirit, individual/universal, and part/whole in the cycle of inquiry and learning. Working with these tensions creatively led the women to a fuller embrace of the Kosmos and their place within it. An experience of lived relationality, one co-participant shared was strengthened within her own life, and by consequence, the lived connection within the group:

So I am seeing less boundaries, less compartmentalization in my life. In my head I knew it was all One, spirituality, creativity, life, everything is all that One.... So I am really very pleased the [a/r/tographic] process that we did with your project, for me just strengthened that, that whole thing, and then carrying on as it did it to me, it did it to the group, this strengthening, this cohesiveness.

The study included the teaching of a/r/tography to the co-inquirers and thus, carried the practice and learning of a/r/tography into the community. One co-participant, who for many years had a performance art practice in the New York art world, shares at the closing sharing circle her aversion to the word a/r/tography and other academic discourses that try to redefine art. This is followed by what she learned about a/r/tography and her new respect for it in returning art to the community:

... you know that I turn my nose up around it – sorry. But like, art is art, let it stand for itself, you don't need to talk about it and analyze it and put it into an ography, and make it in to an academic discipline.... However, that being said, there is such a crucial, I mean it is really important for world progress for art to become more embedded in community and that is what a/r/tography is for, to bring people to an understanding of how – art has become isolated from community and art needs to be brought back to the community. And people need to know that each one of us is an artist, its not like artists over here, and spiritual

leaders over here, and spiritual leaders over here and teachers over here. But we are each artists, and a/r/tography, which as I understand it, allows art to be – to be really seen as a mode of exploration of what it is to be alive, otherwise I don't think people really understand that. So I'm now appreciating the incredible value of a/r/tography, so we made this whole project in community, we shared it with the community, and we did it in such a way that without having to stand on a podium or give lectures – it just seamlessly engaged people and seamlessly offered a space for people to find themselves in relationship to what we were doing, and find their own specific relationship to it.

The women of the study fully engaged an art making, inquiry, and teaching practice. In this way the women modeled the accessibility and spirit-generated aspects of a/r/tography as ritual, within a community context, as a practice not limited to professional artists or those working and studying within the academy but accessible to all who are willing to commit themselves to Being with/in an a/r/tographic practice.

Women's Spiritual Leadership and Education

Within the study a feminist form of spiritual and multi-faith leadership transpired, demonstrating respect, reverence, care, unconditional love, critical reflection and the holding of sacred space. Jacqui Alexander (2005) writes of the core movement that carries the pulse of the sacred in this study:

The central understanding within an epistemology of the Sacred is that of a core/Spirit that is immortal, at once linked to the pulse and energy of creation. It is that living matter that links us to each other, making that which is individual simultaneously collective. (p. 326)

Relationships fed the creative pulse that led to the restorative and transformative learning experiences of the women as artists, researchers and spiritual leaders/teachers. Through sacred dialogue between the art making process and the art, art was not separated from the spirit of art making. In the act of witnessing each other in the art and performance ritual experiences the women had a profound recognition of themselves *as* sacred art. *In becoming art*, the individual women bridged the divide between the individual and the universal Self. In becoming art, they became Divine. The role of women's spiritual leadership and teaching in the service of the decolonization of the Divine was revealed in the sometimes unsettling intersections of the private and public spheres of women's lives.

As a multi-faith group, the women in the study often turned to the mystical roots of religious traditions to find sacred resonances and understandings of the Divine present in all religious

traditions and spiritual practices. Within the group, the Divine is understood as beyond gender, but for many the Divine is recognized and addressed as feminine. The manifestation of the Divine as feminine was then easily transferred to, and associated with, each woman in the group. The spiritual agreement implicit within the group, was to hold each other as sacred and Divine. Within the study this was directed into further manifestations of spirit through the making, performing and exhibiting of art, arguably acting as a further decolonizing process.

Living the Divine politically and spiritually became a decolonizing act supported by a community of women acknowledging each other as Divine. Luce Irigaray (1992) wrote, “Femininity is precisely, that which is excluded from patriarchal representations and can only be glimpsed in their gaps and silences. For it to return, and to unsettle that which repressed it, a special process is required” (cited in Larrington, 1992, p. 448). A/r/tography as ritual was the special qualitative research process that allowed the women to enter into the unknown of the inquiry with trust and boldness offering a means of expression to move with the flow of the Divine.

The ability to create and hold sacred space was recognized as an essential aspect of women’s spiritual leadership. The creation of sacred space and the practice of ritual as performative/pedagogy assisted the erotic life force energy of an embodied Women’s Time to emerge. At the same time the a/r/tographic practice disrupted familiar ways of thinking and being, allowing differences and struggles to surface and be learned from. This study affirms the importance of creating a circle of trust, and remembering the radically relational aspects of women’s spiritual and multi-faith leadership as it reveals the diverse struggles women, willing to lead in this world, must face. Through the art making, ritual, and inquiry process, a number of the women made positive reconnections in remembering and drawing strength from their ancestral roots, which further underscored and strengthened their paths of spiritual leadership.

A/r/tographic inquiry as ritual was a lived interrelational practice within and across the domains of art, education, and spirituality, opening a rich and sometimes dissonant dialogue between these disciplines. For humans to be able to create, learn and transform we require art, education and spirituality that has the support of loving community. Living relationally as an ecological society requires that we enter complicated conversations with these three major domains of knowledge construction. As the study reflects, restorative learning returns our privacy and apartness back to our ecological self. The apartness that has occurred within the domains of art, spirituality, and education in a modernist era of differentiation and dissociation requires the dialectic of restorative and transformative learning to correct its imbalances. Entering the transformative aspects of learning requires the letting go of secure ground and stepping into new areas of knowing and not knowing. This was demonstrated by the women as they stepped forward as artists, researchers, and spiritual leaders/teachers within

the study. Likewise, for transformation of global consciousness and learning to occur, we must be willing to step out of the familiar entrenched territories of art, education, and spirituality and enter anew the realms of not knowing and unfamiliarity, as we strive to develop a connective aesthetic that can embrace the diversity of postmodernism, while retaining the depth of wisdom gained from modernity.

A Multi-faith Curriculum and Praxis

The arts-based multi-faith curriculum and praxis that has deepened within this study is not a didactic curriculum that teaches content and strategies. Instead it is felt and lived as a philetic curriculum through being with, witnessing, and then living the curriculum, in ones unique way as a teacher/leader. A philetic curriculum obliges that one rest on the “shoulder of mystery” (Snowber, 1999) within a co-created sacred sanctuary long enough to allow restorative and transformative learning to unfold. Within the “third space” of sacred sanctuary, ritual as a performative/pedagogical praxis enters its dialectical dance. It takes a community to build a sacred rhythm, a curriculum of love that is strong enough to hold and dance with the tensions based on difference in our trouble world. Just as the women spiritual leaders of this study danced the art to life in the gallery, they have danced their philetic curriculum for spiritual and multi-faith learning/leadership to life. Their ongoing work is given as a “gift of art” to those who desire to learn from and with it—to embark upon the co-creation of compassionate and spirited multi-faith bridges between self, other and the Divine.

One co-participant, who has been part of the planning team for the past twelve years, envisioned an extension of the co-creative work she and the women have done--moving beyond personal selves and into the larger world. It is possible, she says, because the group’s learning prepared them to take the next step:

So it is sort of exciting that in looking back we have had a couple of growth spurts or stages as a group, and we are on the verge of another one, and it is sort of like the other ones prepared us for this one, that this one you know we can take it on the road, take it out, within our community, within ourselves, so its this empowering sort of flight, or we could be on the edge...and say I don’t think so...[but] I think we’ve gone too far, there is no turning back that we have to go ahead and allow it to be as big as it will be and have no fear that we won’t be able to do it because I think as a group we have grown so much... I don’t see that it couldn’t be presented at the next parliament of the World Religions...when I was there is 2001 in Barcelona, that’s what they were wanting. How do you achieve dialogue? How do you work together? What do you have to let go of in order to embrace others? Mentally this is a great idea but how do you do it? Has anyone ever done it? And we have!

The dissertation DVD's have been used for women's leadership building retreats by the WSC planning team. In addition, it has inspired the development of a new form, Women's Spirituality Network, that envisions itself as an interactive on-line repository of women's spiritual and multi-faith leadership curriculum and art. Networking with other international women's multi-faith leadership initiatives is underway as a number of the women from the study have been energized to continue to build upon the work initiated by the dissertation study. The study instilled a renewed sense of compassionate leadership within many of the women and posits that, engaging individual and communal truth making within a sacred and creative sanctuary, can assist women to lead fully and compassionately, building communities that are respectful, embrace diversity and learn through diversity.

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Authors Notes

Collaboration - is a “with/and” experience. It is a conscious working relationship with another or others that requires each participant to join with the collective, and extend beyond their own personal self in an effort to create something that is greater than the individuals involved.

Divine Feminine – can refer to female deities of pre-historic and historical religions. It can also be understood as Luce Irigaray recognizes “... that, unless a mode of a female divine can be imagined, women will not be able to affirm their own identity in a way that liberates them from their previous symbolic confinement” (Joy, 2006. p. 23). Irigaray argues the divine feminine is embodied in all women and all relationships and needs to be recognized as such by women to reclaim subjecthood (p. 20).

Erotic – Audrey Lorde wrote, “The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek work *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony.... it is an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our living, our work, out lives.” (Lorde, 1995, p. 241)

Kosmos –the integral philosopher Ken Wilber wrote, “...the original meaning of Kosmos was the patterned nature or process of all domains of existence, from matter to math to theos, and not merely the physical universe, which is usually what both “cosmos” and “universe” mean today.” (Wilber, 1995, p. 38)

Performance ritual – I combine the terms performance and ritual as ways to acknowledge and connect art with the sacred. As ritual emerged from within my art practice and most often takes place within a gallery setting, I have chosen to use the art term of performance before ritual.

Philetics – is one of three teaching/learning styles based on Harry Broudy’s pedagogical theory: “philetic, heuristic, and didactic, Philetics emphasize their relationships with students...” (McHugh, P. 1974, p. 476). Kenneth Beittel (1974) elaborates the philetic as one who assists, through the act of loving, the emergence of creation or what he calls “arting” (p. 7).

Ritual – is a practice of creating sanctuary for awareness of the sacred-- of Divine presence in ones life, community or the world. Within the container of ritual group’s or individual’s attention is heightened and focused by beholding all actions (which can involve art making, researching and teaching) with reverence. Within ritual expressions of the sacred can be expressed through “... gestures, postures, dances, [and] patterns of movement” (Crossley, 2004, p. 32). “Ritual activity facilitates the penetration and embodiment of symbols into human selves and societies” (Grimes, 2003, p. 38).

Sacred epistemology – “... places us in a noncompetitive, nonhierarchical relationship to the earth, to nature, and to the larger world (Bateson, 1972, p. 335). This sacred epistemology stresses the values of empowerment, shared governance, care, solidarity, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers, and civic transformation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 36-37).

Trance – can be described as a form of active or process meditation and visioning, a waking dream state, and a practice of active imagination or free association; where one can journey to other realities through an altered state of consciousness. Within the waking-dream-state of trance, time and space become fluid, non-linear, and most normal physical restrictions and barriers dissolve.

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