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Dandelion Seeds: Poetry as Performance and Research for Social Justice in Education

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Abstract

A rally in Washington, DC to transform the U. S. schools provided an example of merging poetry, performance, and research for social justice activism. The arts-based research forms of autoethnography and performance ethnography provided the poet/performer/researcher/activist with frameworks of sense-making that were fluid, intrasubjective, and intersubjective. The work included ethnographic insights based on decades of lived experience for the poet and the audience that was embodied through performance. Metaphor, metonym, imagery and other elements of poetry, including the process of revision, were used to mine and represent attention to complexity as necessary for transformation and to pose simplistic thinking as a limited and narrowing aspect of social movement.

Seeds in the Wind

On a typically hot muggy day in July, 2011 in Washington, D.C., I stood on a stage in front of a crowd of educators, parents, and community activists who had come to Washington for a Save Our Schools March, Rally and Conference (YouTube, 2011). A Park Service employee estimated that there were between 6000-8000 people at the rally that day; most had come from across the United States to participate. An electricity of defiance raced through the crowd; signs, voices, art, and performance demonstrated the rumble that had been building since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was initiated. Ten years of a swelling opposition to NCLB, a sense of a general disrespect for the complex work of teaching, and protests against the loss of power and rights that come from attempts at de-unionization (Meyers, 2011) had crested for the rally participants and for the multitudes of children, teachers, and parents that they represented. The principles that they put forward as a solution to the dire state of teaching and the public schools included equitable funding for all public school communities; an end to high stakes testing used for the purpose of student, teacher and school evaluation; teacher, family and community leadership in forming public education policies; and curriculum developed for and by local school communities (Save Our Schools, 2011).

My task was to create a poem that would begin the rally that would set the landscape for speakers who followed who talked about poverty, race, parents, communities, NCLB, high stakes testing, unions, community organizing, and more. Speakers included Linda Darling-Hammond, Jonathan Kozol, Diane Ravitch, Pedro Neguero, Angela Valenzuela, Matt Damon, various poets, musicians, students, parents, policy makers, and many others. I felt that the opening of such a momentous rally should harness and reflect the perspectives, desires, and energy of the people present so that they could collectively feel their audacity and power.



Figure 1

http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-07-30/local/35237617_1_teachers-unions-charter-schools-teachers-march

A/r/tography

As I prepared for writing and performing the poem, I shifted into the habits of mind and doing that is a/r/tography, described by Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) as meaning and process made in the intersections of researcher, artist, and educator; and "... a process of double imaging that includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings" (p. 899). A/r/tographically speaking, I traversed the permeable places between artist, researcher, activist, and teacher. I worked to open the complex and dynamic subjectivities in the intersections of meaning that were my perceptions and interpretations of lived experience. Process, concepts, and product flowed from divergent and convergent streams; they mixed, transformed, and then surged again as new meanings.

My ethnological process had been very long, embodied, meaningful, and dense; it was, in part, gleaned from knowledge and feelings gathered from students, teachers, parents, administrators, policy makers, and others who walk the same streets where I wander and wonder about life and education in a multicultural and democratic society profoundly challenged by 21st century dilemmas. My own lived experiences for more than thirty-five years as an educator in pre-schools, elementary schools, and particularly with high school and middle school students who were put at risk of failure and low academic achievement, who passively and actively resisted schooling as they complained of a boring and irrelevant curricula. These same students were articulate and insightful when introduced to relevant, rigorous, and *creative* work (Hanley, 2002, Hanley and Noblit, 2009). Fourteen years of scholarship and work in higher education with pre-service, in-service teachers, undergraduate and graduate; future teacher educators; my own experiences as tenure track faculty; and recent work in arts education policy echoed throughout the sense making involved in the creating and performing of the poem.

Recent observations, readings, and discussions with teachers, students, and policy makers about the contradictions and frustrations of schooling and teaching gave me notes about teachers who complained about "drive by" inspections of their teaching. They lamented a sense of powerlessness in general and especially about curricular decisions; a lack of creativity; unexpected layoffs and furloughs; inconsistent and uncaring leaders; teaching to tests; and lack of preparation for working with the diverse needs of students, particularly children from low income backgrounds, English language learners, and children of color. The poem is a summation and amalgamation of my autoethnographical frustrations and desires and those of my respondents and informants.

Research always has a purpose and an audience; most times for academic researchers the audience is other researchers, sometimes policy makers, but seldom is it written about and for

practitioners and parents. Sameshima's (2007) concept of parallax in a/r/tography applies which, "encourages researchers and teachers to acknowledge and value the power of their own and their readers' and students' shifting subjectivities and situatedness which directly influence the constructs of perception, interpretation, and learning" (p. 4). Only a process as fluid and inclusive as arts-based research could include so many voices in a form that directly attends to the needs of the audience. In the case of the rally, the audience did not need polysyllabic discourses or statistical or theoretical jargon. They came there for a long fight; they came full of frustration, a sense of disrespect, despair, anger, and defiance. They needed to hear their own combatants' voices and wisdom that referenced the many justice warriors before them and around them through empowering images that would encourage their own agency.

Metaphor, metonym, simile, imagery, alliteration, rhythm, humor were tools I used to poetically present the familiar in ways that were unfamiliar. My life as an artist and activist for social justice was present at each turn of the crafting process, including the subjective and material experience of work that seemed at first to be hopeless, but over time led to dynamic social transformations. Numerous revisions of the poem, as well as reading and gathering insights from students, colleagues, and other poets continued to change the directions of meaning. For example, I struggled with the title. At first, I named the poem, *The Mess*; the focus was on complexity. However, I eventually decided to name it *Nevermind!* because the repetition of the word is a rhythmic call to struggle on, in spite of the mess, in order to arrive at the end of the poem, which is about triumph and creativity, and yes, even more struggle. In view of the goal of the rally and the purpose of an opening poem, I chose to begin and end the piece with empowerment.



Figure 2

Please scroll down as I read the poem.



NEVERMIND!

Life is a mess
Of heres theres
Ups downs
Black this white that
Forests of difference between
Today straight lifelines bang into each other
Explosions of angles
No one thought possible
We scurry intently every which way
To catch the next piece of falling sky
Wrap our arms around change
Dance for our lives
Try to learn new steps
Remember old ones we learned just three minutes ago
In all the joy of push pull
Painful come go
Some try to capture living like a chalky objective on the board
That crumbles with the creativity of a child's question
To chain existence to a true false box
No one cares to open
Blind leading sighted
Through the mess
To simple answers no one asked them for

Children are messy
They believe bunny rabbits talk witches with warts eat children
And billy goat brothers with a plan can beat any troll
They weep with willows and eagerly climb out on limbs
They think parents are paragons or idiots
Teachers know all or know nothing
They ask *why* until *just becuz* becomes unbearably redundant
And adults lose their relevance
They run not walk
Across the field down the hall out the door into life
Testing wonder and power for ends of
Worlds they construct
They come tall small round narrow

Midnight black to milky hues
Big city girl small town boy
Haves and nots
Woven together through education
For liberation
Celebration
Life creation
Or
Subjugation
Disintegration
Extermination
Heavy heady work on starvation diets of lockstep
To next wants we're told to need
Next notions the wealthy want
Or crunched wood of number two pencils
Used to fill in circles lines blank thoughts
Assassins bury imagination
In high stakes cemeteries where children left behind
Try to be more than a mass of numbers
Marched like headstones in a soldier's graveyard
To the next deadly test and the one after that
Bored into submission or resistance
For want of a good relevant hug of creativity
Sacrificed to stern gods
Who love straight lines and scapegoats
Who never smile until January
And forget lifelong learning means
Love learning
Means love

Teachers are messy
Asleep and awake
Sun up to sun dark workers
Artists and architects
Warriors on the field of magic and mysteries
Singer of questions
Worlds of wonder in their hands
Underpaid underserved under resourced
Under attack

Under estimated
Defiantly facing gale-force winds
At the intersection of North Rock and South Hard Place
Gusts whipped up by everybody and his mama
Who thinks they know how to teach
But never dared or cared
Those who do
Hold hands with frightened angry
Hopefully curious children
Lean into the tempest
Cross against the storm
Nevermind the tornado's force
Nevermind roof creaks and leaks
Books moldy with half-truths
Classrooms in closets lunches of limited wealth or health
Nevermind children mired in meaninglessness
While parents frantically rake swamped leaves and grass
Pray their children are not debris
Nevermind principals barely make it to the roof to get help find none
Get blamed for the weather
Nevermind the challenge the difficulty the complexity
The weight of the whole village
Clamoring for their piece of liberty and pursuit
In a millennium of multiplying differences
Nevermind disrespect and accusations
Poked like a finger in a teacher's heart
Pushing fear and anger
When encouragement is a can-do embrace in the strong arms of justice
Nevermind!
Nevermind the Top!
Race to the Roots !
Where spelling words can be injustice resistance struggle and change
Where probabilities of social movements make illuminating pie charts
Where Curious George questions race, class, and exploitation
Where Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter is a union rep
And Wild Things march on Washington
Nevermind!
Nevermind!

The mess flowers with beginnings
Floating like dandelion seeds
To alight on rigid manicured lawns of arrogant control
A burst of bright resistance
Reclamation of defiant indestructible roots
Entitled to a place in the world
Nevermind!
With toil for social justice
Our hopes will recover in our very own backyard
A garden of authentic textures and patterns
Sights that smell Sounds that touch
Youth flourish cultures of brilliant colors
A divine fertile blooming mess
Tended by hard working courageous farmers
Close to the land

Performance ethnography

Performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures who value...the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental. (Conquergood, 1995, p. 138)

Crafting the poem was only one part of the aesthetic process. I also performed it at the rally and subsequently for various groups of educators and community people. Thus, I stepped into the realm of performance ethnography, an arts-based research method that integrates ethnography and theater practices to evoke a critical analysis of society for the purpose of its transformation. Performance presents a multilayered and dynamic embodiment of culture that enables focus for audiences *and* the artist on the multiple, variable, permeable, and subjective intersections of social justice and change. Oberg (2008) describes the potential of performance ethnography when she asserts that, "Through re-enacted performance the oppression of socially imposed roles is unveiled on stage and examined by both audience and actors simultaneously, thereby enabling a transformative critique of values, attitudes and practices (p. 1). Likewise, Alexander (2005) posits that the very purpose of performance ethnography is to "incite culture" (p. 411). He states, "The collaborative power of performance and ethnography utilizes an embodied aesthetic practice coupled with the descriptive knowledge of lives and the conditions of living to stir up feeling and provoke audiences to a critical social realization and possible response" (pp. 411-412).

Conquergood (1995) further explores the aims and processes in performance ethnography when he states, “Kinesis [in performance ethnography] unleashes centrifugal forces that keep culture in motion, ideas in play, hierarchies unsettled...” (p. 138). Gergen and Gergen (2011) propose that, “...performative representations are capable of conveying the sense of truth, but simultaneously undermining its grounds” (p. 295). In essence, the aesthetic approach in performance ethnography, as in a/r/tography, makes room for the fluidity and subjectivity of human experience that has no solid walls or immovable stations. Dark, light, and in-between nuances must present the shifting ambiguities of opportunities for what-ifs and wonderings, agency, and the power to create possibilities beyond the status quo in society, and even beyond the meanings that represent the artist/researcher’s truth. The poem is a focused representation of ideas and experiences from which others may derive seeds of interpretation and transformation in order to establish fields of thought- powerful and challenging work. The farmers at the end of the poem are engaged in the struggle to re-create themselves and their worlds; only empowered people can engage in the work needed to transform such monumental institutions as education in the U.S.

Discussion

The people who came to the rally came with various perspectives on schooling. My performance of the poem, *Nevermind!*, was an effort to provide them with their own stories as a focus for seeing the familiar in unfamiliar ways, to rally their energy and encourage their hope for change. The salient issue represented in the poem is the dysfunctional silos of thinking that are rampant in the *extremely* complex institution and process called education. People are complex; their institutions are by extension even more so. Any simplistic solution that does not grasp multiple wants, needs, issues, and purposes is in the very least bound to serve only as a marker of what not to do; its most dire result may be entrenchment in subjugations of dominance and oppression. Certainly, change is made through the struggle of contradictions; however, lived contradictions are seldom one-dimensional. There are contradictions within contradictions and more at each level of stasis and change; the dynamics of paradigm shifting can be staggering, which is no doubt why it is easier to make linear and superficial choices. Simplistic thinking is useful only for the thrust of the trampoline; the goal of flight is the reach of the imagination. Someone, like the rally participants, who planned to take on the monumental, arduous, and multifarious tasks of shifting a paradigm, such as twentieth century education that is rooted in 19th century forms and habits; multiple forms of exploitation, cultural dominance, and oppression, including the subordination of women and children; have to be prepared to wallow in complex and subjective agendas and think beyond their own already complex perspectives.

The poem is in purpose, form, and content a rallying call, not for unity because unity is often a misunderstood belief in think-just-like-me. Even with a list of principles there will be diverse

perspectives on meaning, intent, and significance. Neither is the poem my opportunity to criticize educators for blindness to the racism, homophobia, class bias, and other forms of oppression that abound in the institutions of education; instead, I presented a critical critique as metonyms of life creation or extermination in a way that asserts the choice and agency of the listeners. The poem focuses on understanding the diversity among those who suffer in educational institutions and ends with a vision of strength, triumph, and the beauty of diversity and creativity--possibility.

As assessment of the effectiveness of the poem at the rally I felt and sensed, rather than assiduously quantified the impact, and based my perceptions on the thunderous applause, shouts, and many handshakes and embraces afterwards. At that time, and in subsequent performances, audience members made statements about certain lines that they liked. At the rally, the lines “Underpaid underserved under resourced under attack and under estimated” and “the Wild things march on Washington” were high points of reaction. In other gatherings of teachers, the description of children and the notion that teachers were “Singer of questions” and had “Worlds of wonder in their hands” provoked discussion about how pleasing and refreshing it felt to be honored rather than disparaged. Simple words like “thank you, thank you” after the readings conveyed to me that I had successfully represented some need and a story that many recognized as their experience. I had not been a distant and indifferent ethnography of the other, a lecturer about the challenges of 21st century schooling; my own passions for the transformation of public education permeate the poem. In crafting and performance intra/intersubjectivities met, mingled, and transformed, and we experienced the goal of inciting culture in its many dynamic shades.

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About the Author

Mary Stone Hanley received a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Washington and is a playwright, poet, educator, scholar, and researcher. She has spent a lifetime as an artist and 40 years as an educator and arts activist. Since 1996 she has taught arts education and critical multicultural education courses as an assistant professor in higher education at Antioch University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and George Mason University. Her research centers on the arts and students of color, specifically the connections between agency and creativity in the arts, drama for K–12 students, Hip Hop culture, and the arts for adult learners, all of which have reinforced her interest in arts-based research. She is presently founder and president of Hanley Arts & Education Associates, a consultant group that conducts professional development for educators about equity and the arts in education (<http://marystonehanley.com>).

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