

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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### Introduction to the Special Issue on the Arts, Education, and Social Justice

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### **Introduction to the Special Issue on the Arts, Education, and Social Justice**

This special issue of the *International Journal of Education and the Arts* is devoted to the exploration of various intersections of the arts, education, and issues of social justice. Indeed, while thematically akin, each of the seven articles included herein represent a range of educational efforts at promoting social justice through several forms of arts, educational settings, and cultural contexts. Each is designed to provide a unique perspective on ways in which educators can -- and do -- work toward using the arts to disturb and disrupt commonsensical ways in which children and adults view and participate in their cultural environments. That is to say, the projects described here are designed to make obvious, and call into question, some of the hidden dimensions of social worlds, and the prevailing power relationships lurking therein, relationships that tend to be debilitating, especially for members of traditionally marginalized social categories.

In his essay, "Decolonizing and Prefigurative Pedagogies: Teaching Art as Social Justice," Dylan Miner focuses on the visual arts in the classroom, initially as they are taught in his own course. Miner suggests an emancipatory pedagogical approach in which the arts are taught within a framework that simulates, or at least "prefigures," a larger "outside" world that is itself more socially just. In describing and elaborating on this framework, Miner creates a kind of dialectic between specific classroom practices and the methodologies and theories that allow them to be imagined in other classroom settings.

Focused primarily on students at the college level, Gail Tremblay of The Evergreen State College is a widely experienced faculty member who explores strategies for encouraging and enabling them to craft works of socially conscientious art. In "Creating Art Environments that Address Social Justice Issues," she offers her seasoned perspective on, and specific examples of how a wide variety of media can be made available for student production of artworks that challenge real world inequities. She is especially interested in the use of a variety of materials (including video and audio tracks) for producing multimedia installation artworks that "allows students to create an environment space that [members of an audience] can inhabit and explore."

In an example of work external to the classroom, Jeanette Haynes Writer explores debilitating power relationships hidden within the prevailing meta-narrative regarding a particular group of people whose lands were stolen from them in an earlier century. She does this by examining a counter-narrative that is implicit within the works displayed in an art show produced by a collective of Oklahoma Native artists. Employing critical race theory and tribal critical race theory, Haynes Writer effectively debunks the privileged "official" history of White pioneer settlers in favor of the experienced realities of a brutally overpowered

indigenous people. The title of her article is “Native Resistance through Art: A Contestation of History through Dialogue, Representation, and Action.”

As is obvious in the title of her contribution, Jenice Leilani View also focuses on the efforts of an indigenous group using the arts during a specific span of time to “fight back” against nearly overwhelming injustices: “Pens and Ploughshares: The Historical Use of Art by African-descended Women to Create Social Justice in the U.S. Jim Crow Era.” The author documents the manner in which, through their use of dance, song, music, drama, painting, sculpture, and literature, these women struggled against the varied manifestations of humiliations and denigrations that abounded in the decades between the end of the Civil War and the 1950s. They struggled through their art, View insists, “to save their lives,” moving beyond silence by committing “revolutionary act[s] of claiming space.”

An indigenous element is again present in the contribution by Jason Mendez in “The Forgotten Point: An Artistic Approach in Supporting a Community’s Call to Action.” In this case, the author himself is a native of the Hunts Point area of the South Bronx, the site of an organized arts-based activity designed to advance revitalization of that community. The specific aims of the activity are to raise provocative questions about, and ultimately incite action alleviating, the unhealthy air pollution within the area. Mendez’s intended audiences include not only local residents, but also policymakers and certain corporate offenders themselves. Finally, this activity involves arts installations that are meant to stimulate a multi-sensory experience among those audience members.

Also concerned with the connections between the arts and activism, Sandra Spickard Prettyman and Elisa Gargarella describe and analyze a community based arts education program aimed at enabling urban teenagers and young adults to “make cognitive, emotional, and social connections to their communities through the vehicle of art.” Prettyman and Gargarella demonstrate how various participants in each of several years’ iteration of the “Arts-UP” program, involved with community partners and artists in residence create works of art that stimulate critical thinking both in themselves and members of the community.

Mary Hanley’s contribution is still another example of the potential of the arts to inspire action in the interests of social justice. The centerpiece of Hanley’s article (“Dandelion Seeds: Poetry as Performance and Research for Social Justice in Education”) is a poem that she composed upon an invitation to perform at the opening of a large rally in Washington D.C. held to call attention to institutionalized injustices related to schooling and education. Her poem was composed using arts-based research forms and strategies, and delivered as a work, she writes, of “performance ethnography,” one designed to complicate thinking about prevailing simplistic notions about schooling. The author is refreshingly upfront in discussing

the importance of an artist's shaping of her artwork for maximal impact on an intended audience, one (here) sympathetic to the kind of educational transformation to which her poetry alludes.

Guest Editors:

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## Teaching “Art as Social Justice:” Developing Prefigurative Pedagogies in the (Liberal) Art Studio

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### Abstract

In an era of expanding global capital, our role as educators remains one in which we must confront the ever growing discrepancy between the North and South, including the South within the North. Through my experiences teaching a course called “Art as Social Justice,” I begin to situate my classroom labor within an emancipatory framework that *prefigures* a more just and equitable world, as well as a classroom that challenges inequality. Employing thick description, this essay investigates “Art as Social Justice” as a case study that employs specific pedagogical tactics to challenge hegemonic social relations, not only in the classroom, but outside it as well. As the essay explores, visual art enables different ways of dealing with issues inaccessible to political science, history, sociology, or even literature.

## **Introduction**

Art enables a way of thinking about issues that other inquiry-based approaches do not allow. It is through the teaching of art that new spaces of critical inquiry and social potential may be established. As artist-activist, Brett Bloom (n.d.) writes in “Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance,” we must not coalesce to capitalist modes of making and exhibiting art, but instead must establish alternative practices and infrastructures to enable a sustainable future for non-market-based arts practice. Since commencing a tenure-track position at Michigan State University in 2007, I have attempted to engage student-artists<sup>1</sup> in this process through a course entitled “Art as Social Justice.” The course, which I have taught three times over the past five years, addresses art from an interdisciplinary and overtly anti-capitalist perspective. By drawing on my own work as an artist, historian, curator, and critic, I hope to engage student-artists in non-traditional artmaking infrastructures as a way to initiate thinking about the possibility of new and better worlds. The class is intended to present art as a particular modality to think through building a more just society.

Employing thick description, this essay investigates “Art as Social Justice” as a case study of how we employ specific pedagogical tactics to challenge hegemonic social relations, not only in the classroom, but outside it as well. In addition to my analysis of “Art as Social Justice,” I also bring my experiences teaching an array of other courses and workshops dealing with art and social justice. These include, among others, a study abroad seminar on art and activism, taught in Oaxaca, Mexico; a doctoral seminar on art and anti-colonialism; undergraduate seminars on “Art and Activism”, as well as other university courses and community-based workshops with Indigenous and Latina/o youth. While not directly addressed in the text, these additional pedagogical experiences directly influence my own pedagogical strategies as inflected in “Art as Social Justice.” Through these multivalent experiences, this essay illuminates how and why radical artistic practice is needed within the university, as individual and collective methodologies that can develop prefigurative pedagogies and radical teaching practices, concepts I will explore herein.

My development of prefigurative pedagogies as an activist teaching practice is founded in the

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the term “student-artist” to refer to those students enrolled in the course “Art as Social Justice.” By using the phrase “student-artist”, I hope to identify the complex nature and dual identities of these individuals. The term implies the potential power embodied in both the process of learning (student), as well as in the process of making (artist).

ideas of prefigurative politics, an anti-institutional tactic initially described by sociologist Winifred Breines. As a scholar of social movements, Breines (1989) is interested in the ways that activist organizational frameworks were commonly linked to a group's larger struggle to dismantle oppression and social stratification. She writes that "the term prefigurative politics is used to designate an essentially anti-organizational politics characteristic of the movement, as well as parts of the new left leadership, and may be recognized in counter institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics. Participatory democracy was central to prefigurative politics" (6). She continues: "The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that 'prefigured' and embodied the desired society" (6). Similarly, prefigurative pedagogies take this into the classroom and other sites of teaching and learning. Prefigurative pedagogies are anti-hierarchical and predicated on participatory learning.

Unlike many of my art historian and studio colleagues, I teach in a residential college (a liberal arts institution housed in a research university) and have been able to exercise a level of intellectual and pedagogical autonomy that may not be possible for those teaching in traditional art history or studio departments. Specifically, I teach undergraduate students in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH), a newly created living-learning environment housed at Michigan State University (MSU). Established in 2007 to fill a humanistic void in undergraduate liberal-learning at MSU, RCAH focuses its curriculum on four cornerstones: arts and culture, world history, ethics, and engaged learning. At the core of the curriculum are transcultural studies and community-based civic engagements. This unique teaching environment has afforded me the opportunity to develop heterodox teaching methodologies that employ otherwise non-traditional course offerings.

### **Cambio Social Radical**

In many ways, the projects in my courses begin to dismantle the barriers between art and politics, as articulated in the words and actions of *Mujeres Creando*. Accordingly, the Bolivia-based anarcho-feminist artists' collective formed in 1992 by Julieta Paredes and María Galindo, contend that "*No hay un cambio social radical, que nos haga felices, que no sea creativo*" (Gaitero, 8). For *Mujeres Creando*, "there cannot be radical social change, at least that which makes us happy, which isn't also creative." In the classroom, a site where we are striving for "radical social change," creativity is centrally positioned and enables students to see the relationship between creativity and the possibility of a new (and more enjoyable) world.

What strikes me most about this quote, which is included in the course syllabus, is that *Mujeres Creando* uses the concept "radical" in a way that serves as a double signifier, one

paralleled in my own teaching of “Art as Social Justice.” Initially, Mujeres Creando envision the “radical” in “*cambio social radical*” as relating to the root or base structure of society. That is to say, that social change must emerge at the grass roots or “radical” level. This parallels the Angela Davis’ assertion that “Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root’” (1987). Moreover, Mujeres Creando, which literally means *women creating*, has constructed their use of radical in alignment with the way that we commonly use it in the Global North<sup>2</sup>: a fundamental and systemic rupture.

The manner that the anarcho-feminist collective positions creativity as central to any basic social transformation is likewise foundational in how I come to situate my teaching about art, visual culture, and social justice. As a self-identified anarchist-artist-historian, I have commonly seen my own artistic practice disparaged by activists who position creative labor as somehow less significant and worthwhile than the “real” work being conducted in the realm of politics and economics. My experience is similar to MacPhee and Reuland (2007) who write that “As anarchists, we have seen our politics denigrated by other artists; as artists, we have had our cultural production attacked as frivolous by activists” (3). From this outmoded perspective, art is simply a superfluous activity with which one engages during leisure time, while politics and economics are the location where true activism is found. While the readers of the *International Journal of Education & the Arts* may quickly disagree with this reductive construct of cultural work (after all, teachers are cultural workers), its discursive circulation is very much alive within many activist and progressive circles. However, through the use of activist-art in the classroom, I believe that we may begin to dismantle this untenable perspective. This is something I have both learned from and shared with student-artists.

### Teaching “Art as Social Justice”

Student-artists are generally willing to engage with questions on the efficacy of art and how it may spark radical social change, even if they are uncertain of their own responses. On the first day of class, student-artists in “Art as Social Justice” are confronted with the syllabus, which cites both Mujeres Creando and Subcomandante Marcos (spokesperson for the Zapatistas, the Maya resistance in southern Mexico), figures unfamiliar to most students in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Global North* is a term used to describe the so-called “developed” nation-states that presently serve as economic and cultural super-powers. The *Global North* is contrasted with the *Global South*, terms that evoke the very real geographic disparity between the northern and southern hemispheres. In a post-Cold War era, the term has generally replaced notions of First, Second, and Third Worlds, although, as Vijay Prashad (2008) notes, the Third World project is very much still alive. In much of my work I continue to use the terms Third World, in reference to the non-capitalist and non-State socialist nations, and Fourth World, in reference to global Indigenous nations.



Midwest. During that initial interaction, many students are shocked to "discover" that Indigenous people are still violently oppressed; yet simultaneously enthralled by the notion that groups of people, particularly the Zapatistas, can resist power, while refusing to replace one form of hierarchy with a different, yet similar, social order. Following a discussion of these figures and their importance on our own lives in North America, student-artists create a series of *theses on art* that we habitually rework during the semester.

Each time I have taught "Art as Social Justice" my personal theses have been included in the syllabus, positioned between the course description and course objectives. What I included in the syllabus read as follows:

01. Art is an alternative to the mechanization of contemporary life;
02. Art offers a specter of humanity in an alienated existence;
03. Art cannot be learned. Art must always be practiced;
04. Art is the questioning of "traditional" models;
05. Art is the production of human relations;
06. Art generates transformation;
07. Art enables heterodoxies;
08. Art is social justice;
09. Art is resistance;
10. Art challenges.

By thinking about the unorthodox and malleable nature of art, the student-artists engage the larger social functions of art at its most basic level. These theses are intended to challenge student-artists' own ideas, while establishing a matrix to understand the multi-functionality of visual art and its role within our own lives.

In "Art as Social Justice," student-artists work collaboratively with one another to produce a series of stencils, relief prints, and serigraphs, as well as a project based on Social Practice (Willis, 2008), what others have named either Socially-Engaged Art (Helguera, 2011) or Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 1998). By working this way, student-artists evoke the tangibility of the printed form in a way that narrates an anti-capitalist aesthetic domain. By collectively creating hand-printed objects, student-artists begin to transcend the closed parameters of market orientation. Through this process, student-artists create work intended for public circulation and therefore become cognizant of the discursive power of their artistic and socially-engaged activities. Within the classroom, I provoke student-artists to critically interrogate their own roles as both consumers and (cultural) producers, identities that many are initially uncomfortable with, having grown accustomed to a life of media consumption. By connecting what they create in-class with global and local art historical and practice-based

traditions, student-artists begin to see how and where they fit within a living and changing world, one unlike what they commonly see in the media. For instance, when making stencils, student-artists create *public artworks* that engage a particular self-selected audience in a unique and situated environment. To do so, the student-artists must begin to understand the “power of place,” as Hayden (1997) would maintain, by interrogating local and urban history, as well as understanding to whom they are speaking.

In another assignment, student-artists create a large stencil addressing a poignant social issue. In addition to actually creating the artwork, student-artists must also produce a map (and possibly photographs) of the location where they would (hypothetically) paint the artworks. Student-artist projects have ranged from issues of food justice, globalization, Indigenous land sovereignty, Latin American and Middle Eastern solidarity, gender and sexual politics, and the infringement on civil liberties, to name only a few. The origin of these ideas develops in collaboration and conversation with one another. By making artworks that address particular issues they find pressing, student-artists circulate their work in pre-existing signifying systems that they do not fully control. In response, they begin to see how, as social actors, they may initiate minute interventions in a world they otherwise do not control. In turn, they are empowered enough to create more challenging and ambitious works.

While confronting their own pre-existing ideas about art and social justice, we also work on multiple artworks, such as serigraph (screenprint) posters and mural projects. The serigraph poster project is one based on the model of the Celebrate Peoples’ History (CPH), a poster series curated by Josh MacPhee of Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative (MacPhee, 2010). As a body of work, CPH brings negated historical events, communities, and individuals to the visual consciousness of contemporary youth. Printed in two-color designs, the offset lithograph posters are frequently seen wheatpasted in urban centers across North America, Latin America, and Europe. As posters, the CPH series combines text and image in an informative and pedagogical fashion that serves a dual aesthetic and activist function. Recently, MacPhee compiled these posters into a book, which serves as an excellent educational tool. Personally, I have created three CPH posters, one each on Métis resistance in Canada, the Flint Sit-Down Strike, and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.

With these political posters in mind, student-artists create stark serigraphs, ranging from one to four colors (based on student-artists’ past experience in the medium), attending to unique social issues or radical individuals and historical events. To date, serigraphs have engaged issues as diverse as femicide in Mexico, the early-twentieth-century state-assassination of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, solidarity with various peoples’ movements, Indigenous struggles, as well as referenced progressive musicians such as Dead Prez, Bambu, and Manu

Chao, to name some of the most memorable projects. In my courses on poster art, projects vary with additional and more open parameters.

### ***Challenges of relational or socially engaged art***

In addition to the print-based focus initiated during the second offering of the course (2009), the first iteration (2008) included a unit on social practice, relational aesthetics, socially engaged art, or collaborative art. Relational art, although seen as a highly problematic term and genre, are artworks in which human relations serve as the primary focus of investigation (as opposed to the usual fixation on aesthetics). Nicolas Bourriaud (1998), author of *Relational Aesthetics*, writes that relational art is "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" (14). He continues, arguing that relational art "points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art" (14). Pablo Helguera considers Socially Engaged Art an inter- or trans-discipline that is constituted by "a meaningful interaction or social engagement" (2). He writes, "what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence" (2).

Due to the collaborative and relational nature of much activist art, it seemed natural to encourage student-artists to work both collaboratively and relationally via social practice. In this way, I imagined that creating socially engaged or relational art would help student-artists develop a working-model for a world we were trying to create by working directly as a community of artists. However, those student-artists enrolled in the course did not arrive with the theoretical or aesthetic apparatus to think of art in such amorphous and performative ways. Since this course is offered at the 200-level (the second year within the college curriculum), student-artists were grounded in a more traditional art historical foundation, possibly a remnant of artmaking they learned in primary and secondary school. In this way, student-artists commonly viewed art as firmly located within the closed parameters of drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, and printmaking. Different outcomes and expectations could be expected from art students, instead of those enrolled in a liberal arts program.

My intention to immerse student-artists in socially engaged or relational projects was challenging, at best. Initially, student-artists showed little interest in pushing their own pre-existing boundaries when defining what is considered "art" while they remained enthusiastic to get into the very "real" process of making objects and images. With these initial resistances to social practice, I decided to remove the unit on socially engaged art the second and third time I taught this course and, instead, focused exclusively on print media, an area I am quite comfortable with in my own work. Throughout all three courses, however, collaboration remained central to classroom dynamics and peer interaction. When teaching the course in the future, I am interested in again using socially engaged practices within the classroom. In

fact, as a way to establish a knowledge of relational art for liberal arts students in my college, I recently offered a first-year seminar titled “Art and Activism: Socially Engaged Art and Social Practice” (2012).

### ***Further course development***

Structurally, “Art as Social Justice” is organized into four key units, each focusing on a different method of cultural work. The first time I taught “Art as Social Justice,” I organized the course around 1.) public art; 2.) relational aesthetics or social practice; 3.) political printmaking; 4.) and collective artmaking. With my initial failures to engage student-artists through relational artworks, I decided to reframe the class in a less theoretical manner and concentrate on methods of studio practice, as opposed to larger genres and functions of the work. As such, the second and third time I taught the course I incorporated “less dense” readings and concentrated on the political uses of various print media, including 1. stencils; 2. relief prints; 3. serigraphs or screenprints; 4. and monoprints.

Intellectually and pedagogically, I am drawn to the structure of the first course for its interrogation of diverse ways of employing artistic inquiry. However, the easily tangible media-based (stencils, relief printmaking, serigraphy, and monoprinting) organization was preferred by the student-artists, who universally understood the transitions between and across these four units. Ideally, before teaching “Art as Social Justice” again, I plan to retrieve an additional organizing framework that incorporates the positive aspects of each previous structure.

In addition to the larger course structure, individual class sessions were likewise divided into one of three types: 1.) seminar-style discussions of theoretical and historical material; 2.) workshops where student-artists actively prepared and created their projects; 3.) and student-led critiques. During the first workshop meeting, we attempted to establish the collective nature of the course, a complex and challenging task to do in an environment mediated by the pre-established inequality of the university classroom. While I recognize the obviously inequitable power dynamics between student and professor, student-artists and I struggled to dismantle the preconceived relationships throughout the entire semester and beyond (continuing into non-academic settings, such as the local anarchist infoshop and other activist and gallery situations off-campus). What became an interesting pedagogical query is how teachers/professors may integrate non-academic social relations created in activist and public spaces into the university classroom. Working prefiguratively, that is acting in a way that “prefigures” new relationships and models of sociality, the project of integrating outside modes of social relations evoked both successes and failures, which I have seen throughout my short career as a professor.

The main determinant to successful prefigurative pedagogy has to do with the willingness and openness of students to dialogically embrace the instructor as a mentor or peer, as opposed to as their superior (and power holder of their grade). In my courses these practices took several faculty-initiated forms from ways of conversing with students to methods of meeting in a "safe space" (not always asking to meet in the professor's uncomfortable office). Accordingly, student-artists and I reciprocally struggle to make the classroom democratic, while maintaining a positive and productive learning environment.

This prefigurative practice became an ongoing creative project that seemed to function as an actual socially-engaged artwork, at least for me, if not for the student-artists. In the "Art as Social Justice" syllabus, I openly clarify the *horizontality* of the course by facilitating student-artist competence to share his or her personal and pre-existing skills and knowledge with everyone in the workshop, including me. Attempting to dismantle the traditional deficiency model, which presupposes that students are lacking in knowledge and/or skills, I likewise make clear in the syllabus that "we will all envision ourselves as knowledgeable artists" and must openly share our knowledge with those around us.

By establishing the course in a way that allows for collaborative work, I envision the workshop to function as the prefigured space where we already live the world we want to see. This does not always function ideally, as anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (2002) points out, because students (and myself) commonly revert to hegemonic schooling, intellectual, artistic, and social models. Nonetheless, while student-artists are engaged in active-learning through artmaking, their capacity to transcend binary teacher-student structures seems to be more attainable than I have experienced when teaching about art and activism in traditional lecture or seminar-style courses. What this illuminates is the power of art-based learning to facilitate an egalitarian classroom that directly contests hegemonic forms of higher education learning.

In the intermediary time between its first, second, and third offering, I have toyed with readings and modified the inclusion or exclusion of specific texts. Initially, the class focused heavily on historical and theoretical material, with artmaking the third side of an equilateral triangle. Whereas student-artists responsively engaged with historical writings, which they found approachable and accessible, the theoretical work intimidated student-artists in a way I had not expected. This intimidation frequently allowed students to intellectually disengage from the material and not fully complete assigned readings, leaving classroom discussion unfulfilling.

In turn, when I taught the course in 2009 and 2010, instead of theoretically and densely-written tomes, I employed a wonderfully illustrated text on printmaking, as well as a

compendium of writings about socially-engaged art. Moreover, essays like Brett Bloom's (n.d.) "Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance" were added, as were podcasts (Badatsports.com, 2012); videos (*Retooling Dissent*, 2003); blogs (justseeds.com/blog, 2012) and a short book by the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor (2008). These varied materials, each approaching activist-art in a language and media that students-artists were comfortable with, served to complement what they commonly saw as boring academic readings.

### ***Class privilege and collaboration***

As cultural workers, teachers and artists are commonly forced to recognize and question privilege, be it based on class, race, gender, sexuality, language, citizenship-status, or a combination of these factors. How we engage our students in these same conversations seems to be one of the omnipresent pedagogical challenges of working within the university. In a "classless" society, as the United States is habitually presented, this becomes even more challenging, as does teaching about the seemingly meritocratic sphere of art. Engaging students in discussions of class within the corporate-colonized university proves to be one of the most complicated pedagogical interventions with which I have engaged. Since artists and cultural workers must continuously mitigate their own complex positionalities, as well as those of their constituencies, I am adamant that these issues be addressed in classroom discussions and studio critiques.

Since my teaching operates across fine arts and humanistic boundaries, it is through active learning, that is the creation of artworks and theory, that we begin to rectify the absence noted by Sheila Cavanagh (2009) who writes that "A number of active-learning practices gaining increasing attention in the academy receive scant notice in English and other humanistic fields" (135). By both learning about historical and theoretical material, as well as actually making artworks, active learning stimulates student-artists to critically reflect upon their roles as both consumers and producers. Nonetheless, students are often quite unrefined in their capacity to engage in class analysis. One of the unwritten objectives of "Art as Social Justice" is to begin these conversations.

As Drabinski (2009) notes "structures of social and economic class are notoriously difficult for students to see, laboring as they do under the powerful myth that America is a country of endless opportunity, where anyone can triumph over obstacles to be anything they want to be" (15). Furthermore, cultural critics Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2008) write that "Most Americans, when they are not thinking of themselves purely as individuals, regard themselves as part of the 'middle class'" (89). They expand this by arguing that

The myth of the middle class is invented to obscure the fact that 'we' (black or

white, man or woman, gay or straight, etc.) are all wage-workers, and, therefore, 'we' are 'all equal here' because, as Marx puts it, 'middle and transitional' levels of social differences 'always conceal the boundaries of classes' (89).

Recently, while teaching a freshman course on "transcultural studies," a class in which I primarily focus on Indigenous cultural practices in the face of ongoing colonialism, I conducted an assignment where students classified their class identity and located the key factors that allowed them to associate with this class identity. Not surprisingly, the *entire* class identified as either middle-class, upper middle-class, or upper-class, categories that they themselves created. When interrogated as to why they identified as such, students commonly fell back on class "demarcators" such as income, cultural capital, ability to go on vacations, and the like. While many of their parents and family members work(ed) union jobs, some in the automotive industry, they themselves did not distinguish themselves as working-class, yet at times placed their family members and neighbors in this category.

This, of course, has immediate implications when thinking about our roles as artists, activists, educators, and students. Although I have yet to conduct such an assignment in "Art as Social Justice," with approximately three hundred students in my entire college, I believe that similar class identities can be extrapolated for those student-artists enrolled in "Art as Social Justice."

One way that I confront this class myopia developed when student-artists were working on a mural project with a local neighborhood center. For the mural, for which we were only able to create preparatory drawings, student-artists were asked

to tell the community stories of [a particular neighborhood], be[ing] cognizant of representing [...] community histories. Moreover, as a public work of art, be prepared of understand the public dialogue and criticism that this work may engender.

As we have explored and will continue to discuss in this class, community murals come from a long tradition of community-based artmaking being used a political tool for the disenfranchised. As such, we must be aware of the history of community murals and how (outside) artists may work in solidarity with community members. Remember that the mural should demonstrate your skill as an artist, but also represent the people and ideas of the Eastside. You may need to engage in library, web, and oral history research in the process of planning this mural.

Very few student-artists had engaged in library or archival research or had researched materials on the web. Noticing this absence of preliminary research, student-artists and I engaged in collaborative classroom discussions about the role of the artist, privilege, the academy, and local histories. During this discussion, one student-artist, who has since become a history major, was poignant when she asked: how can I design a mural for a community in which I do not live? In general, the question about the artist-as-outsider remained unanswerable, but shaped the way student-artists attended to the project.

Oakland-based artist, Rodríguez (MacPhee and Rodríguez, 2008) addresses this type of issue head on in her essay in *Reproduce and Revolt*. In this artist-activist handbook, Rodríguez writes:

Another question that should be addressed openly among activists is: What's your role as an artist/designer when your audience is NOT the community you're from? For example, what if you are a conscious white male designing a piece to get young women of color involved in stopping gang violence? In a case like this, it's important to be mindful of representation. Invariably, the decisions we make as artists about WHO to depict and HOW to depict them reflects our complex identities and sometimes our blindspots (built around class, race, gender, sexuality and life experiences). It is important for an artist who feels outside of a community to build collaborative relationships with community-based organizations or others engaged with that population. This means time and work, but it also means you took steps to understand your audience (20).

While student-artists were "aware" of these issues, convincing them to directly confront them remains an eternal challenge in our work as educators, one I consistently struggle with in the classroom. Since Rodríguez was an artist-in-residence at my college during the first offering of "Art as Social Justice", and briefly visited during the second offering, she was able to personally workshop this issue with student-artists. By semester's end, student-artists began to understand the issue intellectually, yet they were not always capable of disavowing their own class, gender and/or White privileges. Of course, intellectually acknowledging privilege is the initial step, one that may be expanded through continued prefigurative pedagogies. Through creative and solidarity-building projects, student-artists affirm their affinities with other individuals and movements, as well as their own privileged status.



### ***Prefigurative pedagogies***

By working in a *prefigurative* manner, an approach I hope to define in this final section, I see my role inside and outside the classroom as one who facilitates egalitarian and utopian change through the creation of and thinking about the arts. Just as the political tendencies of *alternative modernism* have waned, borrowing from Marxist art historian David Craven (2006), so too have the methods that teachers employ to facilitate change in the classroom. When dealing with students who have never seen a successful revolutionary project, activist-educators must be comfortable making small, incremental shifts, when working with students. Instead of massive upheavals or ruptures, we must be content to foster everyday victories marked by small and incremental classroom movements. For me, I see these triumphs in the moments when students identify their creative output as "art" or, better yet, when they begin to actually see themselves as "artists". This small self-identification is crucial, as new identities open new and revolutionary possibilities. Moreover, identifying as an artist emerges from a uniquely emancipatory perspective and liberatory artistic project.

By facilitating the classroom and studio as a collaborative and prefigurative environment, artmaking functions to both help initiate radical change in addition to actually operating as the change itself. According to Graeber (2002), prefigurative politics are "very much a work in progress, and creating a culture of democracy among people who have little experience of such things is necessarily a painful and uneven business, full of all sorts of stumblings and false starts..." (72). Along these lines, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or Wobblies (2002 [1905]), the radical labor union that gained prominence in the early twentieth-century through various direct-action tactics and unwillingness to coalesce to the demands of the capitalist class, serve as another prefigurative example. As the Wobblies maintain in their constitution, they struggle to create "the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."

With radical practitioners such as the IWW (2002 [1905]) and Graeber (2002) in mind, prefigurative pedagogy suggests alternative universes within the educational setting. Moreover, by laboring within existing structures, prefigurative pedagogies seek to establish a new and emancipatory environment in the *classroom of the old*. As teachers or professors teaching in mainstream institutions, we may be unable to control the parameters of the institution, yet we may nonetheless imagine the classroom as the utopic space we want it to be.

In the same way that prefigurative politics are messy, with many ineffective moments, so too will work in prefigurative pedagogies present failures in the process of making the classroom an open and non-hierarchical space. Even so, teaching prefiguratively (however, we may envision that act) allows us to imagine the classroom and its associated tactics and/or

strategies in a way that existing structural limitations may otherwise prevent. What this means is that in the process of making the classroom non-hierarchical, we will experience countless situations that replicate the horrors of the world around us, while experiencing the joys of an unforeseeable environment.

As an artist and art historian teaching within the university, I find these prefigurative tendencies informative and ones that allow me to situate my own pedagogical practice within an anarchistic and anti-capitalist terrain. Influenced by anti-hierarchical and Indigenous epistemologies, I see the artist as an individual who (through collaboration) possesses the capacity to not only spark fundamental social transformation, but also *envision* the possibilities of a new world. Unlike traditional modes, art allows access to otherwise incomprehensible “ways of seeing,” to paraphrase John Berger (1990). On the one hand, visual images can easily concretize complex and difficult political ideals, while the collaborative process of making art challenges outmoded assumptions of the solitary artist.

In fact, the work of Maori theorist, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), is a model for the core of any prefigurative pedagogy by outlining an array of “projects” that invert dominant modes of being. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith presents “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects” as fundamental to decolonizing the present state of knowledge production<sup>3</sup>. In this vein, her unique positionality allows us to explain how these twenty-five projects are crucial, not only to Native communities and their reclamation of Indigenous knowledge, but simultaneously consequential to decolonizing mainstream classroom pedagogies. Although I teach primarily to non-Native students, three projects have nonetheless become foundational within the hybrid studio-classroom of “Art as Social Justice” and therefore have greater implications to radical teaching in general.

In “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects,” Smith (1999) outlines a selection of projects that may be evoked to change the colonial and capitalist stature of knowledge production. In the classroom, the projects labeled “intervening,” “envisioning,” and “creating” all serve as modes of inquiry intended to challenge hegemonic knowledge systems and their control of the political system. With these ideas at its base, student-artists use their artworks to function as *creative interventions*, which *envision* a new and otherwise unknown social world. Through

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<sup>3</sup> Smith’s twenty-five Indigenous projects serve at the center of the growing anti-colonial reclamation of Native knowledge production. The ideas include the following: claiming, testimonies, storytelling, celebrating survival, remembering, indigenizing, intervening, revitalizing, connecting, reading, writing, representing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing, networking, naming, protecting, creating, negotiating, discovering, and sharing.

prefigurative pedagogy and the inclusion of Smith’s Indigenous projects, the classroom begins to function in a way that counters a legacy of oppression and alienation, something we all need.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, visual art enables very different ways of dealing with issues inaccessible to political science, history, sociology, or even literature. By evoking prefigurative pedagogies, I have attempted to use art as a mode of creating a more socially just world, both inside and outside the classroom. While “Art as Social Justice” has been riddled with strategic failures, I continue to develop the course by using incremental and tactical adjustments to help better align the class with its ambitious and important goals. Through my ongoing experiences, I hope to share some thoughts on art as both a mode for instigating radical social change, but also serving as the change itself.

Dominant modes of thinking and working often lead to the reproduction in hegemonies. By evoking particular non-canonical thinkers and methodologies, particularly those drawn from the Global South, our roles as educators who incorporate visual art within the classroom allow us to appropriately construct the classroom as a collaborative and prefigurative environment, one based in a collaboratively created framework. From Mujeres Creando’s thoughts on the function of radicalism to Graeber’s notion of prefiguration and Smith’s Indigenous projects, radical intellectuals throughout the world have been conceptualizing and thinking through emancipatory practices (and pedagogies) for quite some time. In an era of expanding global capital, our role as educators remains one in which we must confront the ever growing discrepancy between the North and South, including the South within the North. Through my experiences of teaching “Art as Social Justice” I struggle to situate my classroom labor within this unique liberatory framework in a way that prefigures both the world I want to live in, as well as a classroom that challenges inequality. By teaching *art as social justice* and not *art and social justice*, the unique collaborative nature of creativity is foregrounded and enables student-artists (and me) to work through complicated notions that other modes of knowledge cannot. The class itself becomes the space where a more socially just (art)world is manifest.

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### **About the Author**

Dylan A. T. Miner is a border-crossing artist, activist, historian, curator, and professor working throughout the Americas. In 2010, he was awarded a prestigious Artist Leadership Fellowship from the National Museum of the American Indian (Smithsonian, USA). In 2011, he hung solo exhibitions at Urban Shaman Gallery (Canada), University of Notre Dame (USA), Alma College (USA), Michigan Institute for Contemporary Art (USA), and Fort Lewis College (USA). As a member of the artists' collective Justseeds, he was awarded the Grand Prix at the 28th Biennial of Graphic Arts in Slovenia, and installed a solo Justseeds exhibition at the 29th Biennial. In 2012, he exhibited at *The Dreaming: Australia's International Indigenous Festival* and had solo exhibitions at Small Projects (Norway) and Galerie 101 (Canada). Miner holds a PhD in the history of art from The University of New Mexico and has published extensively and lectured globally on contemporary art, Indigenous visual sovereignty, and radical politics, including two forthcoming books from University of Arizona Press and Bloomsbury (publisher of Harry Potter). To date, he has published more than forty journal articles, book chapters, review essays, and encyclopedia entries. He is Assistant Professor in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University. His artwork, writing, and syllabi can be viewed at <http://www.dylanminer.com>.

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## Creating Art Environments that Address Social Justice Issues

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The Evergreen State College, USA

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### Abstract

In this article, I examine strategies for teaching students to make socially conscious art using a variety of media that emphasizes installation work. I present issues of social justice in the contemporary art world and include concerns of censorship that artists sometimes confront. I offer examples of team taught coordinated studies programs where students did social justice through visual art installation work and refer to examples I have used as part of curriculums to teach students the skills needed to create and exhibit works about important social issues. The paper contains links to images of works by the author on Vimeo and lists and links to other artists who that people might want to include in their curriculum.

## Introduction

Many students interested in learning to make art enter college with a very narrow sense of the range and scope of work that politically engaged artists have been creating in the international art scene over the past fifty years. Even students who grow up in urban areas where it is possible to go to museums and galleries have frequently not been exposed to works outside a narrow canon that is quite conservative in its vision even when the artworks they see are technically and conceptually *avant garde*. As a result many students have no sense that they can create artwork that could cause viewers to question the status quo.

### *Positioning Myself*

As an indigenous artist whose work by its existence supports the survival of Native culture in a settler state that has a history of attempting to commit physical and cultural genocide, I have always known my art is political. Beyond that I have chosen to participate in an innovative contemporary art movement and to address certain highly charged political issues like Indian Fishing Rights or the effects of nuclear pollution on reservations in my personal installation work, I have also chosen to collaborate with other artists from a variety of cultures to address issues of feminism and issues of water and water rights (Tremblay, 2001; Tremblay, 2002).

### *Pedagogy*

If one wants to open doors for students and encourage them to make art that challenges the injustices that are a defining feature of our social reality then, as a teacher, one needs to do three things. First, show students works by successful artists who make art that challenges social inequality and teach them to use art to communicate. Second, model ways to create work that is socially engaged and show them how to find sites for exhibiting such work. Third, raise questions about students' works that suggest directions they might explore that will cause viewers of their art to reflect on social realities and the need for a just society. In the process of teaching students to create work that addresses social issues, it is also essential to design assignments that will teach students the skills they need to use a variety of media effectively so that their work will attract curators and viewers and cause those people to take the time to explore the meaning of the art made by young emerging artists.

Moreover, in order to make art about social justice, a person must become aware that the world is unjust, and must be willing, not just to witness the injustice that exists, but to find visual strategies to address that injustice in ways that raise questions for both artist and viewer about the need to make changes in social reality. For students who have suffered injustice this may be more obvious than for students who benefited from the status quo. However, in a world where the environment is being destroyed by corporations, all people are suffering from a system that is threatening the sustainability of life on the planet. Even those who profit most

from the current social system are in danger of suffering because of it, and so can come to a conscious sense of the need for change.

In order to become socially engaged, an artist must examine the world and interrogate not only his or her own personal experience, but must study issues of inequality of power caused by a wide variety of social practices. As a person comes to understand the functioning of economic systems, of problems related to the overuse or lack of access to resources, social constructions related to notions of 'race,' histories of colonialism and underdevelopment, and of exploitation of one culture by another, one finds lots of issues about which one can make art. Some artists may also want to question inequities around issues of gender and sexuality and more personal topics. In doing this work, the artist must recognize that many people are taught a variety of rationalizations to attempt to make inequality seem not just 'normal' but 'natural,' and so when an artist questions inequality and defines it as unjust and in need of change, s/he starts a complex dialog with viewers of his or her work. In order to create art that addresses issues of social justice, one must enter into a sophisticated critique of ideas that are used to support privilege for people in power and to harm and violate those who are not.

### *Caveat*

At times it can be dangerous to make art that raises issues of social justice and speaks to the need for social change. In repressive cultures and places, making such work takes real commitment. Even in a permissive society like the United States that promotes free speech as a constitutional right, one often has to navigate an art world that practices censorship. It is also important to know that in art world discourse, often work is censored because it offends the taste of gallery owners who are marketing work to conservative people with power. There are some gallery owners, curators, and critics that support the status quo and who dismiss politically engaged works of art as lacking quality. At times the quality of a socially engaged work may be no different than other works included in a particular exhibit, and yet work will be rejected. This can be hard for a young artist. It is important to help students recognize that the world is very complicated and there are those in all arts professions, and collectors in all social classes, who work to make social change and who support artists who do the same. Students who desire to make art should be encouraged that it is possible to negotiate both the national and international art world, and to use their work to speak passionately in favor of issues of social justice.

When one asks student artists to address issues of social justice in their work, one not only needs to define social justice, but teach students to question why in a capitalist society people in power have defined art merely as an object of beauty or have pursued 'art for art's sake.' Many teachers in the academy have denigrated the art of the 'social realist' tradition as propaganda and have taught that artists should not be concerned with issues of justice.



According to people who espouse such conservative, aesthetic philosophies, socially engaged artists are considered unnecessarily political and so are forced to confront negative critiques of their work. Since art in Western culture has a long history of being a consumable commodity, if one decides to create engaged art, in certain circles it might affect an artist's ability to make a living. Indeed, it is important to address such issues directly when expanding the definition of what art is legitimate. A teacher needs to realize that it is these conservative ideas that have kept students' definitions of art narrow and helped keep them unaware of the wide range of subjects related to social justice that have been explored by artists during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries.

In order to address issues of social justice, the art created must use imagery or symbols in a way that allows the viewer to interpret the meaning of the work. When one teaches students to create art that is socially engaged, there are many different media that can be used from the most traditional to the most innovative. Certainly when Goya chose etching to create his series, *Disasters of War*, (Goya, 1810-20) he was working in a medium with a long history in European artistic tradition. He chose to use that medium to make a commentary about the horrors of war in order to critique social reality.

It is not only the media or the style of artwork that makes art socially engaged, but above all the content of images and the thoughts those images must provoke if the viewer is to gain a sense of social awareness. When teaching students about these issues, I find they enjoy discussing the film *The Cradle Will Rock* (1999) by Tim Robbins, particularly the scenes where Rockefeller confronts Diego Rivera about painting Lenin in the mural in Rockefeller Center. Students have interesting insights into the incident where Nelson Rockefeller has the mural destroyed and the subsequent conversation between Rockefeller and Hearst about their support of abstract expressionism and painting without political content as a way to reshape the art world. It is important to discuss the tension between works inside the conservative canon of Art History that re-enforce the status quo and the equally powerful works of socially committed artists who are left out of some texts and not others.

### *Installation Art*

As a mixed media artist who has used fiber, metal, wood, dirt, stone, sand, painting, bones, photography, audio, and video to create installations

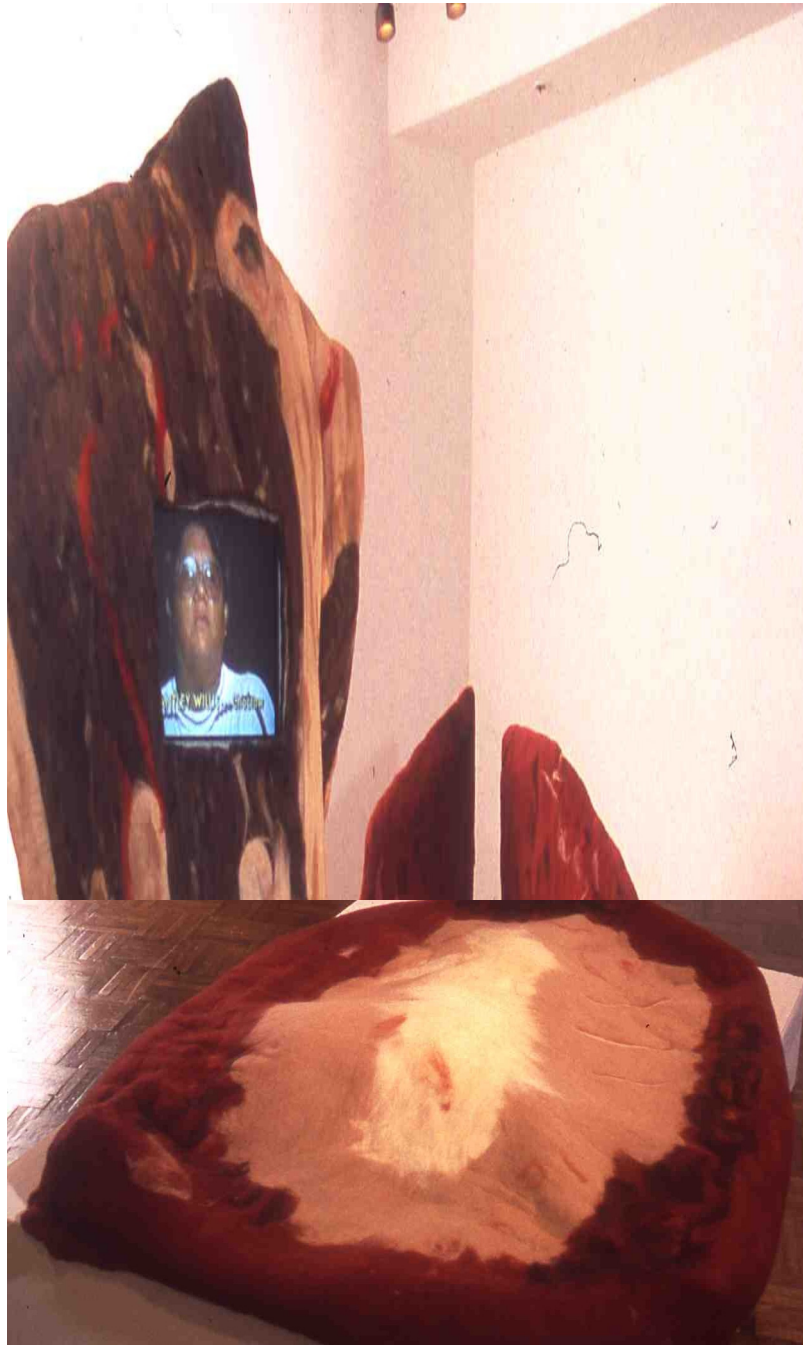


Figure 1



Figure 2

I like to teach my students to use time based, multimedia installation art as a medium for doing works of art that explore issues of social justice, cultural diversity, environmental racism, gender equity, and other social justice themes. Installation art allows students to create an environmental space that the viewer can inhabit and explore.



Figure 3

Moreover the use of time-based, video and audio tracks or performance elements allows artists to weave sound, language and image together in order to create a more multifaceted experience for the viewer. There is also a substantial body of installation work by a diverse group of artists from which one can select examples when designing curriculum about making art that explores issues of social justice. Time-based, multimedia installation art also allows a teacher opportunities to teach students how to develop skills they need to use a wide variety of materials, and to do collaborative as well as individual works of art.

I have worked with artists from China, Puerto Rico, and Mexico as well as the United States, I am therefore able to model for my students the process of creating work that addresses issues about which I want to have viewers think so they can consider whether they want to act. I show students DVD's that document my work, or during certain programs I will install and exhibit a work in the gallery on campus or take students on a field trip to a gallery where my work is being exhibited. I also have students read reviews and book chapters that discuss my work, so that students can learn how a professional artist they know functions in the art world. When students realize that my work is shown nationally and internationally, they begin to ask questions about how to show their work, how to write grants to support the work they

want to do, and so it becomes easier for me to teach them to take their own work seriously and to think of art as a way to raise questions for viewers that will make them think.

### **The Evergreen State College**

#### ***Integrated and Collaborative Instruction***

As a faculty who has taught for thirty-two years at The Evergreen State College, an institution dedicated to doing collaborative, team taught, interdisciplinary studies, I have had the opportunity to work on faculty teams with social scientists, scientists, humanists, film makers, and dancers, as well as with other visual artists. This has allowed me the rich experience of planning and teaching students to make art in academic programs where they actively studied, did research, and built skills in a variety of disciplines. Students in such programs were in touch with a wide variety of subject matter that they could explore as they decided what themes they would address in their art. While it is true that it is possible to teach students to do socially committed, multimedia art projects teaching by oneself, and I have done it at the college level, it is easier to work with students full time in the generative environment of a team taught, interdisciplinary, academic program. Such an academic program supports innovation and encourages students to do research and address ideas that confront real world inequities at the same time that they are learning the skills needed to create art.

One of most successful programs I taught in the past decade was called “Transforming Consciousness: Multimedia and Installation Art in the Americas. I team taught this two-quarter program with a Latin American Studies faculty, and during winter quarter, I took students to Mexico for six weeks. During two of those weeks, students created a collaborative installation with Professor Patricia Soriano Troncoso’s students from Centro Nacional de Arte (CNA), and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Our students created a collaborative installation work called “*Fronteras en mi lengua/Borders on My Tongue*” that was exhibited in the student gallery at CNA. Their work explored issues around immigration and policing the U.S. – Mexico Border, issues of Development and the Macquiladores, and Mexican resistance to genetically modified food among other themes. Students divided the gallery up into several rooms, and some of the students performed giving the work a time-based element. My colleague at Evergreen took another group of students to Chile where they did various media and community research projects. During the quarter prior to traveling, students in the program were divided into two groups, one that did multimedia installation projects and one that did video production and programming about Latin America for TCT TV, a local community television station.

To prepare the students for doing work in both groups, we read works about Latin American history including works by Galeano (1979,1986), Freire (1969), and translations from Ceballos (2006) on the history Latin American immigration to the United States that

examined a variety of issues and put them in historical context. Students read about Latin American art including Mosquera (1995), *Beyond the Fantastic Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, Mosquera and Block (2001) *Cuba Now: The New Generation*, and Canclini (2005) *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. We had students watch a variety of films on social conditions in Latin America. They also viewed films and read about socially engaged works of installation art in the U.S. and in Latin America. Students examined works by Fred Wilson, Ann Hamilton, Pepon Ossorio, Jesusa Rodriguez, Alfredo Jaar, Luis Camitzer, Guillermo Gómez Peña, Coco Fusco, Violeta Luna, Roberto Sifuentes, Amalia Mesa Bain C Maxx Stevens, James Luna, Corwin Clairmont, Shelley Niro, Jolene Rickard, Hulleah Tsinahjinnie, Flo Oy Wong, Suzanne Lacy, and Imna Arroyo.

We also invited Imna Arroyo (1995/2007), a gifted Puerto Rican artist and professor, to come and do an exhibit in the college gallery, She installed a work that she had done about the Middle Passage and cultural survivals in the African American Diaspora. She not only talked to the students about her own work and evolution as an artist, but came to a critique of their work and gave them excellent and thought-provoking feedback. Students were exposed to artists from a broad range of ethnic backgrounds including artists of European ancestry working in both the United States and Latin America who dealt with a broad range of themes that related to issues of social justice. The artists were highly skilled both technically and in terms of the conceptual elements of their work.

After studying a variety of work, each student created a personal installation work due week five of the quarter, and did a collaborative installation work with three to five students due during week ten. Students also did proficiencies using tools in the wood and metal shops, the fiber studio, the costume shop in the theatre, and the media center, Students were expected to have plans and a statement describing the themes of their projects due before the end of week three and week eight, and were encouraged to ask questions and work with me to build skills needed to complete their work. Students doing installations were then divided into two groups and assigned a day to install the work. All projects were to be installed between 8AM and 11 AM in the morning and then, critique lasted from 11 AM until noon and 1 PM until 5:30 PM and each critique lasted for thirty minutes.

While student projects were only up for one day, they were installed in public spaces and posters and invitations went up around campus to encourage people to examine the work. We spent two full days for critiques, and all students wrote an artist statement to contextualize their work. We discussed both the concept of each installation and viewers' ability to understand the themes and the aesthetic dimensions of the work. Students wrote five-minute commentaries on each work to give to the artist before we began discussions. Individual

works allowed students to build skills using materials, and made each student design a work that dealt with a theme that explored issues related to social justice. The collaborative projects allowed students to learn to work together to realize their theme and prepared them for the group work they would do with students in Mexico.

Students in this program were required to take course work in Spanish, although many of them were beginning language students, so I arranged for translators to help the students from the United States and the students from Mexico with translation problems. A few of the students from my class were fluent Spanish speakers, and they also helped others communicate. During the trip to Mexico we visited museums, ruins, performances, art galleries, traditional markets where indigenous artists and artisans sold their work, as well as making and exhibiting art in a variety of settings besides doing the collaborative installation in the Student Gallery at CNA. Students studied the work of artists who were known for work that spoke to issues of social justice like Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros. They met several artists like Manuel Velásquez (2012) and Daniel Romero whose work was powerfully political. They also came to understand the complexities of race and class in Mexico as they traveled around Mexico, D.F. and other cities in the states of Tlaxcala, Puebla, and Veracruz.

When designing curriculum, the most difficult thing for me to do has been to talk about my personal work in the classroom. Even though I have shown my work nationally and internationally, I have always worried about becoming too much the center of attention in the classroom. I want students to develop their own voices and styles and not to copy what I do. When my colleagues first asked me to talk about my work in academic programs, I was surprised and a bit uncomfortable. It was only when I began to realize that I was only one example among other examples that I was teaching students to explore that I became more comfortable. It pleased me when students began to recognize that if I could show work and help them make contacts in the art world, they could also do professional work in the arts if they worked hard to develop skills and to do powerful work. Indeed it was my contacts with artists in other countries and my ability to access commitments from galleries that allowed me to set up opportunities for my students to have their first international exhibits. Given such an opportunity, they felt driven to do work that addressed topics that were thought provoking and that addressed themes they had been studying in our program.

### *More Examples of Student Work*

Over a long career as a teacher, I have had many students who have done outstanding works, and many have gone on to graduate school in the arts and other fields and done important work. When I reflect on student projects that have been generative and thought provoking, I remember in particular a suite of work by Ken Matsudaira who I have invited back in several programs to install environments, perform in them, and lead class discussion. His suite of

work about the effects of Japanese Relocation on subsequent generations of Japanese Americans and particularly a work he created called *Don't Make Waves* talks about the need to be vocal in the face of injustice. By questioning the notion that one should not make waves in the face of various unjust social conditions he explores the importance of acting against injustice.

Among other student works, I think of one collaborative feminist work done in the woman's bathroom with a powerful series of life-sized plaster figures that explored forces that silence women and disempower them. I was also particularly moved by a personal, installation work by Soledad Picon about illegal immigration and the U.S. Mexican Border, in which she used candles to outline an altar-like space inhabited by objects and photographs on the floor. In each case the students clearly defined a theme and developed imagery and language to address the issue. Often times, student work is as sophisticated as work I find in galleries and museums, and if that is the case, I will suggest that students submit their work for exhibit. There is nothing that teaches students to do work committed to issues of social justice like getting their works exhibited and seen.

#### *Helping students make connections*

I am always looking for galleries and museums that are doing and documenting exhibits that deal directly with issues of social justice. Sometimes I write for catalogs and help to document socially committed work by artists. Gathering information from a diverse community of artists helps me to design curriculum that encourages young artists to commit to creating works that address injustice. Students respond to having role models and are less frightened to take the risk to work for change. They learn that art can have a social purpose in the world and raise questions for viewers about the need to act to create a more just world.

The interdisciplinary nature of the full time academic programs my students take allows them a supportive environment when they choose to do work that raises important questions about the place of justice in the world. It is rewarding to watch students develop images and installations that work to make the world a better place as they shape the art world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Art 21 (2005) has done a series of videos that are available for classroom teachers about Pepón Ossorio, Anne Hamilton, John Feodorov, Alfredo Jaar, Do Ho Suh, Carrie May Weems, Fred Wilson, Nancy Spero and Ai Wei Wei.

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### **About the Author**

Gail Tremblay is an artist, writer, and cultural critic noted for multi-media visual works, art installations, writing on Indigenous Art, and her poetry. She teaches at The Evergreen State College in visual arts, writing, Native American and cultural studies. She was a member and president of the National Board of the Women's Caucus for Art. She has exhibited art in Switzerland, China, Mexico, the Czech Republic, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and in 100 exhibits throughout the U.S. Her work is collected by the National Museum of the American Indian, The Portland Art Museum and the Missoula Art Museum among others.

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## **Native Resistance through Art: A Contestation of History Through Dialogue, Representation, and Action**

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New Mexico State University, United States

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### **Abstract**

Beginning November 2006, and continuing through December 2007, Oklahomans were alerted to the promotions of the Oklahoma Centennial. For Indigenous Oklahomans, this was a problematic marking of a historical event. The Centennial's grand-narrative advanced a story privileging the "pioneers" who "settled the land" as the official story of Oklahoma's past. This article deconstructs the manufactured Oklahoma history advanced through the Centennial by identifying and examining, utilizing Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory, the counterstory put forth in the *Current Realities: A Dialogue with the People* art show produced by Oklahoma Native artists in the OklaDADA collective. *Current Realities* functioned as social justice—providing all Oklahomans with a comprehensive history of Oklahoma by telling Indigenous Oklahomans' history and reality through art.

## Introduction

Beginning in November 2006, and continuing through December 2007, Oklahomans were alerted to the promotions of the Oklahoma Centennial. For the Native people of Oklahoma, this was a problematic marking of a historical event. Historian Angie Debo (1940/1991) proclaimed, “The plunder of Indians was so closely joined with pride in creation of a great new commonwealth that it received little condemnation” (p. 92). Although the exploitation, terrorism, and killings of Indigenous Oklahomans for land, oil, and other resources have been documented, this history did not enter into the Centennial discourse. Historical amnesia is more comfortable for most Oklahomans—however, Indigenous Oklahomans remember through their family and tribal stories and their art, heightening consciousness and conceptualizations of the state’s past for the education of children, youth, and adults who perhaps have been forced into or have chosen to stay in this historical amnesia.

I am one of those Indigenous Oklahomans who remembers and calls into question the mythical history promoted within the Oklahoma Centennial. I was born in Cooweescoowee District of the Cherokee Nation and I am a descendent of a family who was resettled to and then took allotments in the community of Catoosa, Oklahoma. I am an enrolled member of, thus a citizen of, the Cherokee Nation, and I am a Native scholar in an institution of higher education. I am an inheritor of the stories and history of the place that became Oklahoma. I am also a story (re)teller and work to re-write/re-right history as a means to fight historical amnesia. In this article I deconstruct the manufactured Oklahoma history advanced in Centennial projects and celebrations by identifying and examining the counterstory put forth in the *Current Realities: A Dialogue with the People* art show produced by Oklahoma Native artists in the OklaDADA collective.

## Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory’s (CRT) basic premise is that racism is a historical, systemic, ideological manifestation of power to serve, maintain, and protect white privilege (Delgado, 1989; Harris, 1993), resulting in the silencing and marginalization of the experiences and realities of People of Color. CRT’s goal is to construct an alternative reality by naming one’s reality through storytelling and counterstorytelling, thus, the advantage of CRT is the space for voice that it provides People of Color. Examples of the “voice” of these counterstories include “parables, chronicles, stories, counterstories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57), and should include art, which provides an aesthetic space for speaking back as well. The contestation, deconstruction and reshaping of the master or grand-narrative helps members of the dominant racial group know “what it is like to be nonwhite” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 39). The multiple perspectives and counterstories are sources of valid knowledge, facilitating transformation; hence, CRT contains an activist dimension for movement toward social justice.

Indigenous scholars utilized CRT to examine the effects of racism and power on Native communities, employing stories as truth-telling—to speak back to colonization and oppression. Brayboy (2005) used CRT as his foundation to introduce Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) to examine issues of Indigenous People in relationship to the U.S. and its laws and policies. Although a significant role is played by race, a primary tenet within TribalCrit is the endemic nature of colonization and its processes in society. CRT and TribalCrit generate truths about colonization in larger social and structural contexts to facilitate change. “Since the truth about injustices perpetuated against Indigenous People has been largely denied in the United States, truth-telling becomes an important strategy for decolonization” (Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005, p. 7).

Looking through CRT and TribalCrit lenses, the grand-narrative of the Centennial advanced a narrow story privileging the “boomers,” “sooners,”<sup>1</sup> and “pioneers” who “settled the land” as the official and sanctioned story of Oklahoma’s past. This “pioneer history” is problematized and challenged by presenting the counter-narrative from the perspective of Native Peoples, the state’s first citizens, by highlighting the stories, work, and actions of those involved with the OklaDADA artist collective and the *Current Realities* exhibit.

### ***Research Framework and Methodology for Data Gathering and Analysis***

An analysis of the *Current Realities* show necessitated a thorough and deeply nuanced understanding of discourse within the Oklahoma Centennial, contextualized within the history of colonization of Native Peoples in both the U.S. and in what is now the state of Oklahoma. Oppressive laws and Acts which fostered the oppression that Indigenous Oklahomans endured historically, and continues today in various forms, had to be identified and understood. I offer this Tribal Critical Race Theory Case Study of *Current Realities* as a means to (1) access and understand the historical colonizing experiences of Indigenous Oklahomans; (2) understand oppressions are still enacted upon Indigenous Oklahomans; and, (3) transform that enactment of colonization and oppression to achieve social justice through an accurate and comprehensive representation of Oklahoma history in public discourse and public schooling.

Data for the case study consisted of interview transcriptions, researcher notes, digital files or photos of artists’ work, public documents including but not limited to newspaper articles and newsletters, Internet websites, historical documents and literature, and verbal and written oral histories of Indigenous Oklahomans. I viewed the *Current Realities* show in Tulsa, Oklahoma and took researcher field notes on the artwork and the show, and gathered information from a total of 9 artists and community members involved in *Current Realities* exhibit and the

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<sup>1</sup> “Boomers” refers to those who pressured the U.S. government to open lands that were “not used” by tribal peoples for white occupation, and subsequently began attempts at illegal homesteading. “Sooners” refers to those who jumped borders illegally to enter the territory early, staking claims before the official start of the land run.

Oklahoma DADA artist collective. Formal interviews consisted of 1 to 1 ½ hour audio-taped interviews with 5 individuals at the interviewees' home or other preferred location; two interviews were through conversations with 2 individuals at the interviewees' home and a coffee shop; and communications with 3 individuals were conducted in written question and answer via email conversations. These variations in interviewing technique and documentation followed Indigenous methodologies and appropriateness (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Smith, 1999). In honor of validity and reliability, the manuscript was sent to each participant for congruence with representation of their voice and intentions. Changes were made to the manuscript in relation to their feedback.

### *Silenced and Ignored, but not Forgotten: An Historical Overview*

In the quest to acquire more land for non-Native occupation and as a method to contain and control Indigenous Peoples, many tribes were violently ripped from their homelands across the U.S. and forcefully removed to Indian Territory, what is today the state of Oklahoma. Treaties and agreements for removal guaranteed the new homelands would be the possession of tribal nations in perpetuity. However, through the ideology and policies of Manifest Destiny, the new homelands were quickly coveted and invaded by non-Natives. The U.S. federal government sanctioned the allotment of Indian land through the 1887 General Allotment Act and the various land runs, land lotteries, and sealed bidding of land in the western half of the state (beginning in 1889 and concluding in 1906), authorizing white occupancy. Indian land was communal property until the Allotment Act enforced the privatization of land through individual ownership. Coercion, deceit, and greed for land plagued allottees. Parman (1979) reported that by 1908, approximately 60% of allottees who received fee simple titles had lost their land. An underlying motive of the Act was the forced assimilation of Indian people into a White value system of private property ownership. The combined force of assimilation and the legal assigning of individual parcels was a calculated method of divesting Indigenous Peoples from the land.

After the designation of the western half of Indian Territory as "Oklahoma Territory" by the U.S. government, plans were executed to join the two territories into a single state. The tribes and many non-Native occupants of the remaining Indian Territory protested. A convention was held in 1905, delegates developed a constitution for the state of Sequoyah that would exist independently from the proposed state of Oklahoma, made from Oklahoma Territory. The State of Sequoyah was to be comprised of forty-eight counties with representation of four at-large congressmen. Republicans fought an Indian state because it would be Democratic and because of the loss of control of natural resources the tribal nations possessed. Republican U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt signed the bill forming the single state of Oklahoma on June 16, 1906 (Debo 1940/1991; Hegewood, Paige & Littlefield, 2005), extinguishing the reality of an Indian state. On November 16, 1907, Oklahoma became the forty-sixth state in the union.

Historically, Native people were legally classified as wards of the U.S. government; legislation at the federal and state levels furthered that control. In Oklahoma, the Five Civilized Tribes Act of 1908 extended federal “protection” to Natives one-half or more Indian blood—rendering them “incompetent” to handle their own affairs. All minors were removed from federal protection and delegated to Oklahoma county probate courts for the assignment of guardians to supervise their wardship status and property holdings. The guardian system operated to exploit, harm, and kill Native children through a wide-spread system of political plunder. Following allotment, a few Native people obtained immense wealth from the discovery of oil on their allotment land, but most never benefitted from the oil or gas royalties due to losing their money to the white guardian class, attorneys, and Oklahoma probate courts; some were killed for their resources (Debo, 1940/1991).

Although this history is rarely discussed in public discourse or public school curriculum, Native families and tribal communities remember and live with the residue of past oppressions. This is the history that framed the counterstory to the Centennial celebration discourse and was reflected in the OklaDADA artists’ artwork in the *Current Realities* exhibit.

#### *OklaDADA and Current Realities: Artists Speaking Back Through Art*

The OklaDADA artist collective originated in Fall 2005, as a group of artists forming a network “to disseminate information regarding opportunities within various artistic venues, facilitating entrance into the broader art community beyond the Indian art classification” (S. Wasserman, personal communication, February 7, 2010). A prime concern for the group was the instance of many Oklahoma Indian artists leaving the state and their tribal communities to seek wider markets for their art (H. Ahtone, personal communication, July 8, 2008; N. Burgess, personal communication, February 3, 2010).

The show, *Current Realities*, developed, in part, in response to a particular Oklahoma Centennial Commission sponsored project, the *Centennial Land Run Monument*. The commissioned sculpture by Paul Moore depicted the 1889 land run in which “settlers raced—on horseback, in wagons, and even on foot—to claim a parcel of the frontier to homestead” (Reynolds, 2007, p. 90). Placed on the Bricktown Canal in downtown Oklahoma City, only a short distance away from where the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum (AICCM) is being built, the sculpture is “the single largest work ever planned for installation in the United States” (Reynolds, 2007, p. 90) and features 45 large bronze pieces spanning 365 feet. Completion is expected in 2015 at an estimated cost of 6 million dollars (Downtown OKC, Inc., 2006, p. 4).

Oklahoma Centennial Commission Executive Director, J. Blake Wade, referred to the monument as recreating “the great spirit, bravery and determinism of Oklahoma’s early

settlers, many of whom overcame obstacles of epic proportions to create a new life and a new state” (“Centennial Land Run Monument,” 2007, p. 2). Representative Ernest Istook proclaimed the monument as “the defining symbol of Oklahoma’s heritage, and of the people who came here to live out their hopes and dreams and stake their claim in America” (Casteel, 2001, para. 7). Strikingly absent from discussion was who the land belonged to on which claims were staked, or references to the destruction that occurred for the 39 tribal nations upon the U.S. federal government’s opening of Indian lands to non-Natives.<sup>2</sup>

OklaDADA artists Nocona Burgess (Comanche) and Brent Greenwood (Chickasaw/Ponca) questioned the monument’s funding and lack of funding for Native art work of equal scale. They also spoke back to the grand-narrative of “Oklahoma’s pioneer heritage” radiated by the Land Run Monument. Burgess commented, “I want to epoxy about a thousand little plastic Indians underneath the sculpture, as if they are getting run over” (personal communication, February 3, 2010). Greenwood added:

Nocona and I joked about how we could sabotage the land run monument, all in a non-destructive manner of course. We felt since there was no Native representation in this area, we were going to spray paint white lines of Indian silhouettes around the monument—just like the white chalk lines of old murder scenes. (personal communication, February 15, 2008)

Burgess and Greenwood’s imagery of action speak back to the monument’s grand-narrative of pioneer heroics. They voice the Native experience that has gone missing in the space, both historically and figuratively, of the monument.

A few Native artists were involved in Centennial projects such as posters and the centennial stamp, however, funding equal to the land run monument was not awarded for Native-oriented artwork through Centennial projects funding or other state or federal monies. Brent Greenwood was involved with a proposed mural project in the Oklahoma City Bricktown area, near the land run monument, however, the tribal artists’ mural was rejected by the Bricktown Commission and dropped from discussion. “What upsets me is that the Bricktown

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<sup>2</sup> To relocate many Native Peoples to Oklahoma, the U.S. government negotiated treaties with the various nations, such as the Treaty of Medicine Lodge in 1867 with the Kiowa and Comanche. Under the conditions of the treaty, the Kiowas and Comanches ceded a large parcel of their traditional lands in exchange for a smaller parcel of land in southwestern Indian Territory. As a result of the Dawes Act and the allotment of tribal lands, “excess” lands were planned for sale to non-Native homesteaders. This move violated the treaty which mandated an approval of any land cessions by  $\frac{3}{4}$  of adult males. Lone Wolf, a Kiowa leader in what came to be the Supreme Court case of *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock* (1903), sued U.S. federal officials; Lone Wolf lost the case. The Court ruled that Congress had plenary power and could abrogate treaties—meaning that terms and conditions, or promises to tribes, could be altered without the consent of the tribes. This remains a landmark case in Indian law (Hauptman, 1992; Prucha 2000). With the blessing of the U.S. judicial system, treaties and agreements were broken with other tribal nations on the road toward Oklahoma statehood.

Commission didn't even want to work with the artists to create a cohesive mural that addressed our diverse and rich Native heritage" (personal communication, February 15, 2008). Greenwood reasoned that because the near-by state capitol dome was crowned with "The Guardian," a 17-foot tall sculpture by Seminole/Creek artist and Oklahoma Senator Enoch Kelly Haney, the importance of having additional Native influenced public works lessened.

J. Blake Wade asserted that Native concerns of Centennial inaccuracy and insensitivity was "unfounded" (Ervin, 2007, para. 28); "[W]e've really tried to be sensitive to *our* Native Americans and their well-being" [emphasis mine] (para. 35). Wade stated, "That's why we're calling it a 'commemoration' instead of a 'celebration'.... We're not trying to change history. We're trying to make sure they're a part of this commemoration" (Ervin, 2007, para. 29, 31). A simple survey, however, of the Oklahoma Centennial Commission's website or Wade's own words in interviews and other promotional outlets revealed that "commemoration" was rarely used—"celebration" was the term of choice and tourism marketing.

Discussing the marking of the Oklahoma Centennial, Shoshana Wasserman, a member of Thlopthlocco Tribal Town and Muscogee (Creek) Nation and Director of Marketing and Public Relations for the AICCM, felt that a revision of history occurred, "on a grander scale...state-wide, it was a celebration and there was a re-writing of accurate history (personal communication, July 10, 2008). Taking that further, Heather Ahtone (Chickasaw/Choctaw), a creative word artist, art historian, curator, and founding OklaDADA member asks, "Why would anybody in power want their history to be rewritten or analyzed if in the analysis they lose some of that political control, they lose some of that propaganda that they're able to teach children?" (personal communication, July 8, 2008). The grand-narrative of heroic homesteaders was fore-fronted while Native experience was ignored and lost within a history translated into a pioneer myth. Nocona Burgess was critical of the grand-narrative put forth in the Centennial as well,

I think people have the right to celebrate if they want to, but not at the expense of the truth. It is important to acknowledge the real history and not the "Disney" version. The Land Run is history, but it was also taking away people's land. (personal communication, February 3, 2010)

Discussions centering on the media coverage of the Moore's Land Run sculpture; the lack of support of the Native art community; and, most importantly, the absence of the Native perspective in the Centennial, prompted OklaDADA to develop the *Current Realities* exhibit. According to Heather Ahtone,



The whole exhibit was kind of speared on by the feelings about this large sculpture.... The marker is about the taking of the land and not statehood. It's all about whose story gets to be told. (personal communication, July 8, 2008)

Shoshana Wasserman and Richard Ray Whitman, a Yuchi/Muscogee Creek Nation artist, actor, and photographer, described the exhibit as a proactive approach to having a Native presence in the Centennial discourse (S. Wasserman, personal communication interview, July 10, 2008; R.R. Whitman, personal communication, August, 1, 2008). Wasserman was an active community member with OklaDADA and supporter and facilitator in the beginning discussions leading to the *Current Realities* show. She describes *Current Realities*' origins as a point of "dreaming and conceiving"—"it became bigger than life" (personal communication, July 10, 2008), that is, it emerged into its own through the collective actions of the artists and their allies. Ahtone reflects:

When the show was hung and everything was brought into that, it was like the first bloom of what that next century could be about—the next century of strong political statements, an American narrative, and strong sense of tradition and rootedness. (personal communication, July 8, 2008)

The *Current Realities: A Dialogue with the People* exhibit opened<sup>3</sup> November 9, 2007, purposefully a week before the marking of the 100 year anniversary because "We wanted our voice to proceed the celebration of statehood" (S. Wasserman personal communication, July 8, 2008). Drawing attention to an Indigenous presence in today's Oklahoma and claiming that space, more than 60 OklaDADA artists<sup>4</sup> presented their work to address, speak back to, and create a dialogue regarding Oklahoma's history and present reality of the Indigenous community.

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<sup>3</sup> *Current Realities* opened November 9, 2007 and ran through December 21, 2007 in Oklahoma City. The show then moved to the Southwest Plains Indian Museum in Anadarko, Oklahoma. Some of the work was featured at the Living Arts of Tulsa Gallery, February 7-28, 2008, where I viewed the show.

<sup>4</sup> *Current Realities* artists had to be a Native American residing in Oklahoma or had to be from an Oklahoma tribe; creations had to be new and address the Centennial historical moment.



Figure 1

Brent Greenwood contributed a historically-based and powerfully symbolic painting *Not a Designated Centennial Project* [see Figure 1] for the show. One of the two Native men, seated on the ground, is a “real” person; the second is a black “shadow” person with the number “89” stenciled in the middle of his back representing the removal of the Indian as a result of the 1889 land run. Above them in a clouded sky is the Oklahoma Centennial logo with an image of a little white boy with a cartoonish, green, yellow, and red feather headdress on staring back at them. Off in the distance to the right of the two men are oil wells with the lyrics to “Oklahoma Rising”<sup>5</sup> rising overhead. Brent explained additional concepts integrated into his piece, which provides a counter-story to the revelry of the statehood Centennial.

<sup>5</sup> *Oklahoma Rising*, by country singer/songwriters, and Oklahomans, Vince Gill and Jimmy Webb, was the theme song of the Oklahoma Centennial.

I wanted to reference ideas that overwhelmed me during the whole Centennial celebration. I started by prominently displaying the year that Oklahoma was officially declared Indian Territory, 1834. It was said that the “Red Man” would have a new land for him to hunt and live in peace “for as long as the grass grows and the river flows.” Well, we all know what happened a short 55 years later. From that, I felt it important to hint at some of the one-sided lyrics to the song, “Oklahoma Rising,” because it seemed to be the theme song for 2007. My narrative was not meant to be resentful but rather educational. It is necessary to share our side of history to promote awareness. (personal communication, February 15, 2008)

Kenneth Greenwood (Otoe-Missouria) and Kimberly Rodriguez (Muscogee (Creek)/Oglala Sioux/Mexican) created two photography collages for *Current Realities* in a take-off of the block of photos at the opening to *The Brady Bunch* television show; this family, however, was aptly named *The Braidy Bunch* (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

In the first collage, Alice, pictured in the middle of the family, is posed as the domineering Bureau of Indian Affairs official and the different Braidy family members portray various dysfunctions resulting from generations of oppression and cultural stripping which has instigated the presence of alcoholism, domestic abuse, child neglect, and victimhood. In the

second collage, Alice, representing federal powers, has been ousted, resulting in happy, healthy, and successful family members. Kennetha emphasized that

People should know that Indians are making a big contribution whether they are becoming doctors or lawyers; that we're choosing not to be the victims. We're looking for a better future. We know the past, we lived through it, suffered through many things. We don't want our children to forget, but we want them to have a better future, a better outlook. (personal communication, July 7, 2008)



Figure 3

America Meredith (Cherokee Nation) painted *The End of the End of the Trail* (see Figure 3), portraying “contemporary Natives pulling down a statue of the *End of the Trail*, a la Oertel's *Pulling Down the Statue of King George III*” (personal communication, January 31, 2008). The *End of the Trail* statue, created by James Earle Fraser in 1915, depicts a lone warrior, lance in hand, leaning over from exhaustion on his equally downtrodden horse. This image has been utilized to “symbolize” Native people; however, it is a symbol of defeat and

extinction. Meredith's painting instead symbolizes the rejection of the *End of the Trail* image, in acknowledgement of the existence and vibrancy of Native Peoples and cultures.

A large sculpture installation, *Dirt Poor, Oil Rich*, by Richard Ray Whitman (see Figure 4), stunningly symbolized the exploitation and destruction of Oklahoma Indian people and land due to greed for oil. In this installation, Whitman posed the body of a Native person lying face down in red earth while an oil pump extracted oil from the person's back.



Figure 4. Richard Ray Whitman: *Dirt Poor, Oil Rich*, sculpture installation  
Photo by Vicki Monks, courtesy of Richard Ray Whitman.

Along with the sculpture, Whitman presented viewers with a written story telling of Moses Bruno (Citizen Band Potawatomi) and Mary Fish Bazquez (Muscogee Creek), both whom lived in dire poverty while their oil-rich allotment land leased by the federal government to non-Indians produced riches for the lessees, not for Bruno or Bazquez.

The opening of the exhibit was deemed a success—approximately 500 were in attendance. Ahtone said of the exhibit:

Nobody really knew if it would be good or too hot, if it was going to be so angry...but it was a little of everything. It was a little of celebration, and a little bit of cultural

specific references, and it was a little bit of political statement and a little bit humor. But all of it is our reality. (personal communication, July 8, 2008)

Wasserman strongly asserts that, “the thing that was the most rewarding about this exhibition was not necessarily the artwork that was generated, it was the dialogue that occurred between Native and non-Native, between people of different tribes and experiences, urban and rural, traditional and contemporary – that was remarkable....It wasn’t just about a visual dialogue, it was about an actual dialogue because Native artists felt they were being left out of the greater dialogue (personal communication, July 10, 2008).

OklaDADA’s purpose of the show had been realized—to create a space for dialogue. Indigenous Oklahomans had a presence in the Centennial on their terms. Ahtone assessed OklaDADA’s actions in the Centennial moment:

The common commitment was the need for an opportunity for the Native community to have an artistic voice. We speak through our art, that’s our tradition, that’s our history and that’s how our history is recorded and we needed to document this point (personal communication, July 8, 2008).

#### *Utilizing Art to Speak Truth to History and Current Reality*

Saltman (2009) asserts the fight for social justice ensues as “people and groups struggle over the representation and retelling of history and that these representational contests over the meanings of the past are inextricably tied to broader material and symbolic struggles, forces, and structures of power” (p. 1). Aside from the artwork created for *Current Realities*, some artists continually challenge and resist the disenfranchisement of Native experience and history through their work—Brent Greenwood describes his work as “social commentary on canvas” (personal communication, February 15, 2008). Because accurate histories are seldom reflected in mainstream media, America Meredith uses her medium as a means to counter historical inaccuracies or silences. She finds that fine art holds a more central, relevant place in communicating about history among Native Americans than it does for mainstream Americans. Although she sees change as more Natives are filming their own documentaries and movies to provide the counter-narrative, the medium of painting provides those who might not have access to expensive technical equipment to have access to a paintbrush and canvas to communicate that history (personal communication, February 8, 2008).

Regarding Native history, Heather Ahtone asks,

Who gets to write history? Whose history? Every individual has a history and sometimes those collective histories have shared elements that can be recorded as a larger history but when we read history books, how often are we seeing

that Native perspective included? Not too often, not too often even now.  
(personal communication, July 8, 2008)

The artists' work in *Current Realities* became public text challenging that version of Oklahoma history distorted for commercialization and tourism purposes, which denied exposure of truths to all citizens and rendered false "happy endings." As the art became text, all Oklahomans—children, youth, and adults—had the opportunity to read the historical landscape in ways often denied them, to understand the injustice of federal and state laws and actions by prominent and everyday citizens that executed that injustice onto the Native Peoples of our state, carrying oppression and racism into the present. The art from *Current Realities*, specifically, and work crafted by Indigenous artists, in general, produces for us culturally-contextualized text which provides a heavily nuanced history amplifying the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous Oklahomans' stories which ultimately belong to and are the responsibility of all citizens of Oklahoma.

### Conclusion

Critical Race Theorist Cheryl Harris (1993) declares that "...the settlement and seizure of Native American land supported White privilege through a system of property rights in land in which the 'race' of the Native Americans rendered their first possession right invisible and justified conquest" (p. 1721). The public and promotional discourse of the Centennial continued the protection and advancement of white privilege, serving as evidence of the continuance of colonization.

What is evident in the work of the OklaDADA collective and the artists who participated in *Current Realities* is the resistance and contestation of the Centennial, providing a counterstory that confronts and problematizes the grand-narrative of the land runs and the "settling" of the state by "pioneers" (Greenwood's *Not a Designated Centennial Project*), the illicit taking of natural resources such as oil and exploitation of and harm to Native people, (Whitman's *Dirt Poor, Oil Rich*), and the positioning of Indians as static, existing only in the past (Meredith's *End of the End of the Trail*). The artists instead illustrate Native Peoples' capacity to guide their own destinies (Greenwood and Rodriguez's *Braidy Bunch*). What is also evident in their work from the heightened consciousness the art contributes, is the promise of possibility—the transformation of the visual and verbal landscape of Oklahoma. Emphasizing this point, Bell (1997) emphasizes that social justice "involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole" (p. 3). Destroying the myths and silences directed toward Native citizens in Oklahoma reshapes public perception and historical reality. Heather Ahtone addresses our possibility, but also our responsibility to history:

History...has the potential of providing great insight to the present when we open ourselves up to those unwritten experiences. But more than historical inaccuracies are the inaccuracies of our contemporary experiences—these we must speak now. We can't rewrite history, but we can change what history is written now. (personal communication, February 11, 2008)

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **Pens and Ploughshares: The Historical Use of Art by African-Descended Women to Create Social Justice in the US Neo-Slavery Era**

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### **Abstract**

In the period after the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Plessy v. Ferguson*), “white” supremacy was codified and reinforced through law, custom, and mob violence. Despite this, African-descended women artists in the Western Hemisphere committed the revolutionary act of declaring, “I am; I am here; I am here remaking/reimagining the world you are destroying.” This chapter offers some of the lesser-known counter-narratives of these artists of the period between the late 1890s and the 1960s.

*The pen is mightier than the sword (Richelieu, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1839)*

*They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.  
(Isaiah 2:4 & Micah 4:3, New International Version)*

### **The Broad Socio-Political Context for Art-Making**

In the period from 1896 to 1965, African-descended women were in a war for their very survival and many used art – literature, dance, song, drama, music, painting, sculpture, etc. – to fight back.

Between 1846 and 1946, the United States government participated in over 130 wars and violent struggles<sup>1</sup> most directed toward North American populations and populations that became part of the ascending American Empire (e.g. Collier, 1993). At the midpoint of this century came the legal codification of “white” supremacy in the U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation even in public accommodations (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 1896).

This codification served to empower local mob acts of violence to reinforce “white” supremacy in every corner of the nation that exceeded the reach and resources of the federal and state governments. At the apex of this period, every institution in U.S. society promoted the idea that people of color and women were inferior to “white” men in ways both mundane and elaborate. Through shunning, sundown laws that insisted that people of color leave town before sundown (Loewen, 2005), limited (or non-existent) voting rights, derogatory public imagery, murder, torture, and rape, and other means, the power structure fiercely asserted its

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<sup>1</sup> This number is a conservative estimate. Various sources of information include major declared wars (domestic and international), domestic conflicts including wars against American Indians, extrajudicial unprosecuted mob violence such as documented lynchings of African Americans and Mexican Americans, and government-approved violence against Asian and Asian American workers and landowners. Collier (1993) provides a scholarly source of data. Some popular sources of information include History central.com Instances of use of United States armed forces abroad, 1798-2004 From the Library of Congress, retrieved from <http://www.historycentral.com/USEFOFORCE.html> on December 18, 2009; Wikipedia: Timeline of U.S. military operations [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_United\\_States\\_military\\_operations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_United_States_military_operations) retrieved on December 18, 2009; Yahoo Answers.com : How many wars has the U.S. been involved in? <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080930181743AApFxbL>, retrieved December 18, 2009; About.com: History Matters American History Timeline American Involvement in Wars from Colonial Times to the Present <http://americanhistory.about.com/library/timelines/bltimelineuswars.htm>, retrieved December 18, 2009; PoetPatriot.com: Timelines of Liberty: <http://www.poetpatriot.com/timeline/tmwar-american.htm>, retrieved December 18, 2009

own legitimacy. Bolstering these assertions was the beginning of decline among European empires (particularly the British, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires) and the rise in American economic power globally (Campion, 2010). American Protestant men believed themselves to rule the world and needed to insure that the rest of us knew it.

The most significant way to reinforce superiority was through economic means: to force people of color and women to grovel for daily food, clothing, shelter, and long-term sustainability. Certainly segregationist legislation, the second rise of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings and race riots, sharecropping, the racial discrimination of labor unions, sexism and the lack of legal reliable birth control contributed significantly to conditions of poverty and oppression. For African-descended women, however, more ominous forces were at play.

In his groundbreaking research, Blackmon (2008) documents the “inexplicably labored advance of African Americans in U.S. society in the century between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s” as a direct result of their re-enslavement by U.S. businesses, large and small. Through the use of slave mines and forced labor camps operated by state and county governments, large corporations, small-time entrepreneurs, and provincial farmers -- and fed by hundreds of thousands of indigent African American men captured and imprisoned on the flimsiest of charges -- mines, lumber camps, quarries, farms and factories thrived (p. 6-7). “Repeatedly, the timing and scale of surges in arrests appeared more attuned to rises and dips in the need for cheap labor than any demonstrable acts of crime” and “the record is replete with episodes in which public leaders faced a true choice between a path toward complete racial repression or some degree of modest civil equality, and emphatically chose the former (p. 7).” It was on these re-enslaved men that the majority of African-descended women and children were expected to depend for their own livelihoods from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1951, when the U.S. Congress finally passed explicit statutes making any form of slavery in the United States an indisputable crime (p. 381), and in the absence of their own voting and economic rights.

As these women struggled to feed themselves and their families, they lived in a scientific and popular culture that derived scholarly glory and entertainment from the denigration of these same women. Termed child-like, immoral, savage, animalistic, and the prime suppliers of the “marketplace of the flesh – slave, sexual, and service economies (Collins, 2002, p. 41), African-descended women were presumed alien to the Victorian ideal “true womanhood” embracing “white” women (Giddings, 1984, pp. 79-83), an image that persisted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of fictional and marketing characters such as the fat, dark-skinned, emasculating mammy, the accommodating aunt jemima, the fair-skinned tragic mulatto, and the cinnamon-colored temptress in their various permutations in the advertisements, books,

magazines, movies, music, radio and television shows of the period only served to make the daily experience of African-descended women even more oppressive (Bogle, 2009).

While African Americans actively resisted racial oppression in creative and adaptable ways – including creating and joining civil rights organizations, sitting in, sending their children to school rather than the fields, going on strike, boycotting, drinking from white water fountains, staring their oppressors in the eye, speaking half-truths in public, documenting full truths in Black-owned media –

African American resistance to white supremacy was costly.... [Weighing] the unlikely prospects of success with the certainties of violent reprisals... African Americans knew that the price of resistance could be their lives. (Chafe, Gavins, Korstad, Ortiz, Parrish, Ritterhouse, Roberts, & Waligora-Davis, 2001, pp. 268 - 270).

In the face of economic, physical, and cultural violence, African-descended women in the Western hemisphere had few defenses in the war against them. Laboring as they were behind the plows and other sharecropping implements, the sewing machines of the sweatshops, the hot stoves, washpots and toilets of “white” women, and the desks of their underemployment, African-descended women had not much more than their readily available imaginations and the weapons of pens, paintbrushes, songs and dances.

This article highlights some of the lesser-known counter-narratives of these artists in the period between the late 1890s and the 1960s. In some cases, the artists are well known but their lesser-known works provide insight to the consciousness of African-descended women. In other cases, the chapter attempts to resurrect artists who do not yet (and may never) penetrate the popular consciousness by, for example, appearing on commercial Black History Month calendars representing “Our Best and Brightest Artists.” In all cases, these women stand in forbidden spaces, against the laws of their time, defiant.

### ***Those Multi-Tasking Race Women***

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw African-descended people at their lowest ebb in their pursuit of social, economic and political justice. Scholar-activist W.E.B. DuBois and historian John Hope Franklin widely perceived this period as the nadir of Black history (Shockley, 1988, p. 277). Similarly, the period between 1920 and 1960 is considered the nadir of feminist activity, following the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granting women the right to vote and the major decline of (“white”) women’s organizations (Guy-Sheftall, p. 77). African-descended women of the period provide a powerful counter-narrative.

In 1896, the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court re-encoded the second-class citizenship of people of color, African-descended women reinvigorated the broad movement for social justice with the creation of middle-class racial uplift, pan-African nationalist, and working-class socialist clubs and organizations. Not content to stand idly by as government stripped away the hard-won victories of the Civil War and Reconstruction years, and disappointed by the failure of Black male leaders to forcefully defend them (Giddings, p. 83; Brown, 2006), these women theorists and activists marshaled every bit of education, financial wherewithal, wit, social power, and courage they had to save the entire race.

Prominent African-descended feminist thinkers of the era – all of whom were orators and activists, in addition to their chosen profession – included Anna Julia Cooper (educator), Julia A.J. Foote (first ordained woman deacon of the African Methodist Episcopal church), Nannie Helen Burroughs (educator), Gertrude Bustill Mossell (journalist), Mary Church Terrell (educator), Ida B. Wells-Barnett (journalist), Sadie T.M. Alexander (lawyer), Amy Ashwood-Garvey (writer, organizer), Amy Jacques-Garvey (editorial writer), Claudia Jones and Grace Campbell (Communist Party organizers), Elizabeth Hendrickson (writer), and Lucille Randolph (union organizer). They organized millions of African-descended women in the U.S. and Caribbean (Giddings, 1984; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; James, 2003; McCarthy & McMillian, 2003; Taylor, 2003).

Women such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper gained prominence for both their fiction and non-fiction writings, the latter being one of the most popular and prolific Black writers, orators and journalists of her day, male or female. In 1859, she became the first Black woman to publish a short story, “The Two Offers,” “a feminist narrative serialized in the *Anglo American*, which tells the story of two women, one who [chooses marriage], and the other who remains unmarried while pursuing the higher calling of [writing about] racial uplift (Guy-Sheftall, p. 39).” She went on to produce four novels, several volumes of poetry, countless stories, essays and letters. Passionate about the special needs of Black women throughout her career, she was present at the 1896 founding of the National Association of Colored Women and eventually became its vice president. Both Dunbar-Nelson and Harper were emblematic of the many African-descended women who merged their public activism with their art-making.

However, this choice was more than a philosophical posture. Except for a handful of the formally educated, middle-class (and often married) women of African descent, it was nearly impossible to make a living solely as an artist; the demands of capitalism (flavored with racism and sexism) forced a higher percentage of Black women of all classes into the market labor force than any other group of women. Nevertheless, Black women were compelled to create art. Why? And, what was their aesthetic? To what extent was it shaped by their social,

economic, and political reality? Did it differ from that of mainstream artists? The next two sections of the chapter explore these questions and some of the African-descended women who made art during the period.

### ***The Evolving African Aesthetic***

Pasteur & Toldson (1982) attribute the expressive quality of Black culture to five complementary and interactive elements: depth of feeling, naturalistic attitudes, stylized rendition, poetic and prosaic vernacular, and expressive movement. These qualities manifest in all of the art forms -- music, dance, literature, visual art, and theater arts – and serve to define the authenticity of African arts in varying degrees over the entire course of the period of study.

Yet, African American arts have not existed in isolation and most artists could literally not afford to live only in their imaginative spaces and ignore the world surrounding them. Yearwood (1987) presents two dominant forces influencing artists of the period: social realism and modernism.

To counteract African characters that had become the butt of a national joke in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “coon” songs, the “darky” jokes, and the raging success of films celebrating the Ku Klux Klan such as *The Birth of a Nation* (Shockley, p. 283), social realist art developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that

...defined Black life proudly...[depicting] certain ideal views of [B]lack life through characters and situations that would serve as models for [B]lack aspirations, despite the social circumstances of racial discrimination. Art was to function as a vehicle for building racial consciousness, consolidating a sense of community, and solidifying a sense of identity among Afro-Americans based on a middle-class model (Yearwood, p. 143).

Drawing on a variety of dominant values in African American life, including “a strong belief in the redemptive powers of Christianity; the moral right of the democratic ideal; DuBois’s hope of a Talented Tenth; Booker T. Washington’s doctrine of social accommodation; and even Marcus Garvey’s cultural and political rejection of Eurocentric<sup>2</sup> values (p. 139), “the

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<sup>2</sup> In his 1903 essay published in *The Negro Problem*, W.E.B. DuBois defined the “Talented Tenth” as a philosophy of educating a subset of African Americans in the manner of European university liberal arts education to uplift the masses of African Americans; in his 1895 speech at the Atlanta Cotton States and



artists of the period were expected to uphold the stoicism and dignity of aspiring African Americans.

This posture was often at the expense of any themes involving working class, poor or rural African Americans. Yearwood (1987) suggests that this “may have been a response to the over-popularization of the blackface minstrels and the low-comedy caricatures of poor rural [B]lacks as ludicrous and colorful zip coons” (p. 143). Just as easily, it could have been due to the class biases of middle-class, educated African Americans, a number of which descended from proud, never-enslaved, land-owning people. Despite the social status of being called a “race” man or woman, who promoted racial uplift, their charge was to look forward to equality with mainstream society, not look back at the ignorance and poverty of the majority of African Americans living in or migrating northward from the agricultural South.

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African American modernists

sought to separate their work from the philosophy and values of a conservative middle class Black leadership. They deliberately reject[ed] the humanism and stoicism of social realism... by [expressing] the full spectrum of economic, cultural, political, and social aspects of historical and contemporary Afro-American experience.... [They looked] inward, celebrating historical roots, and refusing to engage in self-denial for the sake of assimilation... (p. 144).

In addition, artists began to assert

art as a medium for conveying the soul of Afro-American life rather than as a means for direct and overt political action (pp. 146-47).

Using the folk sources and expressions of working-class, urban Black life as the base, modernist artists sought to explore the universal human condition through the Black perspective.

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International Exposition, Booker T. Washington defined “social accommodation” as the masses of African Americans being patient for political rights and equality while focusing their educational and economic attention on vocational and manual endeavors; in the 1910’s and 20’s Marcus Garvey promoted Black nationalism, consisting of unity, pride in African cultural heritage and autonomy, including African Americans returning to the continent of Africa, as a rejection of American and European racism.

At the same time, Collins (2002) identifies a visual paradox in African American aesthetic thought that spanned the 60-plus years of the period: a concern with visual culture matched by a lack of interest in the work of Black visual artists. She attributes its beginnings to W.E.B. DuBois in his 1903 classic *Souls of Black Folks* when he “privileg[ed] [B]lack music and negat[e] [B]lack material and visual art,” and subsequently failed to include visual artists in his various scholarly symposia. This custom continued through scholars in African American Studies who “routinely devalued [B]lack visual production either openly or through process of benign neglect (p.1).” Black music, especially, but also dance and letters have always been “touted for [their] power, originality, and genius (p. 2),” but visual arts have oddly been disregarded, given the passionate concern with which Black scholars and activists have struggled against the mainstream visual culture and its racist depictions of African Americans, and a “belief that increased control of the visual sphere would aid struggles for equality and [B]lack liberation.” According to Collins, this was as much true during the New Negro movement of the 1920s (often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance) as during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The omission of visual artists from the ... conversation on how “Negroes are painted” rendered invisible those who actually worked most directly with paint (p. 4).

Within this aesthetic swirl, African-descended women wrote, danced, sang, composed, acted, and even painted and sculpted. Much like the sentiments of Black Arts Movement leader Larry Neal, these women

did not see the arts as capable of liberating [B]lack people on their own, [but] did believe that their ability to provide vision and cohesion made them a necessary component of a successful revolution (Collins, p. 5).

### ***African-Descended Women Artists***

The women of the period largely embraced the African and American aesthetic and politics of their time, if no more than to declare a place for themselves in a public sphere designed to make them invisible. Best-known are the singers such as blues queen Bessie Smith, jazz divas Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, and classical singers Madame Evanti and Marian Anderson. Dancers, from the ornamental chorus girls of jazz clubs to the scholar-choreographer Katherine Dunham, were publicly prominent. Actors -- particularly those who worked against the prevailing Hollywood stereotypes of African women, as did musician and

composer Hazel Scott and Lena Horne<sup>3</sup> (or who subversively undermined them, as did Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters) -- entertained and uplifted the hopes of the masses of Black people in the United States and the Caribbean (Bogle, 2009). Visual artists such as Augusta Savage, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Selma Burke, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, and Edmonia Lewis maintained fruitful (and in some cases, long) careers in the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

However, Black women writers -- poets, novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters -- were by far the largest group of artists during the period.

A good bit of the writing expressed a commitment to protest themes and ‘uplift movements’ that

... resulted in the literary lovers adopting a social conservative view of literature... social equality, political rights, and cultural parity with the broader white society...[where] art was a form of protest to be used in the fight for full racial justice (Johnson, p. 490).

Some of the better known writers include but are not limited to: the afore-mentioned Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson (host of a weekly salon of cultural leaders), the influential editor of the NAACP’s national publication *The Crisis* Jessie Redmon Fauset, writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Angelina Weld Grimke, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Dorothy West, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Margaret Walker, Paule Marshall and Lorraine Hansberry (e.g., Shockley, 1988; Johnson, 1980; Hull, 1988).

Pauline E. Hopkins was the first Black woman to publish a novel at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Contending forces: A romance illustrative of Negro life, North and South* (1900). Judged “the most forceful protest novel written by a Black American woman prior to Ann Petry’s *The Street*,” the race-conscious Hopkins focused on post-Reconstruction lynchings, sexual abuses, and social and economic oppression, and preferred having a Black publishing company to issue her work. The lead character was

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<sup>3</sup> According to Bogle, “NAACP secretary Walter White took a personal interest in [Lena Horne’s] career...because [he] was convinced that [she] could alter the trend of Negroes in American movies (p. 127).”

a cultured middle-class Black woman who leads a comfortable life, is knowledgeable about the race, and wants to counter stereotypes of the Black woman's immorality (Shockley, pp. 277-278).

Twenty years later, Zara Wright wrote *Black and White Tangled Threads* and *Kenneth*, two melodramatic romance novels about the 19<sup>th</sup> century that sermonized for education to support race progress and accord.

Wright, like the rest of her female contemporaries, was more concerned with spinning propaganda than presenting a story with a valid plot and characters. This was the weakness in their fiction; nevertheless, their will to write must be acknowledged (Shockley, p. 280).

Countless poets, emerged during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but

it was not until Georgia Douglas Johnson published *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* that an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black woman poet gained more than a little attention (Shockley, p. 281),

due to her talent as well as her living in the east and her friendships with leading Black male literary figures. Douglas's work tended toward personal "women's themes," consistent with a drift away from

the restrictions often imposed on art and writing by the Black middle class... to demonstrate to both [B]lack and white Washington that art could help create community as well as liberate the individual (Johnson, p. 499).

Hull (1988) reports that,

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black cultural debates often eddied around the drama. The explosion of dark faces on Broadway (notably in the musicals of the 1920s) was paralleled by the development of serious drama in predominately Black colleges (Howard University in Washington DC was a major center) and the proliferation of plays about Blacks by famous "white" playwrights (Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" was perhaps the most celebrated) (p. xlviii).

Many believed that the stage was the best place to break away from the stereotypical depictions of African American life, and, Angelina Weld Grimke (in 1916), Alice Dunbar-Nelson (in 1918), and Mary Burrill (in 1919) all tried their hand at writing plays on important

themes (respectively, the lamentable condition of ten millions of colored citizens in this free republic, patriotism in the face of racial violence, and a woman's right to know about birth control).

Sponsored by the drama committee of the NAACP of Washington DC and wildly popular along the East Coast, Grimke's play, *Rachel*, was

reputed to have begun the 'actual history of drama by Negro authors' when it was presented in 1916 as 'one of the first dramas of Negro authorship performed by Negro actors (Shockley, 1988, p. 375).

It depicted a middle-class family that suffered dual lynchings and fled north, only to discover different forms of racial discrimination. Explicitly intended to provoke and enlighten, the play created so much controversy that it led angry members of the NAACP Drama Committee to found The Howard Players for "promoting the purely artistic approach and the folk-drama idea," with the purpose of serving as a counter to similar plays, characterized by Alain Leroy Locke as "puppets of protest and propaganda (Shockley, p. 375)."

While the better-known artists left a powerful imprint on the history of African-descended people and the struggle for social justice, the lesser-known artists and the lesser-known works of prominent artists are particularly interesting. In 1903, Pauline Hopkins – editor, novelist, playwright, and singer – "laid the foundation for a new Black journalism [and] aligned with a group of radical editors of protest journalism" to fight the social accommodationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington and fought to make the *Colored American Magazine* a truly literary journal that also countered the charges of "white" supremacy, even as it was largely financed by "whites" (Shockley, p. 292). In contrast to the dominant beauty and cultural standards that celebrated Europeans, poet Pauline Jane Thompson in 1900, scriptwriter Elaine Sterne in 1916, choreographer-anthropologist Pearl Primus in the 1940s and 1950s, and actor-dancer Beah Richards in the 1950s and 1960s actively researched and appreciated African aesthetics.

Thompson's 1900 poem, *The Muse's Favor*, asks the Muse to put aside the all-too familiar music of "Caucasia's daughters" and instead "exchange this old song staid/ for an equally deserving-/ the oft-slighted, Afric maids." In return, the Muse sings of the "fouly slighted Ethiope maid" and "her dark and misty curly hair/ in small, neat, braids entwineth fair/ like clusters of rich, shining jet.... (Shockley, pp. 308-309)."

To counteract the wildly popular film, *The Birth of a Nation*, several African Americans sought to challenge the viciously racist imagery by creating a Black film industry; in 1916, Elaine Sterne wrote the first known film script by an African American, for "Lincoln's

Dream,” a financial and artistic disaster, but the impetus for the creation of over 100 Black-owned film companies, including the most successful of all owned by Oscar Michaux (Bogle, p. 103- 116).

Trinidadian Primus researched the folk and traditional dances of the African continent, the Caribbean, and picked cotton in the American South to meticulously document the African movement and technique to share with others (Creque Harris, 1991). Beah Richards, best known as the mother of Sidney Poitier’s character in the 1967 film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, had a long, well-regarded history as a dignified, proudly dark-skinned stage and screen actor, as well as a poet who, in her 1951 poem *White Woman vs. Black Woman*, issued a feminist challenge to “white” women:

What will you do?  
Will you fight with me?  
White supremacy is your enemy and mine.  
So be careful when you talk with me;  
Remind me not of my slavery;  
I know it well.  
But rather tell me of your own.  
You’ve been seeing me as white supremacy  
Would have me be.  
But I will be myself  
(Richards, *The Black woman speaks*, 1968, p. 35)

Similarly, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in 1895 and Gwendolyn Brooks in 1968 offered audacious challenges to African American men. Harper’s poem “A Double Standard (p. 205)” argues for equal earthly forgiveness for women’s flaws:

I’m glad God’s ways are not our ways,  
He does not see as man;  
Within His love I know there’s room  
For those whom others ban...

No golden weights can turn the scale  
Of justice in His sight;  
And what is wrong in woman’s life  
In man’s cannot be right

Brooks's poem "The Mother (p. 461-62)" boldly asserts reproductive choice for Black women in the face of nationalists who perceived birth control and abortion as genocidal:

Abortions will not let you forget.  
You remember the children you got that you did not get,  
  
... if I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate...

Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved,  
I loved you all.

Perhaps the act of putting pen to paper was the easiest and most accessible way of making art for women who also had to work for a living. But, scholars continue to discover the myriad writers – both published and unpublished, famous and unheralded – who offered a range of ideas, visions, and stories about the realities and hopes for African descended women in an era when they were scarcely regarded as fourth-class citizens by the "white" men who dominated the political and economic arenas, the "white" women who often supervised them, and the men of color who were paid more for similar labor.

It is interesting to note the relative lack of evidence of visual artists during this period compared with the writers. Brundage (2003) refers to a

long-standing and conscious tactic of African American leaders and activists during the [post Civil War] era to use aural and visual means to reach the [B]lack masses, (p. 1369),

and suggests that this efficiency was due to the comparatively high rates of illiteracy and poverty among the newly emancipated people. However, by the period of legal racial segregation, many African American thought leaders exercised the visual paradox cited earlier (Collins, 2002) and ignored the value of visual arts in countering the demeaning images of African Americans, especially African-descended women. As a result, it is more difficult to find full stories of women visual artists, partly because there were fewer of them.

There were, of course, the countless women who quilted, designed clothing, whittled, and created other crafts associated with home making. Of these, the women of Gee's Bend, Alabama (Quilters Collective History, 2010) have the most extensively documented and

celebrated archive of their work. Their quilts are known as “story quilts” for the family and community histories they document.

The better known “fine” artists included sculptors Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller and Augusta Savage, painters Lois Mailou Jones and Alma Thomas, and Elizabeth Catlett (sculpting and wood prints), who comprised a very small universe: Fuller influenced Savage and actively mentored Jones, who subsequently mentored Catlett and Thomas. While W.E.B DuBois celebrated Fuller’s work in 1913 for effective chronicling of the Black experience, she declared an unwillingness to limit her work to “traditionally feminine themes or to African-American types” (Kerr, 1986). Though popular among African Americans for depicting heroic images of Black history, critics have often found her work to be derivative of her mentor, French sculptor Auguste Rodin, and therefore a “failure” as art (Wortek, 1982; Brundage, 2003, p. 1399).

Savage, on the other hand, boldly and consciously depicted African American themes, imagery, and African physiognomy in her sculptures and created a well-regarded studio during the Depression to provide art education to adults in Harlem, NY. She was commissioned to produce sculptures of the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey. Known as much for her teaching as for her own production, Savage eventually became discouraged by the financial struggles of making art for a living and produced very little for public consumption after the 1940s, though she continued to teach until her death (Bearden & Henderson, 1993).

Jones was considered the “grande dame of African American art” largely due to her 47-year career as an influential art educator at Howard University and the critical acclaim accorded to her paintings. Early in her career, French artist Cezanne influenced her work; mid-career, she was influenced by the New Negro Movement to use her African heritage as the theme of her work. Following her marriage to a Haitian graphic designer at the age of 48, her paintings became infused with Haitian themes and symbols. According to Laduke (1987), Jones’s work was largely free of political themes, except for a few collages and posters creating in the late 1960s (p.31); she was “tired of being considered only as a [B]lack painter (p. 32)” and preferred, instead, to be known as “an American painter who happens to be [B]lack (p. 32).”

Similarly, one of Jones’s students, Alma W. Thomas spent 71 of her 86 years in Washington, DC as an art educator and as a painter, and as a decided free spirit. Choosing to avoid marriage altogether, she said,

the young men I know cared nothing about art, nothing at all. And art was the only thing I enjoyed. So I have remained free. I paint when I feel like it. I didn’t have to



come home. Or I could come home late and there was nobody to interfere with what I wanted...that is what allowed me to develop (Fitzpatrick, 1982, pp. 103).

As an unmarried woman, she needed market employment, and spent over 35 years teaching working-class and poor children in DC's segregated schools, community organizations, and clubs, and middle-class African Americans at the art department at Howard University. She painted until the very end of her life, her works having been exhibited at major U.S. galleries.

Considered an iconoclast,

Thomas directed her life and career exactly as she wanted to do it, undeterred by what others might think [an] attitude [that] strengthened by her keen sense of her own identity and by her firm belief in hard work (p. 106).

As demanding as she was of herself, she was even more so of her students. Generally, African American teachers in public schools were perceived as

those [B]lack children who did not rebel. They accept uncritically all the assumptions of American education and American society...they believe that the individual has complete control over his own destiny and they deny the influences of class, racism, economics, etc. (p. 54).

Certainly, as a child of the Black upper-middle class, Thomas maintained an air of superiority in the face of white supremacy and African Americans who did not share her willingness to live up to her standards as a teacher and artist. Some African American parents resented what they perceived to be her elitism and a fear that she was practicing the kind of academic survival-of-the-fittest philosophy that dominated Black education of the time (p. 53), but she persuaded them that high academic and artistic standards led to liberation rather than extinction. Rather than worry about how she was perceived,

Alma was very secure about what she was doing... Alma didn't talk rhetoric, she proved it. She stayed for forty-some years and taught [B]lack kids. (Wilson, 1979, pp. 59-61).

Further evidence of her independence comes from her avoidance of participation in any movement or organization for racial uplift or feminism. "Freedom for Thomas was through art; and if she could be an artist without being a woman artist, or a [B]lack artist, that was her goal (Fitzpatrick, p. 105)." In response to the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement, she said,

Whatever must be expressed must be expressed in a concrete way. Those old [B]lack art guys are just mad at the white man and want to strike back at him. What those artists should be doing is educating themselves. You'd study what's going on today... you can't live off the Africans one thousand years ago...(Spellman, 1973, p. 71).

Her racial struggle was personal rather than collective and the goal was freedom of individual self-expression (Fitzpatrick, p. 105). Similarly, Thomas was not a feminist and did not think of herself in terms of the "liberated woman." When asked by a New York Times reporter if she felt bitterness about discrimination against women, she replied airily, "Everybody says I paint like a man anyway (Shirey, 1972)."

Of the five women, Catlett lived the longest; she died in 2012 in the Cuernavaca art community at the age of 97. Born in Washington, DC in 1919, Catlett became a citizen of Mexico in 1963 following her 16 years as an expatriate and political harassment by the U.S. government. Catlett stated in 1971 that

art is important only to the extent that it helps in the liberation of our people. It is necessary only at this moment as an aid to our survival (quoted in Lewis & Waddy, 1971, p. 107).

Ten years later she stated,

The big question for me as a [B]lack woman is how do I serve my people? What is my role? What form do I use, what content, what are my priorities? (Gouma-Peterson, 1983, p. 48).

These themes governed the entire body of Catlett's sculpting and wood print work, in the service of "four exploited groups – [B]lacks, Mexicans, women and poor people (Gouma-Peterson, p. 48)." Early on, she was renowned for her rigorous technical skill and formal discipline, yet not taken as seriously as an artist as her first husband, painter and printmaker Charles White. They were part of a group that perceived themselves heirs of the Harlem Renaissance artists with a similar drive to blend a social message with an abstract aesthetic (Gouma-Peterson, p. 49). But, it was not until she traveled to Mexico on a Rosenwald Grant in 1946, and subsequently married painter and printmaker Francisco Mora, that she found a way to be an artist, cultural and political activist, wife and mother. Of the five visual artists, she may have been the most "successful" in that she merged an African aesthetic (Pasteur & Toldson, 1982) defined by depth of feeling, naturalistic attitudes, stylized rendition, poetic and prosaic vernacular, and expressive movement, with refined technical skill, with socio-

political ideologies -- all while making a living for herself and her family and while consciously serving the liberation of African –descended communities.

Did the passion of these African-descended woman visual artists have to withstand greater humiliations than other artists? It is certainly the case that all of the arts have been historically marginalized within U.S.-style capitalist economy for the “white” men who sought to create; racism, sexism, and income needs were even greater barriers to the women and men of color in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who wanted to make art. It seems, in addition, that visual artists were not rewarded with as many outlets or patrons as singers, dancers, actors, or writers. As a result, it seems that the visual artists mentioned here were more likely to teach art as a way to supplement income and to share their craft, than was true of the writers, actors or singers.

Another notable difference between the African-descended visual artists and writers was the greater evidence among the former of formal training in their craft as a direct result of higher family income and education. Coming from middle-class or upwardly mobile backgrounds and having to struggle their entire lives for income and recognition from both the mainstream and their own communities, one wonders what compelled these African-descended women visual artists - or any artist - to create.

I argue that the compulsion was to save their very lives -- if not the souls of their entire community -- in a hostile world that wanted to keep them only sufficiently alive to serve the needs of “white” supremacy.

### **Conclusion**

People, women, and therefore, African-descended women, make art because they must. The vast majority of African-descended women artists in the first sixty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had only two choices: earn money following the mandates of mainstream and Black-owned commercial outlets, as club singers and dancers, as Hollywood servants or Oscar Michaux elites, as writers of romantic poems and stories, as creators of “white man’s art (Fitzpatrick, p. 105);” or attempt to earn money following the demands of Black male and female intellectuals and organizers to uplift the race, celebrate African-ness, rescue Black womanhood, and/or explicitly tear down “white” supremacy. And, sometimes these women soared above the noise to produce indisputably revolutionary art.

Despite this choice, African-descended women artists in the Western Hemisphere committed the revolutionary act of claiming space. In doing so the question is whether what they produced was art or propaganda, and if art, defined by what aesthetic --The stoic and heroic social realism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? The celebration of folk idioms in the modernism of

mid-century? The depth of feeling, naturalistic attitudes, stylized rendition, poetic and prosaic vernacular, and expressive movement defined by Pasteur and Toldson (1982) as a more “universal” Black aesthetic?

The aesthetic of African-descended women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the Neo-slavery/Jim Crow<sup>4</sup> era, might argue that any art worthy of the title would necessarily make a social justice claim that looked suspiciously like propaganda to any leisure class that believed in art for pure beauty, for entertainment and escape, for indulgent self-expression, or for its own sake. Among the African-descended women who rejected an explicit social justice claim – such as Alma Thomas and Madame Evanti– they either deliberately stood outside of the mainstream of the African aesthetic taking a different kind of social justice stand as independent women opposing racial conformity, or they were, in fact, acting as subversives by infiltrating “white” domains and boldly asserting equity, if not superiority.

We do not know all of their names or their works. Particularly silent and invisible are the African-descended women who lived in Neo-slavery in the American South, in colonial regimes in the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and Africa during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in rural areas. Yet, there is evidence of their boldness, their courage, their resistance in the face of violence designed to strip their very souls. Their art – however esoteric or common, however strident or silly, however African or European – did what art is supposed to do: declaring, “I am; I am here; I am here remaking/reimagining the world you are destroying.”

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<sup>4</sup> Blackmon (2008) argues for renaming the period in history the Age of Neo-Slavery rather than the Jim Crow era. He states, “How strange that decades defined in life by abject brutalization came to be identified in history in the image of a largely forgotten white actor’s minstrel performance – a caricature called “Jim Crow.” Imagine if the first years of the Holocaust were known by the name of Germany’s most famous anti-Semitic comedian of the 1930s. Let us define this period of American life plainly and comprehensively (p. 402).”

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## *Raising the Point!:* An Artistic Approach in Supporting A Community's Call to Action

Jason Mendez  
Duke University, United States

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### Abstract

This article discusses the notion of action and personal agency. The author discusses his experiences constructing an arts installation that supported a grassroots effort to revitalize Hunts Point, a community in the South Bronx that is home to 11,000 families, eighteen waste transfer stations, 40% of New York City's sewage, all of the Bronx's waste, a sewage treatment plant, a sewage pelletizing plant, four electrical power plants, and several public schools. More than 60,000 heavy trucks drive through the neighborhood each week. Due to pollution, asthma is the number one cause of absenteeism amongst children in Hunts Point's public schools. Educational reform typically focuses on improvements in the classroom, but students live in real communities with real problems. Giving students an enriching education in a community overwhelmed by pollution requires action outside of the classroom! This installation piece inspired the short documentary film, *Raising the Point!*



**Action (n): Organized activity to accomplish an objective (Action, 2010)**

Vision without action is a dream.

Action without vision is simply passing the time.

Action with vision is making a positive difference (Joel Barker, 1991).

**Raising the Point! (Mendez, 2011)**

This article is about my personal call to action. The following sections discuss my support of the South Bronx's Hunts Point community's efforts in improving the social, educational, environmental, and health injustices it encounters. Specifically, I focus on the issue of poor air quality. This project, *Raising the Point!*<sup>1</sup>, is a unique grassroots effort to artistically support Hunts Point's mission in revitalizing the community.

Why Hunts Point? Whenever I discuss my work in Hunts Point I always inform my audience that this is more than research or a project. Hunts Point is my home. I grew up in Hunts Point; therefore, to identify my efforts as some sort of project or research study does not fully capture the essence of my level of commitment and investment. As a Hunts Point native, it is my responsibility to advocate for social justice in Hunts Point, as well as other sections of the South Bronx.

Hunts Point is a rather unique community. From the outside, Hunts Point may give the impression as being some silenced community, which struggles to mobilize and act. However, that is not the case. In fact, Hunts Point is a well-organized community home to numerous organizations, which advocate for social, environmental, health, and educational improvements. Despite efforts, the community still encounters numerous inequalities. Hunts Point is listened to, but not heard. My objective with the *Raising the Point!* project was not to create the illusion of being some Hunts Point savior, but to support the community's call to action.

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<sup>1</sup> The title, *Raising the Point!*, derives from my documentary film about the issues discussed in this article. The film can be seen at the following link: <http://trace.tennessee.edu/catalyst/vol1/iss1/11/>

### **Hunts Point**

During an initial interview for this project, Kellie Terry-Sepulveda, the executive director of The Point Community Development Corporation<sup>2</sup>, described the Hunts Point community as a

section of the South Bronx [with] about 11,000 families. We are located in the 16<sup>th</sup> congressional district, which is known to be one of the most impoverished congressional districts in the nation. We have about a 24% unemployment rate. High school graduation rates are dismally behind the rest of the nation. Unfortunately, we are located in a highly dense area (personal communication, 2010).

Hunts Point approximately covers 2.1 square miles of the South Bronx<sup>3</sup>. In addition to 11,000 families, this rather small community is home to the Hunts Point Cooperative Market<sup>4</sup>, the new Fulton Fish Market, the Spofford Juvenile Detention Center, 18 waste transfer stations, 40% of New York City's sewage, 100% of the Bronx's waste, a sewage treatment plant, a sewage pelletizing plant, 4 electrical power plants, more than 60,000 trucks per week and a few schools sprinkled here in there (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004).

Collectively, these industrial facilities impact Hunts Point's air quality. The South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy study conducted by the Institute for Civil Infrastructure Systems at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service (2005), found that "only 5 to 10 percent of the fine particle pollution was soot from diesel exhaust, but it was that portion that seemed to be having the worst effect on the children's asthma (Fernandez, 2006, para. 25)." The findings add that their [neighborhood children] symptoms, like wheezing, doubled on days when pollution from truck traffic was highest. "The study also examined the proximity of expressways to schools. Four expressways — the Cross Bronx, Major Deegan, Bruckner and Sheridan — and the Bronx River Parkway run through or around the South Bronx. About one-fifth of all students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade in the area go to schools located within 500 feet, or about two blocks, of major highways, the study showed." According to the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004):

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<sup>2</sup> "THE POINT Community Development Corporation is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) dedicated to youth development and the cultural and economic revitalization of the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx.

<sup>3</sup> In the South Bronx, there are 522,412 residents (60% Latino, 39% African American), 40% of which are below the poverty line."

<sup>4</sup> The Hunts Point Cooperative Market is the world's largest wholesale food distribution center.

- Zip Code 10474—Hunts Point—has the highest number and density of industrial facilities in Bronx County (pp. 45).
- Concentrations of elemental carbon—a component of diesel exhaust from trucks—were higher at all South Bronx sites than at sites in Manhattan (pp. 42).
- Car exhaust and burning fuels are producing higher ground-level concentrations of pollutants, like CO (carbon monoxide), NO<sub>2</sub> (nitrogen dioxide), and SO<sub>2</sub> (sulfur dioxide), in the South Bronx compared to rooftop station samples (pp. 42).
- Local and regional air pollution from cars, power plants, construction activity, and other chemical processes are producing high concentrations of O<sub>3</sub> (ozone) and PM<sub>2.5</sub> (particulate matter) in the South Bronx—at levels that exceed U.S. EPA standards (pp. 42).
- While urban environments generally contain a presence of NO<sub>2</sub> (nitrogen dioxide) in the air, samples from the NYU mobile van in the South Bronx were higher than scientists expected (pp. 42).
- Peak outdoor elemental carbon concentrations at South Bronx schools participating in the “Backpack Study” were related to rush-hour traffic, especially in the mornings (pp. 42).

Although heavy car traffic and truck congestion present environmental problems to Hunts Point residents, it is truck idling that has a more significant effect to the community’s poor air quality. According to Washington State University’s Extension Energy Program (2004) *Idling Restrictions* report, “Accurate idling statistics are not available.” However, “the industry estimates trucks idle approximately six hours per day, for a total of 1,830 hours per year. At this rate, U.S. trucks are consuming in excess of 840 million gallons of diesel fuel annually, while idling. Using the EPA idle emissions factors, PM emission rates resulting from truck idling amount to approximately 15 grams per day per truck or about 169 pounds of particulate matter per truck per year (pp. 2.)” Consider the detrimental health effects 60,000 trucks per week, with a larger number of them idling, has on Hunts Point residents.

A major health concern in Hunts Point is the number of children diagnosed with asthma. Compared to the rest of the nation, Hunts Point has nearly double the average of kids affected by asthma. According to the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004):

- There is a strong link between Bronx zip codes with high asthma rates and those with a large concentration of industrial facilities (pp. 42).
- Higher asthma hospitalization rates are more likely to occur in lower-income areas of the South Bronx and in areas where there is a large presence of Latino/Hispanic residents (pp. 42).

- Asthma hospitalization rates are highest in the central and southern parts of Bronx County (pp. 45).
- There is a strong association between asthma hospitalization rates, poverty, the percentage of Hispanic residents, and the number of industrial facilities in the Bronx (pp. 45).

How does the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study's findings connect to schooling? Is this not supposed to be an article discussing arts as social justice in education? Educational discourse typically focuses on educational improvements inside of the classroom. However, there are critical factors that affect a student's educational experience before even walking through their school's entrance.

For example, Hunts Point Elementary School<sup>5</sup> (HPES), which is located in Hunts Point, serves a little over 1000 K-5 students. If you researched HPES's grade level assessment data, you would find that HPES is above average in certain grade levels and below average in others. Assumptions can be made on the cause of the below average grade level assessments. Could it be a lack of resources or qualified teachers? Perhaps, but if you were to ask the principal, she would tell you that one of the biggest problems her school encounters is being located in a "desolate industrial neighborhood with high asthma rates (personal communication, 2010)." Since the majority of school absenteeism is related to asthma, giving a student an enriching educational experience in a community overcome by heavy truck idling is an injustice that requires action.

### **Social Justice through the Arts**

Social justice works to construct a genuine, meaningful dialogue between those in marginalized and privileged communities. However, creating situations for such a dialogue to begin can be difficult and complex because there are limited or nonexistent opportunities to engage with those in power. The arts are expressive, stimulate our imagination, and open our minds. Therefore, using the arts as a mode of inquiry and representation pushes researchers and audiences to engage with content that constructs meaning and dialogue. The provocative nature and seductiveness of the arts creates these thought provoking opportunities for critical consciousness. The arts seduce the privileged into seeing the negative and dehumanizing effects their decisions and callousness results in for marginalized people. Thus, creating a meaning that is both personal and constitutive. This is accomplished through challenging the

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym

meanings and understandings privileged groups have about particular social conditions. Therefore, what a social condition means for different groups is what is at stake. For example, the meaning of those trucks running all day is being challenged through this work. This work contains alarming content that attempts to persuade people to accept a new meaning of those idling trucks, thereby constituting a new understanding and meaning of Hunts Point social condition.

### **Raising the Point! Arts Installation**

Over seventeen years ago, when I was growing up in Hunts Point, the same dense industrialization, congestion, and idling issues existed. However, I do not recall ever hearing about individuals or agencies advocating for improvements or solutions. Hunts Point residents, such as myself, slowly become desensitized to our environment. We accept our neighborhood's environment as a normal lived experience, despite the fact of the detrimental living conditions. Therefore, the aim of the *Raising the Point!* art installation is to create a seductive, provoking, and personal experience, which incites action.

In my efforts to address issues of social justice, I founded the organization Potentialis. Potentialis combines research and the arts to actively advocate for social justice in education, health, environment, and community development. The mission of Potentialis is to develop sustainable programs, activist projects, and art infused initiatives that support and establish social equity. In order to address the poor air quality in Hunts Point, Potentialis collaborated with The Point and HPES to create an artistic installation piece that illustrates the effect idling trucks has on the Hunts Point community. The installation piece simulates the amount of air pollution residents of Hunts Point encounter at any given time. Viewers can interact with the installation for a personal experience.

Using purchased<sup>6</sup> and donated materials; we constructed a large triangular wooden container. The container has five panels, three side panels and a top and bottom panel. The container's shape represents the "iron triangle", which represents the three major highways surrounding Hunts Point: the Cross Bronx, the Bruckner, and the Sheridan. Each side panel is creatively labeled with one of the "iron triangle" highways. The rest of the box is covered with a collage

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<sup>6</sup> All items purchased were bought using funds provided through a Global Youth Service Day (GYSD) grant.

of images, data, and statistics pertaining to Hunts Point, asthma, and ground level pollutants. Most of the collage consists of images of Hunts Point residents, especially children.<sup>7</sup>

Attached to one of the side panels is a hose connected to the exhaust pipe of an idling vehicle. The top panel is connected to a breathing apparatus. The breathing apparatus consists of a breathing mask and small hose. However, instead of exhaust flowing into the box a block of dry ice is placed inside. Small vents are placed around the box to allow the fog from the dry ice to escape. The dry ice creates the illusion that toxic fumes are flowing from the idling truck into the box. At no time, are there any exhaust fumes or dry ice fog flowing through the breathing apparatus. Lastly, a small mirror is attached to another side panel. Above the mirror reads the question. "What is Hunts Point?"

Accompanying the container is a Portable DVD player. Displayed on the screen are images and video of truck idling, car traffic, truck congestion, and children within the Hunts Point community. In addition to the images and video, audio of children with respiratory problems, car traffic, and truck engines idling can be heard through headphones. The installation will be displayed<sup>8</sup> in numerous locations making it accessible to the community, community not being limited to residents, but to Bronx government officials and the industrial corporations responsible for the 60,000+ trucks per week.

### *Seductive*

The installation piece has many physical attributes that make it visually appealing to the potential participant. The hoses, the breathing apparatus, the idling vehicle, the dry ice fog, the mirror, the vents, the box's imagery and text, the video and audio content all collectively work together to stimulate the viewer's desire to interact with the installation. Sensory overload is the key to sparking the curiosity of the common passerby. If the viewer is not interested in reading, they can listen, if they are not interested in listening, they can watch. Regardless of the option they choose, it will be a provoking experience.

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<sup>7</sup> You can view a time lapse video of the construction of the installation as well as the finished project from the following link, <http://vimeo.com/14464661>

<sup>8</sup> The release date for the installation was April 23, 2010, Global Youth Day.

### ***Provoking***

I recall reading an article about the Trinity College community coming together to advocate against racism after an incident occurred on campus. What stuck out from the article was a faculty member's response to the rally:

Associate Professor of Sociology Johnny Williams memorably called the rally “bullshit” for being ineffective and called on the school to implement policies to change the existing status quo. “Don’t feel good when you leave this. Feel uncomfortable. I’m uncomfortable all the time on this goddamned campus,” he said (Brown, 2008, para. 4).

In regards to the *Raising the Point!* art installation, the experience is ineffective unless it makes you feel uncomfortable. Every time an official, a resident, truck driver, commuter, or business owner travels through Hunts Point they must feel uncomfortable until change occurs. The images, video, and audio must provoke the participant to action. In my experience, research findings and statistical data do not have as much of an impact as attaching a face or a name to the problem at hand. For example, compare the below text to the adjacent image (Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>



Figure 1. “Local and regional air pollution from cars, power plants, construction activity, and other chemical processes are producing high concentrations of O<sub>3</sub> (ozone) and PM<sub>2.5</sub> (particulate matter) in the South Bronx—at levels that exceed U.S. EPA standards (Restrepo and Zimmerman, 2004).”

An image showing the everyday experience of a Hunts Point family is far more provoking than reading a pamphlet about research findings. If the images are not enough, then the video and audio content will incite the participant. Using the Situationist critical art of

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<sup>9</sup> Photo courtesy of the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy study brochure. [http://www.icisnyu.org/south\\_bronx/admin/files/SouthBronxBrochure.pdf](http://www.icisnyu.org/south_bronx/admin/files/SouthBronxBrochure.pdf)

detournement<sup>10</sup>, the video displays footage of car traffic, truck congestion and Hunts Point residents. However, instead of the original audio being used, sounds of truck engines and car traffic are overlaid on video of children and sounds of children with respiratory problems breathing are overlaid on video of trucks idling. The images, video, and audio create an opening for an experience to occur.

### ***Personal***

The key to making the installation inspire change is to make the experience personal to the participant. This is where the mirror comes in. This interaction has two steps: 1) read the question above the mirror, “What is Hunts Point?” and 2) look at the reflection. Ideally, the participant will realize that the question should not read “What is Hunts Point?,” but “Who is Hunts Point?” The answer is in the reflection; the answer is self. In creating and presenting the installation I must be careful not to lose the self in the art. If the art becomes the focal point then this installation becomes about the artist(s) rather than the community.

### **Conclusion**

Normally, an arts installation can act as a channel to creatively express or entertain ourselves. However, using an arts installation for social justice, such as *Raising the Point!*, seductively leads us into a state of discomfort. We become uncomfortable because the veil that blinded our critical consciousness vanishes and we begin to see the injustice(s) that exists within our reality. When an event touches our critical consciousness we begin to ask the questions that lead to solutions. This process is reminiscent of a scene from the film, *City of Angels* (Silberling, 1998), when Meg Ryan’s character, Dr. Maggie Rice loses one of her patients on the operating table.

Dr. Maggie Rice: We fight for people’s lives in here, right?

Dr. Jordan Rice: Uh-huh.

Dr. Maggie Rice: Don’t you ever wonder who it is we’re fighting with?

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<sup>10</sup> “Detournement (‘diversion’) was [a] key means of restructuring culture and experience...Detournement proposes a violent excision of elements – painting, architecture, literature, film, urban sights, sounds, gestures, words, signs – from their original contexts, and a consequent restabilization and recontextualization through rupture and realignment (Sussman, 1989, p. 8)”.



Hunts Point's fight against truck idling is far more complicated than establishing stringent environmental and health policies. When discussing issues of social justice, something remains constant-- the existence of two entities: the marginalized [oppressed] and the privileged [oppressor]. In this particular case, it is easy to identify Hunts Point as the marginalized because despite efforts to revitalize the community, social, educational, environmental, and health inequities continue to exist. The difficulty comes in identifying the privileged [oppressors]. Is it the Bronx government officials, policy makers, industrial corporations, truck drivers or even ourselves? The privileged [oppressors] in this circumstance are those who perceive Hunts Points poor air quality issues as protocol rather than injustice. The *Raising the Point!* art installation is intended to aid participants in making this distinction. The installation's creative visual appeal invites the marginalized and privileged into a space that ultimately stimulates a dialogue that incites action. The action to do something or do nothing depends solely on the personal connection each participant makes with the art installation.

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### **About the Author**

Dr. Jason Mendez is a Visiting Professor of the Practice at Duke University's Program in Education. Jason's scholarly interests include school reform, critical race studies, social foundations of education, cultural studies, arts education/integration, multicultural education, educational technology, and qualitative research, particularly; counter narratives, post-critical ethnography, and narrative theory. Working across disciplinary boundaries provides spaces for him to explore varied discourses framing issues in education, cultural studies, and critical race theory. Additionally, he founded the Potentialis Centre, a non-profit organization that combines research and the arts to advocate for social justice in education, health, environment, and community development. Potentialis develops sustainable programs, activist projects, and art infused workshops that support and establish social equity. Through Potentialis, Jason pursues global opportunities to collaborate with artists, researchers, educators, community organizations, and business leaders to support equitable outcomes for targeted communities. Prior to Duke, Jason was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems. Jason has also served as an Assistant Professor in the Teacher Education Department at CUNY's York College.

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## The Power of Art to Develop Artists and Activists

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### Abstract

Many teens today feel as though they have limited opportunities to prove to society that they can make positive and meaningful contributions to their communities. They are presented with few opportunities to make important choices and decisions regarding their lives and communities and often have no mechanisms in their everyday lives to help them engage in meaningful ways in their communities (Youniss, Christmas-Best, Diversi, et al., 2002). In this article, we explore how Arts-UP, a summer art education program for urban teens, fosters self and social transformation by helping youth engage in their local community. Results demonstrate that Arts-UP participants see themselves as part of a larger community of artists, and also as active participants in their communities. We argue that programs like Arts-UP are imperative in creating not only future artists, but also future activists who will be critical thinkers and active, democratic citizens.

## **Introduction**

I think Arts-UP really helped me to focus on the fact that wherever you go, you are a part of a community, and it is your choice whether or not to plug into that community, and to invest yourself into it, for better or for worse. Arts-UP also helped me to realize that art is essential to communities, and despite the fact that making art sometimes seems superfluous or pointless, it's actually the exact opposite (2009).

Today's media often portray urban youth as disengaged, irresponsible, superficial and materialistic. They are associated with social problems like crime, violence, substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy and are accused of being disengaged from their communities (Jacobs, Chin, & Shaver, 2005). These images suggest society holds little trust that teenagers will become healthy, productive, and valuable citizens, let alone activists in their communities. In our own work with urban youth, we each encountered a good number of adolescents who embodied these images of urban youth. Many of the adolescents we worked with demonstrated little or no connection to their communities—a world beyond their immediate school life, home life, or street life seemed unimaginable and/or irrelevant to many of them. In addition, most of our students expressed little confidence about their ability to create change, or even become involved in their communities. However, in spite of their lack of community engagement, these youth desired a sense of belonging and the opportunities to make meaningful contributions to their communities. They just did not know how to make this happen, and often saw no way out of the isolation that they felt.

Many teens today feel as though they have limited opportunities to prove to society that they can make positive and meaningful contributions to their communities. They are presented with few opportunities to make important choices and decisions regarding their lives and communities and often have no mechanisms in their everyday lives to help them engage in meaningful ways in their communities (Youniss, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, Silbereisen., 2002). In this chapter, we explore how Arts-UP, a summer art education program for urban teens, fosters self and social transformation by helping youth engage in their local community. Results demonstrate that Arts-UP participants see themselves as part of a larger community of artists, and also as active participants in their communities. We argue that programs like Arts-UP are imperative in creating not only future artists, but also future activists who will be critical thinkers and active, democratic citizens.

Arts-UP helped participants find paths out of the stereotypes society uses to define them by helping them find a way in—a way in to their community and to the culture(s) of which they are a part. It helped them become engaged with the people and places closest to them and develop a responsibility toward them. Like Beth, the participant whose quote begins this chapter, many participants began to recognize the ways in which they could invest in their

communities, as well as the ways in which art was integral to this investment. One of the most striking effects of the program was the way in which participants continued to work with and in their communities long after they have completed Arts-UP. It is this development as artists and activists that we explore here.

### **The Arts-UP Program: An Overview**

Arts-UP is a community based arts education program that brings together urban high school students, practicing artists, and non-profit community organizations. Through this collaboration, students create an art installation in a public outdoor space, as well as personal art pieces that represent issues significant to and for them. The program is designed to foster creative and aesthetic development, to develop an appreciation for cultural and environmental diversity and issues, and to create a sense of community among participants and the broader communities of which they are a part. Its mission is to foster the individual and collective creativity of young people and their communities through the intergenerational sharing of artistic and cultural knowledge and traditions, while preserving both cultural and environmental spaces and practices present in everyday life. Since 2002, Arts-UP has worked with 51 student artists and six different community partners. Prior community partners include the local zoo, an organic farm, a local environmental center, a local cultural and historical landmark, the national parks, and the local chapter of Keep America Beautiful. In its seven years of active programming, Arts-UP participants have created six major installations that are functionally utilized or visited annually by over 20,000 people. The program is focused on student ownership of all areas, and participants: 1) engage in research about social, cultural, and environmental topics; 2) explore artistic tools and techniques; 3) work with community partners and artists-in-residence to design and create site-specific works; 4) and work to market and publicize their work and events. Below, we provide an overview of one year's project to enable readers to understand the program and its processes.

In 2009, Arts-UP partnered with a local organization associated with Keep America Beautiful to help students understand water conservation issues in their community. During their time in the program, students would design and create unique rain barrels with custom spray stencils and screen prints. The program coordinators brought in two nationally known printmakers to work with students on the rain barrels and on personal pieces of art. Artists-in-residence for the program are chosen carefully and serve as role models for participants—as both artists and activists. They must be highly skilled professional artists who are committed to working with young people to help them understand how to utilize their artistic and creative talents in the aims of social justice.

The artists-in-residence, local partners, and program coordinators worked together to develop an intensive three-week integrated curriculum focused on developing: 1) an understanding of

water conservation issues; 2) connections with people and organizations in their community; 3) printmaking techniques and ability; and 4) entrepreneurial skills for marketing their artwork. Students visited a local water treatment plant, met with community and government officials, worked individually and collectively to design and create pieces of art, and held several events to showcase their work. At the end of the program, students had created 50 artistically designed rain barrels that were auctioned at multiple public events. They raised over \$5,000.00 to assist the city's Greenprint initiatives to conserve water and further educate the community on water conservation issues—for example the group offered free public workshops on how to build rain barrels for home use.



Figure 1: Art in the Rain—Rain Barrels to Benefit the Greenprint Initiative

Each year's project is different and not every project raises money for a community organization. However, each project does work to meet the needs of that year's community partner. Students learn about ways they can get involved, why they should become involved, and what the results of their involvement can be. They work with talented artists-in-residence to develop their artistic abilities, and each year they design and produce a variety of personal and collective pieces of art that they display at a community event. This type of curriculum works to engage urban youth in meaningful ways with organizations and individuals in their communities, and they are able to develop content knowledge and skills they often cannot acquire in traditional classrooms. Through this curriculum, and the interactions it supports, participants are able to develop as both artists and activists.

### **Mining Mountains of Data: Methodological Overview**

This empirical study draws on several years of data collection from the Arts-UP program, including participant observations, program evaluation surveys, multiple interviews with participants, electronic responses to journal prompts, student work and other artifacts about and from the program, and surveys of program alumni. Initial coding of the qualitative data utilized program goals as an *a priori* guide for understanding and situating the analysis, while emergent coding allowed us to identify ideas that came directly from the data. A thematic approach to data analysis allowed us to move beyond the codes and think more abstractly about the data and what we were seeing. Member checking provided us with a way to insure our analyses of the data were on track and served as a means to increase accurate representation of participants and their worlds. Both of us also used journaling as a way for us to reflect upon and monitor our own subjectivity regarding the research. Through the use of participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, we obtained a wealth of data, providing us with the ability to create rich, thick description about the experiences of these students and this program. The use of multiple data collection methods, member checking, monitoring of subjectivity, prolonged observation, and the use of rich, thick description all augment the validity of this research.

In the following analysis sections, we provide examples and exemplars from the data to demonstrate how Arts-UP provides participants with ways to engage in a socially responsive process of reflection, critical thinking, and transformation through their art making (Graham, 2009). The analysis presented below draws on a holistic view of the data and while specific quotes or observations are utilized, they are provided as exemplars of the overarching themes in the data.

### **Finding a Way Out**

As we explored the data, the link between artist and activist emerged, along with the ways in which this link was supported by and developed through participation in Arts-UP. We eventually began to see how the act of becoming involved allowed participants to learn about self and social transformation and how this transformation could lead to viable connections within their communities. Students engaged in self-reflection, critical thinking, and transformative work, and as a result they were able to find ways out of the stereotypes and isolation they often felt by finding ways in as active participants in their communities.

### ***Practicing Self-reflection***

Students engaged in self-reflection throughout the course of each year's project. Through journaling, personal artmaking, and engagement with texts, students were able to recognize and reflect on issues that were important to them (Hobson, 2001). For example, in 2004

participants worked with an artist to make six foot fused glass butterflies for a historic conservatory that was being renovated. Students used the idea of metamorphosis to consider the ‘birth’ of the butterflies they would create, and also to imagine the renovation or rebirth of the conservatory itself, with the butterflies as part of its new form.



Figure 2: Butterflies Float in the Air of the Renovated Conservatory

Using Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as a tool for discussion, students were asked to consider the idea of transformation in their journals and in their production of personal artwork. Several students created artwork that empowered them to say things visually that they found difficult to say with words. Cory, a fifteen-year old girl at the time, crafted a sculpture of plaster hands bloodied and arranged on a stark white sheet to illustrate her abusive relationship with her father, who she felt could not accept her homosexuality. In her journal, she wrote an artist statement about how her work was a commentary on the overall negative stigma associated with homosexuality and her desire to transform her personal situation with her family.

I would not like to be my father, abusive and drunk. So here is my

story...When she (Cory) woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, she found herself changed in her bed into a monstrous vermin. She was lying on her side which was all bruised, when she opened her eyes a little she saw her girlfriend bleeding, lying unconscious-broken nose, whose breath became so shallow, she could barely hang on. Her bloody hands staining the white sheets as they laid there like her girlfriend, before her eyes.



Cory also used this piece as a concrete visual and written symbol to her grandmother to tell her that she was a lesbian, knowing her grandmother would view her work at the exhibition. She was able to use tools, like journaling and personal artmaking, to reflect on how issues she experienced personally related to broader social and cultural issues, and how she might use this reflection to create change—either for her personally, or for society.

Her artwork served as a powerful vehicle for communication, personal and political, in her life. Many students, like Cory, reflected on personal and political issues in their journals and artmaking. By reflecting on issues that were important to them, many said they were able to “find strength” within the healing powers of artistic expression. This strength allowed them to take personal and artistic risks in their work and in their lives. When we followed up with Cory the following year, she told us how she was inspired by experiences in the Arts-UP program to focus her research for her International Baccalaureate program in high school on the impact of gay, lesbian, and bisexual artists and their impact on society, and to become active in school groups for homosexual students, something she felt she had not been able to do prior to her participation in Arts-UP.

### ***Practicing Critical Thinking***

Through inquiry and artmaking related to each project, students were able to practice skills related to critical thinking, such as interpretation and analysis about social, cultural and environmental issues that are prevalent in their local and larger communities. Developing these skills resulted in their ability to engage in self-regulatory judgment that allows them to explore and defend their own positions, consider alternative positions, and potentially make conceptual changes to their own thinking.

In 2006, Arts-UP participants spent two weeks at an environmental education center where they created a ceramic cairn to serve as a communal landmark. Participants engaged in multiple modes of inquiry throughout the project. They conducted research on habitat destruction, wetland restoration, and cultural history related to natural and human made landmarks. These investigations led to several art production assignments designed to ignite critical thinking about the role of humans in relation to nature, the ways humans have created monuments to people, places or things that are important to them, and how they could use their art as a vehicle for communicating important messages. Three years after completing the program, Anna, a sophomore college art student, explained in a follow-up survey how she began to reevaluate and interpret her ideas about the natural world as a result of her experience in Arts-UP.

I can remember one morning, on an early hike along the trails, as we were walking, [a program coordinator] pointed out something very small on the trail- a snail, or a little

bug of some sort, and told us all to be careful not to step on it. To go out of our way to avoid hurting the smallest of smalls. And for some reason, that instance really stuck with me—if I can't even justify stepping on one little creature in the middle of the forest, while there are hundreds just like it in that same forest, how can I justify deforestation? How can I justify going out of my way in order not to harm that little snail, but not go out of my way to care for those humans around me that are hurting? I think it was just a series of small incidents like that which translated into so many ideas I have about life, and people, and the environment.

Anna was able to interpret and analyze the events she experienced, connect them to other related issues, make changes to her thinking (and her actions) and engage in self-regulatory judgment that moved her to find ways to defend her positions about compassion for others and for the environment.

Like Anna, other Arts-UP students demonstrated how they became more critically aware of issues they faced in their everyday lives. For example, in 2003, participants worked with a Native American artist on an organic farm who raises food for homeless shelters in the area. Every morning students participated in meditation and other activities to remind them of their connection to the physical earth. They did physical labor on the farm that included planting, weeding, harvesting, and shoveling manure. This work, along with their on-site artmaking, caused several participants to think about their ideas and actions in relationship to the environment. In their interviews from 2003, participants discussed the tangible effects the experience at the farm had on them, such as learning ways they could compost at home or could avoid polluting water and soil in their neighborhoods. Some students spoke of how they began to consider where their food comes from, how much energy it takes to produce and transport food, ways they take for granted the fresh foods they have available to them, and how people living in poverty may have less access to organic produce. However, we wondered if their interpretation of these experiences and ideas would translate into their ability to critically analyze environmental issues in the future. When we asked Cash, a 16 year old student with a Mohawk and combat boots, to articulate those things about his experiences in Arts-UP that affected his life beyond the program, he explained:

Well, like at the farm, there weren't any ashtrays because we were in the woods, and I didn't want to flick my cigarette butt, and have an animal eat it . . . but around home there's ashtrays...in the city. But days after we got back, I was still thinking about it, not flicking it in the street...and it dawned on me that I don't really even think about it anymore...now I actually carry around a little pouch to put them in.

In these examples, students were able to critically investigate their surroundings through personal and collective inquiry and analyze their ideas and experiences related to social, cultural, and environmental issues. Many students began to practice more self-regulatory judgment, like changing their concepts of environmental protection and putting into place alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

## **Finding Ways In**

### ***Developing as Artists and Activists***

As a result of their engagement in reflection and critical thinking, students began to develop the capacity to challenge and ultimately transform the ways they perceived their roles as artists and activists. In this section, we highlight how youth in the Arts-UP program found ways in to their communities by utilizing their artistic and critical thinking skills.

### ***Practicing Transformation: Finding Ways in to Their Communities***

Because we learned so much about the areas where we'd be creating the work for—going on tours...spending lots of time there, sketching out the architecture or the grounds, becoming knowledgeable about what it was we were creating for, meeting all of the people involved—it really helped connect us to the community even before we began building the project.

Each year, guest speakers like park rangers, curators, CEOs of major corporations, food bank workers, and city planners and engineers worked with participants to explore the work and needs of partner organizations. Speakers also discussed how to apply for volunteer opportunities, paid apprenticeships, jobs, and where to find opportunities to make public art. Each year, we hear from Arts-UP participants who go on to work for organizations they partnered with in the program or with other community organizations. For example, two students from the 2003 program, Leon and Miya, volunteered at the organic farm throughout the summer after their participation in Arts-UP. They planted, weeded, and harvested, divided produce for community shares, and transported food to local homeless shelters. According to them, this work allowed them to “stay connected” and provided them with a way to “continue to give,” something they found very fulfilling.

In another example, students from 2007 designed a space with functional seating made from disassembled bicycle parts along the hiking and biking trail in the national park. They lived for two weeks in a nearby hostel so they could ride donated bikes to the site to create artwork for the space. At one point they visited an urban bicycle co-op to learn about the ways

bicycles serve as energy efficient modes of transportation and how they could be deconstructed for alternative functions.



Figure 3: Recycled Bicycle Parts Find New Lives as Tables and Chairs in a National Park

Three of that year's participants, Ben, Cody, and Jerome, became the artist's apprentices after the program ended and continued to create art using recycled materials. Ben began using his bicycle as his sole means for transportation, continuing with this practice when he went to college the next year. In 2009, Jerome began to promote his latest initiative with a handmade business card—the start-up of a bike co-op to recycle, trade, sell, or gift bicycles for those in the community.

Other participants, like Kate in 2005, spoke with us and with other Arts-UP participants about her work with organizations like Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass. She explained to us that young people were "the future and the hope" of organizations like these and that "if we work hard enough we can change the world.". The Arts-UP participants showcased in this section began to explore the ways in which their experiences could serve as catalysts for becoming more proactive in their communities—they were discovering ways in—to their communities and to a life as artists and activists.

## Helping Others Find a Way Out

### *Using Their Skills as Artists and Activists*

Another theme that emerged from the data demonstrates the ongoing impact of the program—where participants have become involved in community projects to help others find a way out. In this section we present the experiences of one participant who we use as an exemplar for the many participants who have shared ongoing stories of work in their communities.

Vince was a humble, shy student when he started the Arts-UP program in 2002. While he was a competent artist, he was hesitant to take risks with his work, and kept most of his interests and ideas in a small sketchbook he kept to himself. During his two years of participation in Arts-UP, Vince developed both personally and professionally. In a follow-up interview, he described his views about Arts-UP.

Arts-UP gave me the guts to approach art in new ways... This program has encouraged me to jump on challenges. Not only do I say yes to art challenges, but I find myself saying yes to all sorts of opportunities. I used to be afraid of opportunities, so worried I would fail that I'd just let them go. Now, I grab a hold of opportunities, and get scared later. But scared or not, I still jump in.

Through his participation in Arts-UP, Vince not only found guts, he found his voice. After his participation in 2002 and 2003, Vince continued to use his skills in the community and he moved on to inspire other voices by using or encouraging art in the service of community and justice.

Most recently, Vince became involved with Project R.I.S.E. (Realizing Individual Strength through Education), an organization dedicated to the education of homeless individuals in the community. He began his relationship with Project R.I.S.E. as a tutor at a local homeless shelter, where he had the opportunity to design and teach four “Learning to Read with Art” literacy workshops to homeless children between the ages of six and thirteen.

Project R.I.S.E. is probably where my art and community activism mix the most. For example, when I put together lessons... I intertwined art making and interpreting with story writing and interpreting. This was a huge confidence booster to students who were not fluent in English, or had limited exposure to printed material. They were no longer intimidated by reading, because the process was bi-lingual: English and Art. Even if the words do not make sense, the student still has an opportunity to contribute and most especially- learn from the artwork of other peers. Art became a language that connected those who had trouble connecting before. Where words may have presented

barriers between ages, genders, and cultures- pictures built bridges. Art, in essence, can offer a language of the silent.

Vince, like so many former Arts-UP participants, found a way to see himself as part of the collective potential of his community. He found a way to help others find their voices in hopes that they too could find ways out of oppressive situations.

While Vince's story is a compelling one, he is only one of many Arts-UP participants who continue to work for change in their community. In a follow-up survey, many program alumni reported that after their participation in Arts-UP, they began to seek out more opportunities to use their creative skills in their communities. For example, Beth began volunteering with the Salvation Army to make Hope Totes for the Haven of Rest. Anna became the volunteer arts director at a nursing home on her college campus. Rhea volunteered at a therapeutic equestrian center for youth with developmental disabilities. Noble became the volunteer graphic designer for Kuddle Buddies Foundation, an organization that supports research for children with pediatric cancer. He describes his role as "the perfect opportunity for me to use my talents to help others without expecting anything out of it. I'm not doing this for fame or riches but, rather doing it to make differences (P13, 2009). These students all cite Arts-UP as giving them the "confidence" and the "knowledge" to engage in these ways. As Beth said in the opening quote, Arts-UP helped them see themselves as part of their community and the ways in which they could contribute to it.

### **Discussion: Arts-UP and Beyond**

I think Arts-UP nurtures the idea that it's healthy and rewarding and not as difficult as one might imagine to be able to be a strong, vibrant and living part of a community. Somewhere along the line, teens realize that they're no longer categorized as this faction of hoodlums living within their community. And they weren't spending their time flipping burgers at McDonalds or playing video games or stealing stuff from the mall- they were researching their city, exploring it, seeing it with new eyes, and then creating a new vision of it for everyone else to see. (P10, 2009)

When students enter the Arts-UP program, they represent a diverse group of urban teenagers and young adults who are different in many ways: culturally, racially, religiously, sexually, educationally, and socio-economically. Yet, they are similar in that they believe they have limited potential and limited opportunities to create significant changes in their lives, personally and collectively and they believe most adults perceive them as self-absorbed and disinterested. They are similar in that they do not know how to find their way out of the stereotypes that write them off as apathetic, narcissistic, and disengaged. They are similar in

that they do not know how to find their way into the local communities of which they are a part.

Several adults who have worked with the Arts-UP program validated the ways in which participants' perceptions about their limited roles and opportunities in society are rooted in some truth. Ed, program director at the environmental education center, spoke about societal stereotypes in an interview.

[People think] they're all punks. Don't give them a chance. They'll take a look at them and see a Mohawk or a ripped t-shirt and automatically they're a bad kid and they don't want anything to do with them and that sucks. And it's an unfortunate stereotype. You know that group you had out there...I can see that happening to each of them. And after you get to know them, there's no reason for it. They're all great kids.

Like Ed, many adults who worked with Arts-UP participants came to recognize the value of youth and their potential to make positive contributions to their organizations and to their communities. This involvement fostered the students' growth as artists and activists, and worked to dispel the myths and misconceptions about their positions in society—for participants and for their communities. Dave, the resident artist from 2007, expressed the ways his involvement with the program changed his views of youth participants:

These kids surprised me. They are bright, ambitious, upbeat. They were more engaged than my college art students, and are far more willing to take risks in their work and jump on new challenges. I even hired two of the kids to be my assistants after the program ended. These kids just need a chance to do something cool. (Dave, 2007 Artist)

While Arts-Up does help participants “do something cool,” it also does more than this. Arts-UP helps young people make cognitive, emotional, and social connections to their communities through the vehicle of art.

Youth in Arts-UP found opportunities to put into practice ways of reflecting and thinking critically about issues of social importance, opportunities to develop confidence as youth artists and activists, and opportunities to connect with their community. Through these opportunities, participants began to recognize their potential to take more active roles in transforming their own futures and the future of their communities. They developed new modes of social awareness that led to new avenues for social activism, both during their participation in the program and well after it was completed. Through their involvement,

many participants came to the revelation that they not only have a way out, but they ARE the way in. And perhaps even more profoundly, they discovered they ability to help others find their way out as well.

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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](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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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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**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>).

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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