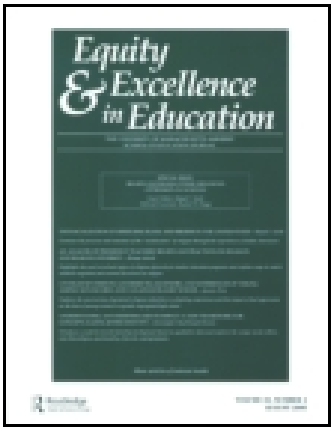

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Imagining Otherwise: Connecting the Arts and Social Justice to Envision and Act for Change: Special Issue Introduction

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Imagining Otherwise: Connecting the Arts and Social Justice to Envision and Act for Change: Special Issue Introduction

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> Not only can art expose the norms and hierarchies of the existing social order, but it can give us the conceptual means to invent another, making what had once seemed utterly impossible entirely realistic. (Hardt & Negri, 2009)

WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE? WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE ART?

The term social justice has become so ubiquitous that it is now used to define almost any practice that superficially mentions equity and/or diversity.[1] In our view, for practices to be accurately termed "social justice" they should:

> enable people to develop the critical analytic tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (Bell, 2007, p. 2)

Social justice practices at their best should also awaken our senses and the ability to imagine alternatives that can sustain the collective work necessary to challenge entrenched patterns and institutions and build a different world.

Our definition of social justice requires that as much as we use our critical faculties to grasp the complex and invidious ways that systems of oppression operate, we also need to engage aesthetic and sensory capacities so as to create and experiment with alternative possibilities—imagining what could otherwise be. As several scholars suggest (Ellsworth, 2005; Greene, 1995; hooks, 1994; Mouffe, 2007; Ranciere, 2008), the arts are a particularly potent way to activate imagination and a broader understanding of injustice, its consequences, and the range of alternative possibilities. Thus, we argue that the arts ought to be a critical component of social justice practice.

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We also highlight the value of alternative epistemologies (ways of knowing), as essential sources for understanding the roots of oppression and for expanding our notions of what justice may look like. We include here the analytic tools and insights gained from indigenous epistemologies (Grande, 2004; Smith, 1999), critical race theories (Brayboy, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) and global feminisms (Mohanty, 2003; Wing, 2000). Each of these theoretical orientations offers a critical stance from the margin that shifts the analysis away from mainstream, taken for granted perspectives, to show different ways of understanding social reality. These theorists offer knowledge, experiences and examples that enable us to imagine alternatives to hierarchical Western notions that too often dichotomize reason and emotion, thought and feeling, the social and natural worlds, East and West. They, thus, broaden the historical and social frameworks, as well as embody different aesthetic and sensory knowledge, for comprehending the world and imagining possibilities other than the status quo.

Situating dominant discourses and institutional structures within a historical context is another vital component of social justice work. Perceiving the relationality of privilege and oppression requires that we be attentive to the kinds of stories that are given voice through history and those that are not. Further, how we make sense of our relationship to the world, and ourselves, is both historical and embodied/sensate. The arts can play a unique role in highlighting the embodied nature of historical inquiry (See e.g., Desai, Hamlin, & Mattson, 2010). In this regard, Ellsworth (2005) poses a critical question for social justice art: "What might be possible and thinkable if we were to take pedagogy to be sensational" (p. 24)?

The arts can help us remember, imagine, create, and transform the practices that sustain oppression as it endures across history and locality. When tuned to that purpose, the arts play a vital role in making visible the stories, voices, and experiences of people who are rendered invisible by structures of dominance. Equally important, the arts confront how we have learned to see and provide new lenses for looking at the world and ourselves in relation to it. In other words, they "reconfigure the visible and its spectacular economies" in a way that "disrupts the divisive social relations that exist in our society and open possibilities of reconfiguring these divisions" (Hinderliter, Kaizen, Maimon, Mansoor, & McCormick, 2009, p. 11).

This broad understanding of social justice and social justice arts provides room for a range of different emphases and strategies, rather than assuming there is one right way to challenge oppression.[2] Some theorists focus more on understanding and revealing social structures (Apple, 1982; Freire, 1998, 2000; Freire & Freire, 1994). Others highlight the role of culture and identity for understanding and challenging oppression (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2009). Still other writers and activists concentrate on the ways in which language reveals social practices and social structures embedded in everyday discourses (Bakhtin, 1982; Bourdieu, 1999; Foucault, 1982; Gee, 2008). All of these approaches reveal different aspects of oppression and thus are points of intervention. The various articles in this issue focus on one or more of these areas in their analysis and pedagogical strategies.

Despite different strategies and emphases, social justice arts have developed particular methods that specifically draw on the particularities of different art forms (theater, visual arts, dance, music, poetry). For instance, Forum Theater is an embodied approach to social justice in which Brazilian artist Augusto Boal enacts Freirean consciousness-raising approaches through improvisational theater arts (Boal, 2001, 2002; Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994). These strategies engage audiences as active participants, using theater games to raise consciousness (conscientization) about how oppression works systemically and to move participants to enact challenges to oppressive relations and create more equitable solutions.

WHY NOW?

The relationship between art and social justice though not new, has taken on greater urgency today, increasingly occupying the concerns of both educators and artists. Internationally recognized artist, Gómez-Peña (2006), reflecting on his work as a performance artist, challenges artists to question why they do what they do in these times of perpetual war, religious fundamentalism, censorship, and economic, social, cultural, political, and educational crisis. He asks, "What are the new roles that artists must undertake? . . . Is art still a pertinent form of inquiry and contestation" (p. 5)? These questions are not merely philosophical but require critical reflection and dialogue about the different ways artistic practice can either challenge or reinforce the dominant hegemony in a world where neutrality is not a viable stance.

Socially engaged artists use a range of tools, methods, materials, and forms to explore, critique, and challenge oppressive social relations—from personal to communal to national to global perspectives. Some social justice art, through the creation of art objects, theater, music, dance, or poetry, seeks to make visible the hidden histories, stories, and experiences of subjugated people in order to expose how power works in our society and world.

One approach to historicizing stories and utilizing the arts to imagine and enact alternative scenarios to the status quo is the Storytelling Project (Bell, 2010; This book is reviewed by Rachel Briggs in the end of this special issue.). This model focuses on the arts in general, and storytelling in particular, as vehicles for understanding oppression. The story types in the model work to both expose the stock stories that support and rationalize an unjust status quo and unearth counter-narratives drawn from historical and contemporary accounts (concealed and resistance stories) that challenge stock stories through the voices and experiences of those marginalized or silenced in mainstream discourses. Building on this critique, new emerging/transforming stories can be developed to imagine and enact alternative possibilities. Concealed and resistance stories can be found in indigenous, critical race, feminist, and queer narratives that contradict taken-for-granted stock stories and offer models of resistance. Emerging/transforming stories invite the ongoing creation of stories as new generations build on knowledge that has come before to meet the conditions they encounter in the present (see for example, Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008).

Other social justice artists use these art forms to generate dialogue by creating temporary or permanent social spaces where people can meet, interact, and connect in order to change the way we see ourselves in relation to others, thereby raising social consciousness and social responsibility. For example, Krysztof Wodiczko designed Alien Staff (1991–1993) a digital walking stick that allowed immigrants on the street to share their experiences, memories, thoughts, and feelings about moving to the United States, thus authorizing their stories of immigration. This communicative device opens dialogue about the issue of immigration in a public space (street) and creates an opportunity for opinions and views to be exchanged among different people. New stories of immigration are generated with every use and interaction. Such projects change the way we use public space commercially in current consumer culture into a democratic forum where social change can occur.

In each of these approaches, a central concern for the artist is to inspire the active participation of viewers, challenging the idea of aloof spectators who have no personal engagement with the ideas they encounter through art. This social turn in contemporary art has subsequently meant questioning whether aesthetics are compromised in social justice projects (Bishop, 2006). One of the tensions inherent in social justice art practices is "balancing art practice and sociopolitical

critique" (Dumbleton, n.d., p. 5). The tension lies in provoking the audience to consider not only the social problem invoked in the art but to engage with the art object itself, its aesthetics.

This tension is particularly evident in artworks that move outside formal institutions, such as museums, galleries, and traditional performance spaces (e.g., theaters, music halls), into public spaces. The tension between art and its social justice function is one that we cannot afford to treat lightly, especially if the arts are to give us the conceptual means to imagine and discover other ways of living together that are more equitable and just.

These are questions that educators must ask as well, and as a result of that inquiry, educators will find that working with artists opens new possibilities for creating engaging learning opportunities that are imaginative and social justice oriented. The push toward standardization, testing, accountability, and assessment in public schools across the nation has limited the opportunities for students to critically reflect upon and become creatively involved in rethinking the many issues they and their communities face daily (Giroux, 2004; Lipman, 2003; Sleeter, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). As K-12 schools narrow the curriculum, a growing number of social justice arts organization and community centers (e.g., Center for Urban Pedagogy, n.d.; Dreamyard [The Art of Inspiring Education, 2011], and Eyebeam [Eyebeam Art + Technology Center, n.d.]) fill in the gap, often focusing on civic engagement through the visual and performing arts (El-Haj, 2009; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006). Given the current colonization of school curriculum by test based accountability practices, these projects offer models that classroom teachers may have to smuggle into the few spaces not consumed with mind-numbing test prep routines.

DEVELOPING CRITERIA FOR DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE ART PRACTICES

The articles in this special issue open dialogue through the lens of different artistic practices regarding the ways educational spaces in schools, community centers, and public sites can challenge the status quo and provoke change by refiguring dominant discourses, subjectivities, and institutional structures. Each of the articles, in different ways, show us what is possible when teaching and learning is embodied/sensational and historically contextualized.

As we read and selected manuscripts for this special issue, the following questions guided our review: To what extent does this article expose norms and hierarchies that maintain an unjust status quo? In what ways does it make visible voices, stories, and experiences that counteract or challenge normative discourses? What practices for reimagining and designing alternatives does this article provide? In what ways does it grapple with the challenges and complexities of social justice art practices, offering examples of self-reflection in the work?

These questions connect and interact through social justice projects in spaces as diverse as grassroots organizing in Mexico and decolonizing education projects in indigenous communities in Canada. They link a study of dance practices that challenge the ghosts of racism with a performative pedagogy project that helps educators embody others' roles, so as to understand and challenge the ways racism operates in their school.

These questions, explored in this special issue, weave through community and school projects with youth that engage their voices and stories and embolden them as actors in the world. The range of practices, projects, and locations explored here shows the myriad ways in which social justice art can inspire critical reflection and action for change. Below we cluster the articles

into sections of this special issue that focus, first, on non-formal sites for education (public spaces, communities, popular education), and then, on formal educational sites (K-12 schools and universities), and describe key aspects of each.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ART PRACTICES IN SITES OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

In "Multimodal Literacies, Pedagogy, and the Construction of Identity-Based Social Movements: The Case of *Espina y Jugo* in Mexico," Erica Mein traces the historical role played by the arts in Latin American social movements and the pedagogical relationship between the arts and social justice, She does this through an ethnographic study of a community organization in northern Mexico (CEP). As community members discuss the historical and contemporary relations between mainstream Mexican narratives and their own lived experience in the desert of northern Mexico, they consider what it means to be Mexican and begin to challenge stock stories of "Mexicanness." They uncover/recover the concealed stories about their lives, drawing upon resistance stories of other popular arts-based movements in Latin America. The *Espina y Jugo* metaphor, describing the specificity of their social location, becomes a tool for collective identity building, resistance, and social critique. Translated through poetry, music, photography, and public performances, it enables community members to imagine and enact a new vision of political participation and citizenship grounded in the particularities of their own social location.

Judy M. Iseke in "Indigenous Digital Storytelling in Video: Witnessing with Alma Desjarlais" also uses the arts as a tool for collective identity building, social critique, and imagining otherwise. Through her digital interviews with elders from indigenous communities in Canada, she evokes the power of witness as a vehicle for revisiting and recovering from the traumatic history of a colonial past. This form of witness—"researching back"—enables the re-imagination of a people's relationship to the past so as to recover knowledge for contemporary struggles for self-determination.

Rosemarie A. Roberts in "Facing and Transforming Hauntings of Race Through the Arts" likewise examines the power of the arts to unearth concealed stories about the trauma of racism and the racial ghosts that live on in contemporary life. Through analyzing the resistance work of dance pioneers, Katherine M. Dunham and Ronald K. Brown, Roberts describes an embodied pedagogy that makes visible through dance a historicized understanding of racism as the basis for imagining/dancing alternatives to it. She illustrates the power of embodied pedagogies (in this case, dance) to unearth and confront concealed (or ghost) stories of racism that run through contemporary life and enact new transforming stories to challenge racism and perform counter-practices to it.

Paul Duncum's article, "Engaging Public Space: Art Education Pedagogies for Social Justice," focuses on the ways art educators have utilized both virtual and actual public space to engage the public in critically considering issues of social justice. He reminds us of the historic role that public space has played in civic life, providing avenues for democratic dialogue and collective action. Duncum discusses ways artists have found to illustrate and critique the degradation of public space as a site for political intervention and social action. He proposes a continuum of social justice art practices that critique, intervene, and enact virtual and actual public spaces as sites for conversation, debate, dialogue, contestation, and protest.

These four articles illustrate the different ways that art can operate in non-formal settings to inspire democratic participation, provoke critical reflection on racism and other issues of injustice, and support community claims for justice. Turning to formal sites of learning, the articles that follow offer examples of these practices in work with teachers and students in the formal institutions of schools.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ART PRACTICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

How do we prepare teachers to enact social justice art practices in schools? How do we determine which practices truly reflect social justice principles? In "Where is the action? Three Lenses to Analyze Social Justice Art Education," Marit Dewhurst addresses these questions and provides analytic tools to help us understand, critique, and evaluate the nature of artmaking that seeks to change the world. She analyzes social justice artmaking through three lenses: the intentions of social justice art, the process embedded in making a work of art intended to make visible the unequal social structures or voices and experiences of those on the margins, and the social location in which and by whom a work of art is made. Using these lenses as a conceptual framework, she illustrates the different forms social justice art may take and the implications for teacher education in this domain.

Ruth Harman and Greg McClure discuss their use of theatre and performance in "All the School's a Stage: Critical Performative Pedagogy in Urban Teacher Education." Their project introduces teachers in a graduate course on children's literature to Boal's techniques as a way of re-enacting and challenging institutional tensions in their work as multicultural educators. Using functional linguistics analysis to analyze transcripts of the re-enactments, Harman and McClure show how performative pedagogy helped the teachers expose and challenge oppressive school relationships while at the same time re-inscribing power relations in the school. Their thoughtful discussion illustrates the powerful pull of the status quo and the need for constant self-reflection on the part of teachers who seek to use art practices in the service of social justice.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ART PRACTICES WITH YOUTH IN SCHOOLS

Karen M. Gourd and Tina Y. Gourd in "Enacting Democracy: Using Forum Theatre to Confront Bullying" use Boal's techniques from Theatre of the Oppressed to create and enact an arts based anti-bullying curriculum for eighth grade students. Drawing on the students' knowledge and experiences of bullying, the authors used scenes the students develop and perform as a tool to engage students' own situated knowledge regarding bullying. These performances encourage students to think about how to change unequal power dynamics and envision alternative solutions to the problem of bullying in their school. The authors note that in the absence of an explicit discussion about issues of race and class, however, the attempt did not go far enough. They reflect critically on their practice and the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, modeling the kind of thoughtful critique necessary in this work. They demonstrate that awareness alone is not sufficient for imagining systemic change and note that the failure to explicitly connect bullying to the social structures of oppression, in particular racism, undermined the critical potential of this work.

In "You Better Recognize!: The Arts as Social Justice for African American Students," Mary Stone Hanley uses theater as a means for African American and Latino youth from poor urban communities to reflect, analyze, and imagine alternatives solutions to the various issues they face in their lives. She describes in detail the pedagogical process of the Tubman Theater Project that uses a culturally relevant problem-posing model to empower youth to see and express themselves as artists and, in so doing, reflect critically on social problems in their communities and their own capacities to be agents of change.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst, the host of *Equity & Excellence in Education*, has donated blog space to the journal. Several articles in this special issue are enhanced with enlarged photos, color photos, video clips, and links to websites. The link to the blog space is embedded in the articles in brackets so that readers of the print version of the journal can enter the URL on their computers and locate the clips. Online readers will be able to click the hyperlink and go directly to the *Equity & Excellence in Education* blog space.

CLOSING

Taken together, the articles in this special issue illustrate both the promise and ongoing challenge of enacting art-based social justice practices that can be transformative in focusing consciousness and organizing action toward justice and social change. They show the power of arts-based pedagogies to engage the imagination, reveal invisible operations of power and privilege, provoke critical reflection, and spark alternative images and possibilities. They also show the importance of ongoing critical reflection for this work with attention to both the specificities of place and the obstacles (internal and external) to maintaining a social justice stance in the face of contemporary neoliberal discourses and structures.

Philosopher Lauren Berlant (2006) uses the term "cruel optimism" to name "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (p. 20). Social justice work is inherently optimistic in its commitment to the belief that a better world is possible. Yet, it can be cruel when we encounter the ubiquitous and slippery ways that power reproduces and reconstitutes itself to compromise the conditions for change. The notion of cruel optimism cautions against attachment to particular methods and strategies, encouraging us to stay awake "to the cognitive *and* affective difficulties of remaining critically present to desire" (Berlant, 2008, para. 10), to the desire for a better world. This desire requires us to be humble in this work, to be willing to give up attachments to this method or to that ideology or practice, in order to remain alert to emergent, yet to be seen, possibilities that may take us in more fruitful, liberatory, and loving directions. The potential of arts-based social justice work is in just such destabilizing, constantly surprising opening to new possibilities. It offers a way to imagine otherwise, again and again, as we embrace our desire for a better world and step out into the unknown spaces that might take us closer to its realization.

NOTES

1. In 2009, a search for the term "social justice" conducted by Adams (2010) found 3,700 articles and 580 book titles in English, while a search by North (2008) found 3,500 titles on social justice education.

This growth in social justice literature has meant that we cannot assume one set of meanings for the term social justice or social justice education. Similarly, social justice art is not a monolithic term, but draws on several different ideologies based on the civil rights movement (race/racism), feminism, queer politics, Marxism/neo-Marxism, postcolonial discourses, and disability studies.

2. For a review of different approaches to social justice pedagogy see Adams (2007, 2010).

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