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You get tenure, what do I get?: Using art to interrogate a researcher's dilemma

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An abstract black and white artwork featuring concentric circles, organic textures, and a central text overlay. The composition includes a large, dark, swirling circular form in the upper left, a series of concentric circles in the upper right, and a circular pattern with a hexagonal grid in the lower right. The background is filled with various textures, including wood grain, brushstrokes, and organic shapes.

ARTICLES

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You get tenure, what do I get?: Using art to interrogate a researcher's dilemma

ABSTRACT

White researcher-advocates whose explorations are situated in schools serving predominantly African American students hope that their research will improve the academic possibilities for those students and reverse systemic injustice. While racial oppression continues as a central thread in the fabric of American educational institutions, white scholars continue to benefit from their research. Through arts-based methods, I explore this issue as it relates to my own research identity and question whether, despite my goals, I am complicit with hegemonic practices that oppress communities of colour within educational contexts.

KEYWORDS

arts-based research
anti-blackness
special education
whiteness
disability
research authenticity
research ethics

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND MY STANCE AS A RESEARCHER

Research authenticity (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Tobin 2006) demands that all participants in qualitative studies benefit from the research endeavour. In alignment with this concept, educational researchers need to see themselves not as disinterested observers but as advocates for the students they engage with. Nevertheless, those of us who work with black youth in the public schools reap many career benefits from our research, including tenure, awards and recognition, while the benefits of the research for the students we research with are uncertain. More doubtful still are the benefits to black youth

in general due to dynamics that include systemic social and economic racism and a lack of political will. Although we may desire not merely to describe the conditions of students but to improve them, we need to grapple with the possibility that our research is only serving ourselves. In this article, I describe how I use arts-based methods to navigate my identity and integrity as a white artist-researcher-advocate in public schools that serve communities of colour.

I see my role as an advocate as essential to my self-definition as a researcher and artist. Researchers are often thought of as being disinterested individuals in search of objective truths. I have never been disinterested in any of my artistic or intellectual pursuits. I see my own freedom and possibilities of becoming what Freire (1970: 44) terms 'fully human' to be intertwined with the freedom and possibilities of others; when I advocate for others I advocate for myself. As Eugene Debs famously said, 'While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free' (Zinn and Arnove 2009: 297). Advocacy means always demanding social justice, which for me is an intellectual and a spiritual calling; it is essential to the idea of authentic research. My use of the term 'researcher' should be understood as embodying advocacy. I was a professional artist for over twenty years before earning my graduate degrees. Although that identity never leaves me, I highlight it here when I am discussing arts-based approaches to research.

THE HISTORICAL RECORD AND BACKGROUND TO THIS STUDY

The statistical record lucidly conveys the obstacles faced by the researcher who works in under-served communities of colour. A disproportionate number of black youth still fail to graduate from high school and college (Casselmann 2014; Ginder et al. 2017; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2018) and are labelled with disabilities, suspended, arrested and incarcerated (Orfield et al. 2004; Annamma et al. 2013; Merkwae 2015). Black children are often presumed to be future criminals by teachers and are expected to underperform (Ferguson 2001; Dickar 2008). Furthermore, they often internalize the negative evaluation of their potential and are doubly stigmatized when labelled with disabilities (Steele 2003; Ho 2004; Holley et al. 2012; Annamma et al. 2013; Bos et al. 2013; Fellner et al. 2017). On a more macro level, black communities are systemically underfunded and under-served in a myriad of ways due to lack of health care (probably even more precarious since the weakening on the 2010 *Affordable Care Act*) (Lau et al. 2012; Adepoju et al. 2015); lack of employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017); and educational condescension that privileges remedial education for students of lower economic class over critical and stimulating discourse (Anyon 1997; Orfield and Lee 2005). Schools are more segregated now than they were in the 1970s (Orfield and Lee 2005). The emotional and psychological scarring, and the very material suffering resulting from the continued legacy of slavery is evoked by contemporary writers and scholars, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, Toni Morrison and Christina Sharpe, and echoes earlier accounts of anti-blackness articulated by Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois and James Baldwin among others.

Although teachers can make an important difference to the trajectory of some students they work with (Diez 2010; Vlachou and Papananou 2015; Honkasilta et al. 2016), black youth, as individuals and as a class, still face formidable systemic obstacles to success. This reality was again poignantly highlighted for me during my research with an 18-year-old African American

woman, Alysha (pseudonym), (mis)diagnosed with ADHD in the fourth grade, who failed almost every class between fourth grade and eleventh grade and was suspended at least once a year during those seven years. I met her at a school for overage and under-credited students that she had recently transferred to and where she was making good progress due to the personal attention, support and respect that she received from the school's faculty and staff. Over the course of the following two years, she enthusiastically and actively worked with me on a research project about her schooling experience.¹ Not only did she co-teach some special-education college classes with me each semester, she also reviewed, criticized, reflected upon and occasionally modified digital collages that I had made based on what she had discussed with my students and me. These collages helped her reflect upon her trajectory and on how she wanted to see herself and be seen by others. She told me, 'You make me think more than I'm used to thinking', and 'You've shown my intelligent side'. At one point during our discussion about one of my collages about her, she told me that her favourite painter was Frida Kahlo. She proceeded to describe and analyse two of Kahlo's paintings in exquisite detail, concluding that Kahlo's paintings of suffering spoke to her intimately and helped her think about her own life.

Then, a few weeks later, upon being rejected by the colleges that she had applied to, Alysha requested that I not use her real name or image in the article I was writing or the exhibition we had discussed. She was exercising her right to refuse the gaze of others (hooks 2015), which could be seen as self-empowering and something to be celebrated. Nevertheless, I could not but help feel that her decision was infused with sadness and a sense of defeat, a sense that the pride and hopeful expectations triumphed by the images and article had now been vanquished by the rejection letters. At that moment, I became poignantly aware that despite moments of epiphany for both of us, the promise that she associated with her future and our research had, at least temporarily, been reversed. Of course, it is difficult to know, and impossible to measure, the benefits to Alysha of the conversations and images that we shared over a period of two years. On some level this not knowing is the frustration of every teacher who works with students facing tremendous odds towards success. Meanwhile, this article serves as a testament to the relatively smooth continuance of my own professional trajectory.

USING ARTS-BASED METHODS TO NAVIGATE MY PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The inspiring event

In the wake of Alysha's refusal to be identified in the article that I was writing, I looked to arts-based methods to contemplate my situation just as I had used those methods to catalyse reflexive discussions with Alysha. Arts-based research (Barone and Eisner 2012; Leavy 2017) welcomes spontaneity and non-linear thinking. It excites the exploration of ideas and shuns claims to truth. It serves to evoke experience with all its contradictions and to provoke discussion that can enrich understanding. In this way, arts-based approaches to research differ from more traditional research methodologies that demand generalizable findings and solutions to pre-defined problems.

I began my visual exploration by re-experiencing what the historian William Sewell Jr. (2005) describes as an 'event', a moment that endures as significant beyond the instant of its enaction and mediates subsequent conditions.

1. All quotes from Alysha included in this article were noted during 2016–17 and 2017–18 school years and are considered personal communication between her and the author.

During my time with Alysha, the most salient event for me was when Alysha, looking at the collages that I had constructed about her, suddenly asked me whether I knew Kahlo's *Without Hope*. When I nodded my head affirmatively, she responded, 'That's an amazing painting. She's lying in bed with some type of structure over her and then there's this demon or something, a spirit coming out of her mouth. That's an amazing painting'. What was so astounding was that as Alysha was speaking she was looking towards the sky in ecstasy, radiant with hope on seeing so vividly again the 'demon' of hopelessness that Kahlo had conjured up. In that moment, the expression of awe on Alysha's face at the impossibility of Kahlo's demon seemed to me a harbinger of unlimited possibility for Alysha, one that embraced her creativity, joy, insight and intimate engagement with the world.

I chose now to examine this event because of how it had marked me, first with excitement and then, after Alysha's withdrawal from our project, with despair-tinged sadness. I began by drawing an image of Alysha (Figure 1), purposefully not a likeness) gazing with rapt hope at Kahlo's demon of hopelessness. This poignant moment reminded me of too many students of colour like Alysha who I have worked with. These students are filled with aliveness, brilliance and fervent ambition but, like the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947), they walk among whiteness unrecognized, disrespected and unacknowledged; they are derailed by an educational system that 'refuses' to see them as full human beings. Images of these students began to populate my drawing, following Alysha, supporting her, demanding to be seen and recognized. To be sure, their historic invisibility, this essence of anti-blackness, had over the course of generations been infused with a deeply internalized self-stigma (Holley et al. 2012; Bos et al. 2013). This stigma had turned the tables

Figure 1: Gene Fellner, *The Demon of Hope*, 2018. Pastel on paper, 40×26.5 inches. Courtesy of author.

on Alysha, making it seem that fault belonged to her alone, an individual fault rather than a curse nurtured in the design of slavery and fortified by legal and economic structures that were produced and reproduced generation after generation. Eventually, they blended into the very lubricant of the American system.

But the drawing, as it evolved, turned out not to be about Alysha, but about my relationship with her in the context of my own professional identity. The image that emerged came not only from the promise denied Alysha but from an emptiness, an inner unsettling, about my own role in the defeat that she experienced. I sensed that the insights and excitements that we had shared had now been swept away by the reverberations of systemic racism that I represented despite my commitment to advocate on behalf of my students.

As I continued with the pastel drawing, the nature of my unease became clearer, rooted as it was in the differentials of class and racial privilege that allowed me to continue my academic pursuits with a surface seamlessness while Alysha's pursuits had been cruelly blunted. First, the hooded heads appeared in the drawing, keeping watch and threatening with a force newly invigorated over the last few years in the United States. Then, I appeared in the drawing, a witness to Alysha's dual captivation, on the one hand by the cathartic release that Kahlo's image offered and, on the other, by the vigilance of the Klan, lurking and ready to ensnare again; golden neckbands and armbands circle around Alysha serving both to beautify and to bind. The whiteness of the Klan hoods brushes against my head, trying to ensnare me as well. They target my own precarious position, inferring complicity and claiming identity. A red figure, devil or disciple, who just moments ago was a vase of flowers that did not seem to fit the composition, leaps towards Alysha.

Collage as an arts-based method

I digitized the pastel drawing and then added to it other scanned images, intuitively producing dozens of digitized collaged images with the rapidity that digitization allows. During this process, my visual sensing exceeds the speed of my analytical and verbal abilities. The images feel right, stages in a series of visual sense-making, that have an integrity because they resonate with my *felt* experience. They commune with the senses rather than proceeding through a sequential, carefully selected set of words that follow lexical rules. This does not mean that I do not revisit the images later with verbally mediated thought – indeed words contribute to sense-making and are maybe essential non-redundant ingredients to collective understanding. It does mean that I begin with a felt experience only partially available to words that hopefully evoke my experience and my predicament for others and provoke discussion about what is going on (the phenomenological question) and why it is going on (the hermeneutic one). The purpose of creating and presenting imagery, as earlier stated, is not the establishment of findings, solutions and generalizable data; such results will not help. Rather the point is to deepen understanding, further reflexivity, to illuminate contradictions and nuances that are interwoven into the situation at hand. Collage as a medium, with its broken, ragged, porous and often invisible (non-existent) borders between discordant images, is particularly suited to embrace and evoke the complexity and contradictions of social life and pave the way for a breach in conventional seeing through which new visions can emerge (Butler-Kisber and Poldma 2010; O'Donoghue 2015).

One of these collages (Figure 2) began with a pastel of Alysha (again not a likeness) that I hoped would manifest both her strength and her

Figure 2: Gene Fellner, Untitled, 2018. Digital collage. 6.2×6.5 inches. Courtesy of author.

vulnerability. Once digitized, multiple renditions of two youths from Kelly James Marshall's painting, *Better Homes, Better Gardens* (1994), began to surround her. Marshall's painting has always represented for me the abridged hopes and dreams of black youth, and at one point I had inserted them into a collage of Alysha standing before the school that, by refusing to see her, had failed her repeatedly in every way. When Alysha asked me who these two youths were, I told her I had extracted them from Marshall's painting. She responded with a wide smile, 'Oh, you gave me friends!' a particularly poignant comment since she had previously told me that she had been placed in the back of the classroom 'by myself' year after year until 'I got used to it'. Now these friends, entering the collage, made it clear that Alysha was not alone. I, the artist-researcher, witness the situation. Although I tell Alysha I am here to advocate for her and her friends who now join her in force, I hear the white spook at my side begin to laugh and I have to examine who and what I am really serving.

Jewish but still white

There is not enough space in this article to view the dozens of drawings and collages, in all their iterations that emerged during my exploration of my role as a white researcher in a community of colour. I have included here a particular collage (Figure 3) in which all representations of Alysha disappeared and were replaced by a tapestry of identical self-portraits. Slave ships of the Middle Passage with their bound-together captives, many dead or dying, poke through

Figure 3: Gene Fellner, Are White Researchers of Black Lives Complicit?, 2018. Digital collage. 7.3×5.5 inches. Courtesy of author.

the many repetitions of me. Simultaneously, the partial face of Robert E. Lee, still claimed as a hero by many who call themselves white (Coates 2015), sneaks his gaze out. I am not responsible for the slave ships and what Lee did I find repugnant. Yet, in a world of skin hegemony, his whiteness slips itself on me and paves my way with privilege taken-for-granted, a sign to the world of the official pecking order. It is the image that clarifies my complicity with terror irrespective of my desire to shed my connection to it. Whiteness entraps me like a Kafka tale or an Escher painting in a surreal world that nevertheless inflicts material damage. Here, whiteness, fictional as it is, still rules, embedded, engraved and fused into the history, culture and economic structures that coat and entrap us all. It is a status quo that white people accept as natural, that we ride upon mostly without thought and that we can shed only with extreme difficulty and determination based on intolerable awareness. Even in schools that serve only students of colour, like the school that Alysha attended, whiteness rules in absentia. It hovers over policy and the attitudes that make and are made by it. It is administered even by teachers and administrators of colour who have also internalized the hierarchy of worth that leaves black students on the bottom. Bourdieu (2000) tells us that to tear ourselves away from the 'habitus' that our skin engenders and protects, we need to join pedagogy and reflexivity to a rigorous routine of bodily counter-training. He gives no instruction, however, on how to do so (Fellner and Kwah 2018).

Suddenly, impulsively, I place a Jewish star on one of my likenesses. It is an effort, I later understand, to set myself apart from whiteness by recognizing the killing of my mother's parents by the Nazis who did not see them as white.

It is an effort to distance myself from whiteness by re-presenting the desperate and ill-fated voyage of the *Pentcho*, the ship that was supposed to carry my father's parents to freedom; instead it was denied harbour and sustenance at every port despite my grandfather's plea to help these desperate escaping Jews who were also not seen as white. My skin is their skin. Despite my own denial of whiteness, however, these collages call my whiteness out and condemn the anti-blackness that feeds and sustains it, thus permitting a calculated fiction to become a lived reality. These drawings and collages tell me that those who call themselves white or assume the privileges that attach to whiteness must assume a heavy load of contestation so that 'mutual recognition' (hooks 1994: 13) within humanity has a chance.

ALYSHA'S TRAJECTORY AND A POEM

There are always parents, teachers, friends and strangers who can make an eventful difference in a student's life trajectory. There are also, always, contingencies – unplanned coincidences of favourable events, and exceptionality – students who despite extraordinary odds make it for reasons that we cannot measure or fully understand. But Alysha's overarching trajectory, although it was not and is not pre-determined, has thus far followed a well-worn path of anti-blackness.

It began with slavery
continued through chain gangs,
lynchings,
prisons,
all manner of segregation,
and state-sanctioned deprivation.

It has been statistically verified
for generations
in the numbers of Blacks
unemployed
undereducated
incarcerated
murdered
through official and unofficial means.

It has been tallied
by scholars,
given voice to
by artists.
These accounts,
words, images and music
are testaments to
the enduring thread of racism,
the endured thread of racism,
and the enduring spirit of opposition that
without pause
has sought to dismantle racist structures.

I told Alysha
the article I was writing

and the images that affirmed her
might help others like her.

I told Alysha
it could reduce
the number of youth
mis-labeled with disabilities
because they are black.

I told Alysha
the article would confirm
again
the dismal education
black children receive
because of white oppression.

I told Alysha
the article
might raise teachers'
awareness
of attitudes they held
that demean
students of color
and students with disabilities
thus empowering teachers
to reverse injustice
by transforming themselves.

I told Alysha
the article
could help keep
resistance
alive.

Alysha nodded,
skeptical.

I
also
doubted
my own words.

CONTINUING THOUGHTS

Lisa Delpit writes:

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze.

(1988: 297)

We need to listen to each other through our very skin, to experience, if only momentarily, the experience of students tracked towards failure by schools

and the societies that they reflect. Maybe most importantly, however, for those of us who are white educational researchers, we also need to locate the truth in our own opinions, which is what Socrates tried to guide his students to do (Arendt 2004). We need to expose ourselves to the harsh lens not only of another's angry gaze but through the harsh lens of our own values of decency. The concept of race is only, after all, a tool of power. The desire for power to dehumanize others, to make them lesser so we can feel better, is a human desire rather than a racial one although race makes it easier to divide the spoils. I write this not to make the struggle against anti-blackness less vital and urgent. I do so only to stress that beneath race there is a struggle for power and superiority that needs to be addressed and a corresponding urgency to sustain values that recognize and nourish the full humanity of every person.

For the artist who uses imagery or words to resist and foment resistance to dehumanization of any sort, there is the idea that the non-literal can reach where the informational cannot, that it can seep deeper into the recesses of our spirit and serve to move us on the level of the body, in our skin, where facts and figures themselves find only a distant response. We hope that what evokes in us also evokes in others, and that change in the larger world, even as it mediates our innermost being, is also transformed by the changes that we make in ourselves and radiate from ourselves. I know that this takes time that we do not have.

In the drawings and collages that I constructed as part of this self-examination, of which the three here are only a very small sample, I subject my identity as an artist-researcher-advocate to my own gaze. This gaze is not devoid of disappointment at my shortcomings. Nor is it unaware or unfeeling of the anger with which others may gaze at me. Still, in the spirit of arts-based research, my self-reflective gaze embraces the critical compassion and the care of self that is necessary to the process of self-actualization (hooks 1994).

These images, emerging from within me rather than submitting to a pre-conceived outline, made me pay attention, which is a dimension of care, to my own professional quandaries as they emerged. They did not seek to lecture me, or to engender shame or guilt. Rather, they relentlessly re-presented to me images of my own professional identity as a problem to be unravelled. My process resulted in no answers or solutions, and it did not erase my doubts about my professional practice. Still, my arts-based process and the artefacts that it produced fore-fronted the ethical conundrum of researchers who claim to be advocates for their students but often may be the only ones to benefit from the research that they conduct. By doing so, the images strengthened my determination to relentlessly contest the concept of whiteness and the gaze that sticks to and is interwoven with it. Hopefully, my images will also strengthen the determination of other researchers to do what they can to shed the privilege attached to their skin. Together, as part of this process, perhaps we can make more equitable the share in benefits that arise from our research. If we can, then we will be able to respond with greater authenticity to the reproach that I would utter if I were one of my students, 'You get tenure, what do I get?'

The skin you are born with marks you, and the structures that multiply those marks and reify them are formidable, but none of us are reduced or defined solely by race, and what we do in the world counts. We can change the meaning of the skin. We can make the meaning of the skin meaningless.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Fellner, G. (2018), 'You get tenure, what do I get?: Using art to interrogate a researcher's dilemma', *Visual Inquiry: Learning & Teaching Art*, 7:3, pp. 169–81, doi: 10.1386/vi.7.3.169_1

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Gene Fellner returned to school for graduate studies after spending 25 years as an artist and activist, which included being a member of the Attica Brothers Legal Defense, a brigadista in Nicaragua and being named a *Distinguished Artist of New Jersey* for his series of pastels on John Brown and slavery. He received a master's degree in multicultural education and English as a Second Language in 2007 and a Ph.D. in Urban Education in 2012. He is currently an assistant professor of education at the City University of New York (CUNY) in Staten Island and occasionally teaches an arts-based research course at the CUNY Graduate Center.

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