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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.