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The arts have the ability to play a vital role in imagining an alternative way to comprehend/transform the academic world of writing collaborations and challenge the systems that sustain White privilege.

## **Desirable Difficulties: Toward a Critical Postmodern Arts-Based Practice**

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Prior scholarship on collaborative writing projects by women in the academy acknowledges sustained attempts of intraracial and interracial collaboration/divides. Interracial collaborative scholarship, while noble in effort, may result in unacknowledged tensions surrounding racial identity politics. In these collaborative environments the problematics of race cannot be denied, with Black women often drawing upon their racialized identities, while White women emphasize their gendered identities. An unawareness and/or invisibility of Whiteness as a racial construct of privilege further problematizes feminist postmodern discourse. This polyvocal text focuses on responding to and working within the tensions of identity politics encountered in interracial scholarship among four women academics. What follows is an attempt at describing an arts-based project, emerging from concentrated efforts to develop an approach to collaborative scholarship aimed at identifying and inhabiting the divides rather than only navigating around, over or under them.

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While my autoethnographic partners could acknowledge my “Brown-ness,”<sup>3</sup> none explicitly acknowledged their own “Whiteness,” further cementing an otherness about my existence. This uneasiness left me questioning, many times, my desire to continue with or abandon the project. Feeling weary and wary, I proceeded forward. (Gloria, personal communication, November 9, 2015)

This paper focuses on that feeling—knowing something will be difficult but making the choice to move forward anyway. Specifically we, a research group of one Brown woman and three White women, explore how we formulated an approach to collaborative scholarship that reflects both individual and collective experience. In what follows, we consider the individual and collective through intertwined narratives of our thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of working inter/intraculturally (Moody & Robbins, 2013). We begin by briefly describing an arts-based writing practice that emerged from our concentrated effort to develop an approach to collaborative scholarship centered around identifying and inhabiting the divides between differences, rather than only navigating around, over or under them. Following this we explore our theoretical influences by contextualizing the key terms *submerge*, *inhabit*, *navigate*, and *divide*: terms that reflect our embodied encounters with one another. Finally, we offer readers a few words of caution when considering ways of engaging in interracial collaborative scholarship and conclude with some recommendations for how this method might be useful in research and educational settings.

### The Project

Before all this I was as a high school art teacher in a large low-income school. As a White teacher in a sea of Brown faces I often felt different, uncomfortable, abnormal. To flee my discomfort I

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<sup>3</sup>This cultural signifier is one that the first author, Gloria, adopted, given the complexity and variation within the national language of race invested in “color” and the complexity of her own racialized/cultural inheritance. Gloria has a multiracial identity and multiethnic lineage within the borders of a White dominant culture, which at times has come to represent a challenge to dominant definitions of Blackness (Demirturk, 2012). Scholars are now writing about a “Browning” America (Sundstrom, 2008; Milian, 2013).

envisioned myself as their educational savior. I am ashamed of how I perceived my students and even more ashamed at what role I assumed. I am slowly learning discomfort is not an indicator of threat or a sign to flee— but rather of the increased potential for growth, change, and awareness. (Sara, personal communication, November 26, 2015)

The four of us met at different points of a doctoral program in art education at the University of Georgia. We shared past experiences as high school art teachers, where our love of creativity and education often united us. Each of us eventually accepted tenure-track positions in various teaching and research institutions across the Southeast. From the outset, we decided to document our movements in higher education through autoethnography. As a form of self-reflection and writing, autoethnographic methods became both a process and product focused on the exploration of our personal experiences within a wider cultural, political, and social contextualization of academia (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Our collaborative autoethnographic project started as a way to stay connected and identify key transitional experiences from our first years as women in academia. As we graduated and moved to our new homes, we committed to posting our reflections and experiences to a private Tumblr account. We also expanded our circle of involvement as we moved through our first year, starting a large-scale installation piece, planning gallery exhibitions, creating individual artworks documenting our movements, and visiting each other.

Inspired by arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2013; Leavy, 2015; Rolling, 2013), we used these practices as a way to enhance and deepen an understanding of the human condition through alternative (versus conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry. Our arts-based expansion and methodological practice allowed us to engage in forms of expression (writing and art-making) that we found useful in honoring the multiplicity of voices. For us, arts-based practice and method advances our desires to conceptualize, (re)organize and represent our data as a

means to reflect our distinct ways of being and knowing (Rolling, 2013) while emphasizing that working aesthetically can be a way of anchoring knowledge. Rolling (2013) also reminds us:

Whether they are oral, visual, written or performance arts practices, arts-based methodologies for organizing human data effectively inform not because they are beautiful; rather, they are beautiful to us because they secure the coupling of our emotional attachments and enthrall our attention around the most salient qualities of life. (p 54)

Particularly when involving “bodily participation” (Greenwood, 2012, p. 18), we view this project through a social justice lens (Bell & Desai, 2011), as a way of illuminating sources of “othering” and working towards distribution of opportunity and representation of voice.

Now in our second year of the project, it is clear those initial arts-based expansions were our first attempts at acknowledging ourselves as individuals situated within historical and social matrices. Marked by specific positions within these circumstances and locations, we understood our experiences as embodied. The concept of embodiment naturally conjures images of bodies, more specifically, racialized bodies. This is when the discomfort emerged.

You see, though the four of us share many things, we also have our own sets of unique experiences. Most noticeable is that as a self-identified person of color, my embodied experiences differ from those of my writing/research companions, each of whom identifies as White. Making matters of racial identity fraught with complexity, many have assumed that I am Black. Further cementing this identity, was my father, who shared stories of growing up in the Deep South as a Black male. As such, I have lived life largely through the perceptions of others. (Gloria, personal communication, November 26, 2015)

Prior scholarship on collaborative writing projects by women in the academy acknowledges sustained

cases/attempts of interracial and intraracial collaboration/divides (Moody & Robbins, 2013). Consistent with recurring tensions around race and identity politics in feminist work (Banks & Thomas, 2004), Black women who have addressed the topic often made prominent their racialized identity, whereas White women’s reflections on their own collaborative work tended to emphasize their shared gender identities (Moody & Robbins, 2013). Only in the last 20 years has scholarship on the intersectionality of multiple identity locations (e.g., race *and* gender) been problematized (Collins, 1998, 2012, 2015).

We always “see” from points of view that are invested with our social, political, and personal interests, inescapably—centric in one way or another.... We often err on the side of exclusion and thus submerge large areas of human history and experience. (Bordo, 1990, p. 223)

## Submerge

**sub-merge.** /səb'mərj/

**verb.** to completely cover or obscure<sup>2</sup>

**used in a sentence:** During the writing process issues of race were often unintentionally submerged by the dominant discourse of gender.

We cannot deny the problematics of race. Embedded into the DNA of American history, it continues to remain the elephant in the room. With the election of the nation’s first (self-identified) Black American president, we have witnessed how challenges surrounding race have forced their way into popular, national and scholarly discourse—for better or worse (Cobb, 2011; Hill, 2014; Omi and Winant, 2015; Springer, 2014). Those who have bought into the rhetoric of “post-race” no longer believe it necessary to examine issues surrounding race in general, and, specifically, interracial exchanges and how these exchanges might advance or further impede our

<sup>2</sup> The authors utilized arts-based writing practices and combined definitions from dictionaries with their own interpretations, giving context to each term in relation to their collaborative process. This and subsequent definitions begin with the portion from the dictionary ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)) followed by the phrase “used in a sentence” that indicates the authors’ interpretation.

nation's democratic ideals (Lentin, 2012). Additionally, the field of communications has given hypervisibility to interracial relationships, both intimate and platonic (Frankenberg, 1993; Orbe & Harris, 2008).

Taking on a topic such as interracial relations is not an easy task. Trying to reach complete consensus among all parties is fruitless, and I question the necessity. However, it has long been my belief that as humans, we exhibit courage and build strength by leaning into difficult situations, rather than by avoiding them. (Gloria, personal communication, December 23, 2015)

From the outset, we were not overtly interested in trying to reach a shared consensus or voice amongst all; rather, we were interested in how we might find new ways of working and writing collaboratively, specifically approaches that honor both the unique and universal voices inherent in collaborative autoethnographic work. Unfortunately, during our discussions about what to do with our data, and even in the data generation itself, normative Whiteness (Bush, 2011; McIntosh, 1988) quietly emerged. During the data generation phase the three White women in the group often overlooked Whiteness, consistently acknowledging identities as mothers, wives, sisters, colleagues, girlfriends, partners, assistant professors, and new graduates, among others. Inherent in these identities is a lack of racial designation, which ultimately eroded at the concern for authentic voice ever present in dialogues about how our project would manifest. Feeling this subversive undercurrent, we stopped, reconsidered, and reworked our approach to navigate and inhabit the divides often encountered in interracial collaborative scholarship (Orbe & Harris, 2008).

My husband and 3-month old daughter meet us at the café as our meeting closes. I want these women to know my daughter, and I want my daughter to know these women: These women who are driven, smart, creative; these women, with whom I have shared my secrets, challenges, and heartaches through the intimacy of our shared Tumblr blog.

Strolling back to our car with my new family, I say—"honey, I think we might lose Gloria."

Why did I say this to my husband instead of Gloria, Sara, and Kelly? Was I afraid of what might be spoken? I didn't want to face the reality that Gloria might leave the project, and instead, I shielded away from the discomfort. In writing through the desirable difficulties woven in and through our collective autoethnography, I am left with more questions than answers: What held me back from articulating the embodied knowing that Gloria might be pulling away? Was I disillusioned by our connection as women, as academics, as graduates of the same degree program, and as women becoming friends? Had my Whiteness, my White privilege, my White body failed me, blinded me (Spillane, 2015)? Spun, stunned, stalled—this process has found me heavier, mulling in and through what this means for not only me, but for how I will raise my daughter. (Brooke, personal communication, January 7, 2016)

When you work with a group of women long enough, you begin to sense tension; the air changes and attitudes shift when introducing discomfort to the equation. We all knew it was happening. We had to do something. Something had to change. Sara spoke up at our meeting in May, "You know those *Choose Your Own Adventure* books we used to read when we were kids? That would be so cool to reinvent as arts-based research!" In retrospect, we could have never known what a powerful mode of representation this book format offered us. Inspired by the books we devoured as adolescents, we called our arts-based interpretation Map Your Own Adventure (MYOA) as consistent with our research focus on movement and embodied cartographies. The ability to allow the reader to shift bodies, locations and storylines by simply turning to page 15 or 42, opened up opportunities for representing both shared experiences and individual contexts.

August brought the visit to my house. Gloria called ahead to say she was spending some time with her

family and would be arriving late—did she not want to see us? This was one of the first times I remember us saying it aloud—acknowledgement that we sensed Gloria’s discomfort. What I realize now is that putting race into the conversation was the first attempt at consciously establishing trust and nurturing vulnerability with Gloria; although, like most first steps, we were destined to stumble and fall—see, we had yet to put race into the conversation with Gloria in the room. (Sara, personal communication, December 31, 2015)

These whispers of difference continued to persist, increasing with intensity; however, we focused and began work on the specifics of the MYOA project. We began physically mapping our experiences, making decisions about voice and resonant themes. Although the original books were from the perspective of a protagonist, we decided that the voice guiding our movements would be that of Tenure. Because we are all tenure-track, this common thread emerged as the guiding force behind most of the decisions we made. In the original introduction, to our MYOA book, we left out the bodily designation of White, and Gloria later added it. Gloria had not mentioned it explicitly to the group as she later admitted “racial battle fatigue” with being the lone researcher outwardly acknowledging bodily racial inscriptions. To Gloria, this meant that any further racialized discourse might place added distance within the ever-growing divide. This instance of normative Whiteness is but one of the subversive ways invisible structures still impact even the best of intentions, an idea we discuss further in the remainder of the paper. We have included the initial introduction below (see Figure 1).

For those not familiar with the books, a narrator directs the story through questions or intersections—offering opportunities for the reader to make decisions about the direction of the story. At these junctures, the reader considers the scenario and then chooses a path or direction from the options at the end of the page. The resulting story has many different pathways and endings. Dependent upon the path the reader chooses, the outcome varies; some storylines end abruptly, while others last the duration of

the text. The conceptual and physical format mirrored our experiences, and, further, the opportunity to construct a text that allowed space to acknowledge different voices and bodies was exciting.

Page-to-page transitions take the reader away from the location of the node and lead her to a new position in the text; she will have to literally leave the nodal situation “behind” in order to resurface at a different site within the book. (Meifert-Menhard, 2013, p. 66)

This physical relocation within the text and the story is where we see the potential for the MYOA format to be a transformative collaborative writing experience,

### WARNING

This book extends a different type of invitation, a chance to map your own path through the first years in academia by answering a series of questions posed by TENURE. The body you will wear in and through the stories to come may or may not be your own. You will become a shape-shifter, moving between bodies: artist, anxious, eager, lonely, tense, teacher, researcher, Brown, wife, pregnant, mother, partner, first generation college graduate, daughter, mentor, mentee, and... and... and...

As you read, you will need to trust these bodies, listen to these bodies. They will guide you. They will offer you a myriad of paths: they will attune you to openings, lines of possibility, and creative exploration. Should you ever wonder what might have been, do not despair, for these bodies will allow you to circle back, take a new course of action, make a different choice. As your body transforms en route, hold on to these three truths:

*Things have been set in motion.*

*Only time will tell.*

*Hang in there, friend.*

Figure 1. Introduction to our forthcoming book.

one that gives voice to the individual, the individual's context, and the individual's own story, while also positioning them within a larger structure and shared experience.

Working within this group of women, I struggled to maintain my voice; I wondered if they might become exhausted of listening to "race talk." Further, the language of the feminist postmodern theoretical discourse considered for our project felt successful as exclusionist language, performing the work of alienating the voice of my "Black<sup>3</sup>" self (Collins, 2008). I found myself asking the question: "Where do I fit in?" I wondered about the ways in which postmodern discourse enacted exclusionary practice, questioning whether I might find openings for inclusion. (Gloria, personal communication, January 7, 2016)

This writing was arts-based and, like making artwork, we were trying to grasp the significance of the makers' context while creating something bigger—something that would resonate with a viewer; except, for us, there were four distinctly different makers. The issue of embodied experiences, felt through race-inscription, though subversive and silent, became significant and sought after.

## Embodied

**em·bod·ied.** /əmˈbädēd/

**verb.** past tense (embody). be an expression of or give a tangible or visible form to (an idea, quality, or feeling).

**used in a sentence:** The way-finding of our collective journeys depends largely upon embodied experiences, always sensing and responding.

Attuning to the body through the lens of racialization re-awakened the senses of the group during our face-to-face and digital meetings and became a salient way-finding mechanism for this project. Though we

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<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to give equal importance and consistency to racial designations of *Black*, *White*, *Brown*, and so forth; according to the APA Publication Manual, 6th edition, racial and ethnic groups are proper nouns designated by capitalization.

encountered a felt tension or roughness, we pushed forward to engage deeper in the exploration of our differences. This reworking became something more than tuning into our differences; rather, we began to engage in what Gloria has called *desirable difficulties*—*desirable* as a necessary course of action, and *difficult* as a thing that is hard to accomplish, deal with, or understand.

## The Theory

The arts have always been a way to acknowledge both the universal and the particular, at times serving as a vehicle for agency and activism while simultaneously existing as a social institution complicit in the negative stigmatization and oppression of historically marginalized groups (Greene, 1995; Harris, 2003; Knight, 2006; Nochlin, 1996; Siegesmund, 2007). Thus, when considering art's role in our own project, we felt it was important to carefully delineate the particulars, and, in this case, the particularities of intersectionality (Collins, 2015). For us, art is not only a vehicle for ideas, but also a way of thinking about how we approach representational acts in our research. Artful patterns of writing and composing manuscripts become a mode of critical thinking that offers the opportunity to focus on the nuances of individual experiences while creating a contextualized notion of collective experience (Richardson, 2008). In our collaborative autoethnographic work, we employed the overarching construct of cartography to begin to draw connections between artful thinking and final representation. Embodied cartography, as a theoretical and methodological approach, offers opportunities for viewing similar spaces through different bodies while also acknowledging the particulars of each body and vantage point. We see this approach as our attempt at simultaneously thinking of individual and shared experiences in both fluid and structured ways.

The body is both mobile and channeled, both fluid and fixed, into places. It is not only the "geopolitics of the body" but also the politics of connections and disconnection, of rights over the body, of the body as a site of struggle. (Nast & Pile, 1998, p. 2)

We viewed cartography as locations of experience carried out from particular points of view that create tension—both a finiteness of perception and an opening out to the world—as a place for every perception, seeing bodies as sites of struggle. Yet more complicated still is the notion of separate sites of struggle sharing similar locales (McIntosh, 2015). Within these varying perspectives we encountered the marked divide made salient by racialized identity.

## Divide

**di·vide.** /deˈvīd/

**verb.** separate or be separated into parts

**used in a sentence:** During the data collection and analysis phases we began to notice a divide forming between normative and racialized experience.

I was raised not to talk about race. I still hear the comments from my White community: “I don’t see color” and “I’m not racist but...” We have been taught to ignore race so that we can bridge our differences, but what we are doing is furthering the divides—ignoring and silencing. Often I forget to acknowledge my Whiteness in the presence of those who identify as Brown and Black, and I am ashamed when I think that it’s happened even in the context of our collaboration—between friends. White has become normative, expected, invisible; and I realize I am no better than those who make the comments. I am guilty of ignoring and silencing through my own normative practices. I have contributed to the divide. (Kelly, personal communication, January 7, 2016)

Research has revealed that even with an advanced education, most privileged White persons are under- and misinformed about racial inequities (Bush, 2011). We have seen in our own work how race becomes (or sometimes does not become) a marker of identity, and more disturbing still, the normalization of Whiteness. These divides have shaped the way we approach collaborative scholarship, searching for opportunities to acknowledge the differences in our

racialized markers of identity while still acknowledging our shared experiences as women in academia.

To borrow from *The New York Times* opinion column, *The Great Divide*, “OUR divisions are deep” (Stiglitz, 2014), we are a nation of divides. Great disparities in wealth, race, educational opportunities, and arts exposure to name a few, define privilege. These privileges come in many forms. As four women situated in higher education with PhDs ascribed to our names, we are keenly aware of the privileges our positions afford us; even within these places of privilege, divides still remain. We are interested in exposing these divides, removing the haze placed over our positions by our fortunate placement within the walls of the ivory tower. While the curves of our breasts and coding of our chromosomes speak to our shared experience as women, when one pans out to view the broader picture, distinctions emerge. Encountering these differences, even if for a passing second, we become aware of the great divides created, impacting how Whiteness is viewed in a manner uniquely distinctive from the *other*. “Whiteness thus becomes neutral in meaning, a colour yet no colour” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 45). Essentially, Whiteness is so mainstream that it no longer recognizes itself as Whiteness, thus pushing it into a locale of normalcy<sup>4</sup> (Levine-Rasky, 2013). As a social construct, *Whiteness* has become such a pervasive metaphor for *normal* that it is no longer seen as a thing, rather it is what makes us the *same* or *other*. It is within the divide of *sameness* and *otherness* that we begin to bump up against and navigate between the postmodern beliefs often guiding our collaborative work.

## Navigate

**nav·i·gate.** /ˈnavəˌɡāt/

**verb.** plan and direct a route or course, especially by using instruments or maps; to travel on a desired course after planning a route.

**used in a sentence:** During our collaborative

<sup>4</sup> Normalization has become a popular theoretical tool for identifying the arbitrariness of regarding as normal many ideas we take for granted as normal: heterosexuality, capitalism, the family, poverty, individuality, consumption, and love. It is a powerful way to uproot certainty about foundational categories of thought and forces us to account for the way in which a particular meaning has become hegemonic. (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 43)

cartographic explorations we attempt a critical awareness of how we navigate collective experiences, while still honoring the individual.

Postmodern scholarship explores the concept of *otherness*, yet by its very definition, otherness is that which is not normal, thus it perpetuates the problematic nature of Whiteness as normal and everything else as *other*. Inherent in the *same/different* supposition of postmodernism is a lack of attention to the structures that put the *same* in one place and the *other* somewhere else. *Otherness* as a postmodern concept thus becomes problematic for a group of women occupying the place of *other-as-women*, and then further muddies the concept of the *other woman* within our group (Kim, 2009).

Understandably, when working in a research collaboration, you must find a middle ground between the varying paradigmatic perspectives; however, as the project progressed, a deep interest in postmodern feminist thought became a central tenet of much of the group's writing. Like other scholars of color (hooks, 2001; Moody & Robbins, 2013), I remained skeptical about embracing a postmodern feminist stance, with its aims to privilege a deconstruction of identity, embracing a colorblindness of sorts. (Gloria, personal communication, October 27, 2015)

At first glance, a postmodern feminist stance appears to be a logical approach in support of a liberation from positivist theories of epistemological and methodological certainty. However, danger lurks below the surface. Black feminist scholars (Collins, 1998; hooks, 2001) agree that a postmodern stance is an effective critique of power, yet maintain that it is not a theory of empowerment. Employing exclusionary language in addition to language of difference, it is void of the substance necessary to effectively support and empower the embodied experiences of women of color. In other words, it does the work of maintaining a discourse to reduce *difference* as essentialist, thereby dis-embodimenting all persons and eliminating any discourse or engagement *with* power. It raises

the question: *how might we begin to see the divide as a place of productive discourse and empowerment, and begin to courageously navigate collective experiences?* hooks (2001) notes:

Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space to sever ties or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent ruptures, surfaces, contextuality and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined to narrow, separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of everyday. (p. 2484)

We must look at these ideas from *within* the divide rather than *outside* of it; we must find ways to first navigate, and, then, eventually inhabit the spaces our differences create. We do not have to leave postmodernism behind, but we should be keenly aware of the potentially problematic nature inherent in a postmodern view of the world, paying close attention to divides as potential sites for inhabiting the spaces desirable difficulties create.

### Inhabit

**in-hab-it.** /in'habət/.

**verb.** to live in or occupy (a place or environment)

**used in a sentence:** The goal of our collaborative writing has been to allow each other to democratically inhabit our shared writing project.

The navigation of this artful writing project, then, becomes a desirable difficulty, a generative process where risks into the unknown and trust-building must take place (Moody & Robbins, 2013). We explore this writing process as a means of learning to compose more thoughtfully and critically together than when writing alone, to question the unquestioned, and to trouble the perception of normal. Through work on the MYOA project, we attempt to inhabit and tame some of the unruliness of collaborating within the intersectionalities of race and gender (Collins, 2015),



attuning closely to relations of power and voice. Inextricably linked are our embodied experiences in the places we inhabit, and we seek further guidance by the political and social forces of the past and present. Nast and Pile (1998) argued, “there is an urgent need to look at the relationship between bodies and places...because the ways in which we live our body/place relationships are political” (p. 1). Acknowledging our embodied histories within time and place allows us to personify our locations through the conceptual mapping of writing. Just as artists across time have been inspired by cartography (Harmon, 2010), so, too, are we. We are interested in how this generative and collaborative writing practice might continue to help us navigate the terrain that we inhabit collectively, while giving voice to the separate individuals traversing the same spaces.

### A Word of Caution

What has come of this collaboration? Grounded in our common desire to support one another in continued scholarship, a deeper connection and unique relationship has emerged, one blurring the boundaries between professional/personal. Despite the varied epistemological stances found within our research group, we affirm our diversity and continue to seek ways to disrupt, without reinforcing, the inequities. While we have entered this venture in respectful and open ways, susceptibility to the pervasive undercurrents of the construction of race causes still exists. The work of collaboration inspires the responsibilities of staying attuned to the nuances of language and structures. Ever present, we must check and recheck that our actions are inclusionary, and not hegemonizing. This is but one path toward staring in the eye of the often devastating encounters with race; it is easier to look away when face-to-face with discomfort. Thus one must continue to maintain a keen awareness that superficial curiosity of the “other” will neither forge nor maintain the trusting environment necessary to sustain authentic engagement. This practice requires a move away from an appetite for ethno-tourism.

The night before Gloria arrived in Florida, three of us lounged in Sara’s living room, tired yet somehow

energized by one another’s company. In our last Skype conversation before the visit, we had felt a tension arise and Gloria’s silence in the conversation continued to reverberate among and between us. Someone asked if Gloria was okay. Someone else wondered aloud if Gloria would leave the project. We all wondered if we had done something wrong. My mouth went dry as the thoughts crossed my mind...Have I truly been honoring Gloria’s voice and the uniqueness of the Brown experience? Have I put myself as a White woman in the vulnerable spaces we are asking her to inhabit? **Have I unknowingly marginalized my colleague friend?** (Kelly, personal communication, January 17, 2016)

I arrived a day later than the others; our meeting in Florida was generative. In fact, we had reached a point of breakthrough in our attempt at honoring all voices in this project.

By embracing the Map Your Own Adventure (MYOA) format to plot our stories, we decided to create an introductory page for our book. In listing the various bodily markers (artist, teacher, mother, etc.), I noticed that while my own “Brown” marker was readily identified, the marker for “White” had been omitted; a sober reminder of the power embedded within the legacy of normative Whiteness. It had been rendered so normal, that unconscious acts such as these foster complacency—one that reproduces socially-constructed norms. We often discuss how these systems oppress people of color. My question now is: **How do these systems oppress people who perceive themselves as White?** (Gloria, personal communication, January 17, 2016)

I spoke to Gloria on the phone about the book introduction—I can’t believe we left out the designator of White. How will I be able to help with this project if I don’t even notice something like this! I found myself floundering when I spoke with Gloria, worried that I would fall over my words or say something insensitive. The discomfort I felt was my first knowing battle with normalized Whiteness. I continue to wrestle with normalization of Whiteness. **Mostly, I think, because deep down**

I'm afraid I don't know how to be anything other than "normal." (Sara, personal communication, January 17, 2016)

### Coda: Self/Other in the Arts and Art Education

In writing this paper, all of us proved willing to get vulnerable, to engage directly with difficult conversations. Yet, it did not happen on its own. Only through the messy, lively process of writing, receiving feedback from reviewers, reengaging with the work, reevaluating, and rewriting, did our conversations begin to directly articulate and address how race permeates our collaborations. **An opening was created, and we all chose to leap.** (Brooke, personal communication, January 17, 2016)

The arts have the ability to play a vital role in imagining an alternative way to comprehend/transform the academic world of writing collaborations and challenge the systems that sustain Whiteness privilege. We did not set out to enact an arts-based social justice project, yet when faced with the challenge of honoring our polyvocal text, it prompted action easily categorized as such (Bell & Desai, 2011). If social justice is a goal that can be sought using the analytical tools that feminist and critical theories provide (Bell, 2007; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; North, 2008), then this project might be seen as a way to illuminate sources of *othering* and work towards equitable distribution of opportunity and representation of voice.

With this in mind, we consider the implications for how our experiences might inform the critical postmodern art educator. We cannot ignore the impact our varied positionalities have on our pedagogical practices and students and the importance of considering the various ways racism and heterosexism "work to shape consciousness and produce identity" (Acuff, 2014, p. 67). Thus, we hold positions of power in the classroom—powers to incite dialogues about race and hegemony—powers to perpetuate as well as powers to transform.

Through our work together, we have exposed the depth of an embedded normativity of Whiteness and unintended *othering* that infiltrated a space of

friendship, scholarship, and collaboration. While we sometimes found ourselves uncomfortable as we reflected on our words and experiences, we continued forward by a commitment to both our project and each other. We felt compelled, even through discomfort, to share our experiences as a means of opening dialogues toward the importance of understanding our own social positions within the matrices of domination and subordination (Collins, 1998). As we have discovered, such matrices are often not visible to the White majority, however, they are present and affective. They permeate our research projects, our words, our art, and our classrooms. Scholars have argued that the arts are uniquely suited to hold open a space for broader understanding of systems of oppression and injustice (Greene, 1995; hooks, 2001; Rancier, 2008). We see this project as one such space.

Through this arts-based project, our work seeks to reinforce and make essential a commitment to honoring and commenting on relational intersections (Collins, 2015). When viewed as a "relationship in progress," we acknowledge the potential divides and the nuances of what it means to work together toward a common goal. The unique format of our MYOA project challenges a postmodernist exclusionary unwillingness to "engage the experiences of writings of the truly marginalized" (hooks, 2001, p. 2476). Working through these tensions cultivated a space for us to recognize and expose the norms and hierarchies of existing social orders. This, we believe, is the first of many steps necessary to engage a *critical* postmodern stance. With this in mind, a critical postmodernist arts-based practice opens a dialogue for inclusion of the voices of the historically and socially marginalized (Collins, 1998; hooks, 2001; Lorde, 2007), and allows the occasion for new types of bonding and transformation to occur. In sum, we must seek potential spaces of *divide, navigate* them relationally, and *inhabit* the between. Through MYOA, we have found ourselves awakened to the intersectionalities and transformation of self/other as we move together, artfully mapping our journeys in higher education, which is a relationship in progress—**this is the adventure we have chosen.**

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