Using Art to Tell Stories and Build Safe Spaces: Transforming Academic Research Into Action

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how art can be used to tell stories and actively build safe spaces, and grew out of reflections from a capacity-building and knowledge translation/mobilization project involving 7 young people living on the streets. The paper considers how research can contribute to an examination of anti-oppressive practice and methodology, and an application of it in the field through an arts-based agenda. Conceptually, the paper takes up the postmodern turn in methodological considerations by exploring how the "spectacle" of a research agenda can come to be undone by a more participatory research process. This paper speaks to the processes involved in creating an arts-based environment and, ultimately, the building of a community space for sharing, for reflection, and for mobilization—storytelling not only as a form of art, but as a *critical methodology*.

Keywords: art, anti-oppressive practice, methodology, participatory, storytelling

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine des moyens d'utiliser l'art pour raconter des histoires et pour activement construire des espaces sécuritaires. Il est le produit des réflexions émergeant d'un projet de renforcement des capacités et de transfert et mobilisation des connaissances impliquant 7 jeunes vivant dans la rue. L'article examine comment la recherche peut contribuer à l'examen—et à l'implantation dans le milieu à travers un programme de nature artistique—d'une pratique et d'une méthodologie axées sur l'anti-oppression. Au niveau conceptuel, l'article prend le virage postmoderne par rapport aux considérations méthodologiques en explorant comment le « spectacle » d'un programme de recherche peut venir à être défait par un processus

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de recherche plus participative. L'article s'adresse aux processus impliqués dans la création d'un environnement de nature artistique et, finalement, la construction d'un espace communautaire de partage, de réflexion et de mobilisation—raconter des histoires non seulement comme une forme d'expression artistique mais également comme une *méthodologie critique*.

Mots clés : art, pratique axée sur l'anti-oppression, méthodologie, participatif, raconter des histoires

Art as a form of methodology and intervention is now commonplace in different health care and therapeutic settings, particularly mental health settings, and is used to promote intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and functional performance and to augment personal growth (Griffiths & Corr, 2007). A whole range of literature demonstrates the value of art to both individual and social ends: from providing a sense of achievement to health recovery to contributing to a sense of social belonging through group participation (Star & Cox, 2008; Tesch & Hansen, 2012; Walsh, 2008; White, 2006; Windsor, 2005). Accordingly, Osei-Kofi (2013) notes that while arts-based research is not new, its promise is increasingly being taken up by researchers because of its potential to "honor multiple ways of knowing, including sensory knowing" (p.137). The appeal, methodologically, lies in art's capacity to co-create knowledge with research participants, emphasize reflexivity in the research process, and "embody great potential for consciousness raising and critical dialogue" (Osei-Kofi 2013, p.137).

This paper both contributes to and departs from that body of literature. First, it explores how art can be used to tell stories and actively build safe spaces that were either latent or nonexistent before the acts of (collective) storytelling infused them with life. Second, the paper takes up the postmodern turn in methodological considerations by exploring how, in this case, the "spectacle" of a research agenda came to be undermined by a more participatory research process, exposing the limits of method while highlighting the strengths of allowing ourselves to be stripped of what Foucault (1979) called the "transcendental anonymity" (p. 144) of authoring others' lives. To this end, the paper considers how our research contributes both to an examination of anti-oppressive practice and methodology (AOP) and to an application of it in the field through an arts-based agenda. Drawing upon three diverse yet deeply interconnected intellectual resources—popular theatre, popular education, and participatory research—the authors revisit one particular community research art project to shed light upon the ways in which critical pedagogy such as anti-oppressive practices can be situated within nonlinear, decentred complex relations and intensities.

This paper grew out of reflections from a particular capacity-building and knowledge translation/mobilization project involving seven young people living on the streets who were invited to a 4-month full-time filmmaking camp in Halifax, Nova Scotia, during the summer of 2009. This arts-based initiative was informed by a previous Canadian Institutes of Health Research–funded study that explored the health experiences of Halifax street youth, primarily focusing upon their varied accounts of being physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually healthy/unhealthy within the context of being without stable housing, employment, and social supports. Several academic presentations emerged from this study (for example, Karabanow et al., 2007; Kisely et al., 2008). In 2008–9, extending these findings, we engaged academic colleagues, nonprofit community agencies, youth, and frontline service providers to set up a Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Council–funded knowledge mobilization initiative through a summer film and art-training project with street-entrenched young people. In this paper, we draw upon informal fieldnotes scripted throughout the course of the project by the first author as reflective anecdotes of the day-to-day happenings within the project. The fieldnotes speak primarily to the first author's accounts of the processes involved in building a community space and the interactions between project members.

This paper focuses on how the nexus of art and youth, homeless youth in particular, can act as a catalyst for change by problematizing notions of "us" and "them," researcher and researched. It challenges what Stewart (1996) terms the "clean lines of will and action" typical of academic research that is often prescriptive and authoritative, attempting to hold at bay the notion of collaboration within the pursuit of knowledge and its dissemination. We also speak to the processes involved in creating an arts-based environment and, ultimately, the building of a community space for sharing, for reflection, and for mobilization—storytelling not only as a form of art but as a *critical methodology*.

Simultaneously then, through a discussion of popular theatre, popular education, and participatory research—three convergent epistemologies that are all instances of how to make manifest an anti-oppressive practice and agenda—we explore our journey as a collective foray into how our research became refashioned to ultimately subvert and disrupt our own expertise. Kannen (2008) states, "Forces of oppression restrain and contain members of marginalized groups by systematically blocking or penalizing their actions and abilities. Anti-oppressive work must be understood as that which attempts to combat/disrupt/subvert/undo oppressive barriers" (p.160). In this way, we explore how method itself can risk being a force of (academic) oppression, particularly when the intent can be both to know others and to speak for them on their behalf. The lens of anti-oppressive practice and analysis demands that we reconsider our own roles in power imbalances and the inequality of producing knowledge, and challenge approaches "implicated in colonialist traditions of objectivity and that treat production of knowledge as a function of social privilege" (Finley, 2008, p. 74). At the same time, we contend that this academic privilege (vis-à-vis our training and sanctioned expertise) is inseparable from doing research. What is needed is a frank acknowledgement of how anti-oppressive practices can augment and add rigour to traditional research agendas and methodologies, as opposed to being seen only as an attempt to undermine them.

CONTEXT

Much has been written about street youth from both popular and academic arenas. We have a deep understanding of how young people enter street life and the experiences and conditions of being homeless. We have less insight into how young people attempt to exit street worlds. In this light, the discussion concerning the building of community can be seen as an integral part to the complex phenomenon of the street exiting process (Karabanow, 2004, 2008). The few studies that have explored this stage of the "street youth career" (Karabanow, 2006, 2008; Visano, 1990) acknowledge the significance of supportive spaces, primarily in terms of social service organizational structures (such as drop-in centres, emergency shelters, supportive housing complexes) in aiding young people out of street environments.

While this discussion is not primarily focused upon street exiting as such, it engages the intricate process of building safe and supportive spaces for young people that can foster supportive pathways for street exiting. The creation of a narrative-driven arts space was not directly intended to facilitate either street exiting or community building. Rather, it simply began as an opportunity to allow young people an outlet for their creativity. Simultaneously, however, the outcomes of this artistic work, and the associated spaces that materialized, forced us to confront what others have loosely termed a "rhizomatic turn" in methodology and research practices (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)—that is, the decentring turn "against 'Method' with all of the privileging that is connoted by that proper noun" (Honan, 2007, p. 532). Here, and throughout, we intentionally capitalize to denote the term in a formal academic sense, as an objective epistemological set of tools and practices used in social science.

As Honan (2007) notes, rhizomatic thinking challenges us to disrupt the linear thinking of our subject positioning in relation to conducting research. The result is that contractions reveal themselves. A metaphor from the physical sciences, a rhizome is a stem of a plant connected to other roots and nodes. Taking the metaphor a step further, de Freitas (2012) comments, "A rhizome is an acentric nonhierarchical network of entangled and knotted loops, folding and growing through multiple sites of exit and entry" (p. 557). As such, our work with young people in this project spoke to the complex and nuanced processes of shaping a collective space, building engagement, creating safe and supportive environments, making the work meaningful to all, accommodating the diversity of needs within the group, and creating art forms that spoke to participants' experiences.

Our first observations of and reflections on the strength of arts-based programs came somewhat serendipitously from the first author's work with young people living on the street in Guatemala City. It was 1996, just on the heels of the signing of the peace accords that were intended to bring some closure to a horrific 36-year civil war. In most academic and nongovernment accounts, the war was a brutal attack on segments of civil society (primarily indigenous communities) that were seen by the staunch anti-Communist government as "rebels" or "socialists." Commissioned by the Latin American Human Rights branch of the United Nations (MINIGUA), the first author was invited to bring a small team of professionals working on issues of poverty and homelessness down to this resource-rich yet poverty-stricken country to carry out a research study on the plight of street youth in Guatemala.

At the time, the team had been instrumental in developing an alternative street youth service in Montreal, Quebec, and there were ideas about possibly replicating this structure down south. When we arrived and got slightly more acculturated to Guatemalan ways, we began to work closely with several nongovernment youth outreach services to get to know street culture and homeless youth issues. As privileged outsiders in terms of both our "gringo" status and our adult/professional identities, we were uncomfortably surprised by the ways in which both service providers and young people deferred to our experiences, voices, and sensibilities. From the very beginning, we were described as "experts here to help solve the homeless crisis." First attempts to include our stakeholders in meaningful and authentic co-development of a research agenda were met with surprise. It took time and the building of trust to be able to create a truly participatory work space. This reflected an ongoing tension throughout the project, as our efforts to make the work a collectively owned process signalled the ways in which "our agenda" (creating a participatory initiative) in itself reminded us of our inherent power and control.

Several months later, with the advice of some of these newly formed community partners, we decided to make a film documentary about the ways in which street youth were surviving within the particular political and economic context of Guatemala and the youth organizations that have been set up to support them. From the beginning, we wanted both the organization and these young people to be intimately involved in the making of the film. The decision to use art modes rather than more conventional means of data collection and analysis arose from many conversations with service providers and youth concerning what would be most inclusive, meaningful, and exciting and have the ability to be disseminated broadly. Through this process, the first author started to see how the sharing of new skills and new knowledge inspired new opportunities and new hope—a process of empowerment and resilience at both the individual and the collective level (see for example Cadell, Karabanow, and Sanchez's [2001] work on community empowerment).

Quite unintentionally, a space emerged that allowed for us all to learn from one another. We learned how to best film a particular scene, introduce a particular theme, review and edit our work each night, and so on. In turn, we also started to share our own individual stories—of what it was like to be homeless in Guatemala and Canada, the similarities and differences, and the contradictions. One young Guatemalan kept asking why a rich country like Canada had young people on the street—allowing for deeper conversations concerning the role of government and notions of marginalization.

As Osei-Kofi (2013) succinctly states, "To engage in anti-oppressive work, to challenge the norms of what it means to know and how we come to know, imagination is essential" (p. 139). Through the joining of our individual knowledge bases, we shaped a space where we could both be students and teachers in sharing street experiences, street supports, and art production. Through this process of decentring our research privilege, we awakened a sense of connection between two very different cultures. We also found a space to be critical of what we saw happening, collectively tying our "local" to broader political, social, and economic forces. We learned very quickly that for the majority of these young people, living on the street was a rational and thoughtful response to the abuses, trauma, and exploitation in their past lives (for more, see Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow, Gurman, & Naylor, 2012). Through this process of creating art, there emerged a sense of belonging, a "symbolic space" or "culture of hope" environment (Karabanow, 2003, 2004). We began to form relationships, share feelings and experiences, and create a bond—all through the process of making a documentary.

At the time, the stories of homeless youth came as a sort of shock to us in many respects. But where lay the "shock"? Through thoughtful introspection, it became clear that the research we were conducting was only possible, and only meaningful, if it was done together. The shock, in other words, was an affront to our Methods, and our expertise, which we brought with us to lend and to disseminate in a very linear manner. This is, of course, typical of both power and privilege, particularly in light of the broader relationship between the global North and South. Notably, Heron's (2006) work insightfully explores this orientation to social work and the often accompanying disposition of altruism, which she argues is rooted in colonial representations of the global South. As Heron observes, what is called for are ways to produce knowledge differently—what she terms the "encumbered self" (para. 1):

> This entails challenging not only the innocence (of not being implicated and of simply "helping"), but also the entitlement that goes hand in hand with such a perspective. By entitlement I am referring to an axiomatic assumption that Canadians and other Northerners can and should feel welcome to "help" anywhere in the world—it is a right. (Heron, 2006, para. 16)

Heron's challenge to, and assessment of, the impetus to "help" is extremely helpful in retrospect, and her insights are extremely illuminating in describing how our own agenda came to be undone. In our experience, our initial orientation to research and dissemination became quickly undermined. The youth became both subjects and participants, both teachers and students, and their participation in what we were doing came to unravel our initial attempt to "aid" and "engage" them. In retrospect, we were admittedly initially "unencumbered," to use Heron's term again, with the necessary critical reflexive lens that was required to engage locally with the project we were attempting to insert ourselves into.

The notion of a rhizome then, in retrospect, became an apt philosophical description of how we came to reorient ourselves to the study. As de Freitas (2012) notes, this notion provokes "us to consider a radically new ontology of the social, where subjectivity is formed by way of discontinuity, rupture, and multiplicity in a vast interleaving rhizomatic assemblage" (p. 557). Our identities as researchers and youth workers became more complex and fractured, and this messiness of role definition remained with us as we returned to Canada. It colours our understanding of how difficult it can be to carry out anti-oppressive research in the field to this day.

Yee and Wagner (2014) argue that anti-oppressive frameworks, particularly within schools of social work, are too often reduced to binaries, and simply produce "safe knowledge." As they comment, "It would be threatening for students and faculty alike to engage in identifying and theorizing about the unconscious ways in which they benefit based on their gender, race or level of ability" (p. 342). Indeed, how an anti-oppressive stance or orientation plays out within the field of research is similarly threatening and complex. As Yee and Wagner argue, the limitations of an anti-oppressive framework occur when it fails to challenge the structures and systems that sustain inequality. Placing anti-oppressive practice within the complexities of rhizomatic relations perhaps provides a more authentic and messier ontology—one that is grounded in critical pedagogy and continuously contested, ruptured, and decentred.

ART AS METHOD, METHOD AS ART

In our experience, one key tool for helping to wade through this "messiness" is the "doing of art." By using art as a decentring method, undermining our own privilege to expertise, we can open new avenues for thought and action that otherwise our "Method" may have missed. A few years ago, with a SSHRC-funded dissemination grant, the first author brought together several grassroots youth organizations to begin to envision a local film camp for street-entrenched young people. With the help of several Halifax youth services, we invited seven young people with experiences of street living who were interested in learning and working with film throughout the summer of 2009. With rented studio space in the north end of the city, the first author, a filmmaker friend, a former social work student and seven young people began a journey to explore filmmaking and attempt to translate our academic work on street health and street identity into film oriented "products." While numerous film bits were made, where we learned how to script narratives, use the camera, edit shots, explore camera angles, act in front of the camera, add sound, make musical scores, and put together footage, two animated shorts became the trademarks of our film camp.

The first short, entitled *Walking Through Wonderland* (Figure 1), captures a glimpse of youth homelessness in a surreal and edgy manner. Framed around two characters building a friendship on the street, this artistic work highlights the dualistic nature of youth homeless culture: on one hand there is a sense of community and safety; on the other hand, many of these young people have experienced traumatic family pasts and continued exploitative street encounters. The two characters discuss issues of alienation, poverty, and poor physical and emotional health within a backdrop of a fractured urban landscape.

Figure 1
Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

The second short, entitled *This Film Is More Than Its Title* (Figure 2), is a poetic narrative that exposes longing for both acceptance and independence in modern-day culture. The film's rhythmic lyrics, told through stop-motion animation, share a sense of deep loneliness and betrayal but, at the same time, a nonchalant resilience.

In all, what emerged throughout these 4 months was a collective process where we worked side by side to translate, interpret, and understand what we experienced by "doing art" and where the process of making art allowed for some kind of awakening or reshifting in seeing things from other perspectives. Using our (traditional) research findings as starting points, the group reimagined the content artistically. The result not only spoke to the complexities and nuances of lived experiences but also served as a more engaging way to translate these experiences to a broader audience.

Figure 2
Clip from *This Film Is More Than Its Title*

With all the conflicts and tensions that arise when people with differing agendas are brought together, a community space was built: a place to share, to work out personal issues, to figure out next steps, to engage, and to reflect—in all, to build a critical consciousness. A demasking process took place that allowed one to see for the first time his or her "individualness" as related to personal traumas and external realities and to connect that with others going through similar explorations. It took time to build relations, develop trust, learn about one another, share personal stories, feel safe, feel non-judged, and open dialogue about our lives and our work. At first, several young people would ask "What is our agenda?" and it took time for them to believe our response: "There was no agenda outside of wanting to share some art skills." In a way, without us knowing it, we were engaging in a rhizomatic process drawing on three key critical and interrelated anti-oppressive methodologies that could become visible only upon later consideration: popular education, popular theatre, and participatory research.

THREE METHODOLOGIES

Popular Education

Popular education is an educational model that focuses on student involvement in the generation of knowledge as well as in the learning process. While traditional modes of education treat students as passive recipients of knowledge delivered to them from a higher authority (the teacher), popular education places students in a more active, involved, and equal role. Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire, a seminal advocate of popular education, argued for "a liberatory literacy education [that] involved not only reading the *word*, but also reading the *world* through the development of critical consciousness or conscientization" (Conrad, 2004, p. 14). A critical consciousness involves deep reflection and questioning of past and current situations—a manner of *reading* the world with a critical lens. Throughout our film project, the young participants gained technical skills involved with filmmaking and regularly used those skills to contribute to the collective purpose of transforming their lived experiences into animated film shorts.

Figure 3

Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

Through numerous discussions with the participants, we were able to explore street experiences through both the first author's academic and clinical work and these young people's street experiences, coming up with creative ways to disseminate diverse narratives within art forms. The Clip in Figure 3 was one young person's poetic description of his traumatic family life; the Clip in Figure 4 came from several young people imagining a surrealistic yet ironic form to describe to viewers the feeling of being "on stage" and "under surveillance" in their day-to-day street life. These insights emerged from a week of role-playing shaped around themes chosen by youth participants.

Figure 4
Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

Our collective work in shaping the art form not only produced identifiable art products but also allowed for each of us to gain deeper and more contextualized understandings of what it means to be, for example, without a home, excluded from mainstream workings, or living with past traumas. The Clip in Figure 5 depicted the way in which these youth participants perceived parts of the service delivery system—confusing, bureaucratic, and nonsensical. This piece emerged from a drawing exercise that focused upon "what we could change about our present lives."

One of the participants remarked at the end of this process that he never realized how familiar other participants' stories were to him, and how thinking about this made him feel less vulnerable and isolated. Youth wanted the film *Walking Through Wonderland* (Figure 6) to depict a sense of camaraderie that did develop throughout the project—they spoke of feeling "comfortable with one another", "at ease"; of a "feeling of caring" and "being looked out for."

Moreover, there were many times when the group would come together to help support one member who was dealing with a difficult issue, attempting to work out solutions in a supportive and communal manner. One young person was dealing with current sex work issues and over time began to share her experiences with all of us—why she had engaged in the work and how difficult she found attempting to exit. Others shared their own experiences with street survival and also suggested possible solutions. It was at these times that we could see how the project enabled the creation of a community space that proved to be empowering by increasing participants' individual and collective sense of their own capacities. Moreover, adults in the

Figure 5

Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

Figure 6

Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

project also shared their opinions, experiences, and understandings of street life, providing for deep dialogue that sought to be respectful, caring, empathetic, and authentic. Several youth and adults in the project once commented how "weird but cool" it was to have such open dialogue.

Figure 7
Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

As such, the processes involved in making these art forms provided the context for a reawakening of our individual and collective questioning/struggles to understand our positions and identities as "street kids", "artists", "researchers", "activists", and inevitably "citizens." The Clip in Figure 7 depicts a sense of "connectedness" that our youth wanted to describe that can occur within street communities and that one young person reported feeling within the project.

Popular Theatre

One of the primary objectives that emerged as our project progressed was to build a reflective and consciousness-raising community space for these young people and the entire team. A key aim of popular theatre and popular education is empowering traditionally excluded or marginalized sectors of society by exploring the learners' lived experiences in both their humanizing and their oppressive dimensions. At the same time, this art form helps to integrate grounded analyses of structures of power and oppression with instinctive analyses of the human spirit. Both animated shorts explore the contradictory nature of street cultures—on one level highlighting notions of exclusion and loneliness; on the other level exploring elements of inclusion, community, and personal agency. The works also speak, in quite different idioms, to a deeper, more critical understanding of poverty and homelessness, articulating the structural dimensions that impact people's sense of social, political, and economic citizenship rather than simply individual characteristics. The Clip in Figure 8 articulates the way in which our participants saw their position in civil society; as several remarked in one of our discussions, "we are always treated as garbage."

Figure 8

Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

Popular theatre, like popular education, attempts to engage the audience by forcing them to take an active and critical role in the art experience (Conrad, 2004; Tofteng & Husted, 2011). The art process is often shaped "by" the people and "for" the people. Popular theatre is frequently combined with popular education. There are numerous documented cases of theatre being employed by students and for students to educate on topics both within and beyond the curriculum (Conrad, 2004; Jackson, 1980, 2005; McEwan, Bhopal, & Patton, 1991). Throughout our project, daily activities often involved creating individual narratives which would then be role-played in order to practise various skill sets. Not surprisingly, many of the narratives spoke to participants' lived experiences, and role-playing took on a deeply emotional ambiance as both "actors" and "spectators" reflected on the particular contents at work. Narratives that touched upon previous abuse, addictions, relations with family, and street survival strategies tended to cultivate diverse emotions and reflections. Quite an emotional discussion emerged as we developed the Clip in Figure 9 depicting sex as an exploitative act of survival.

Figure 9
Clip from *Walking Through Wonderland*

In this respect, popular theatre methods are particularly well suited to vulnerable and marginalized young people, who often lack a voice and struggle to express their traumatic pasts. Also, popular theatre represents a method of self-expression that does not privilege language: theatre instead emphasizes the visual and the emotional (Tofteng & Husted, 2011). These modes tend to be far more accessible to youth who have street experience. The short film *This Film Is More Than Its Title* (Figure 10), with its strong evocative visuals and sparse poetic dialogue, truly exemplifies this point.

Popular theatre can have a tremendous effect not only on those who produce it but also on those who view it. It has been argued that "at its best, popular theatre is not an isolated performance or a cathartic experience, but part of an ongoing process of education and organizing, aimed at overcoming oppression and dependence, and at securing basic rights" (Kidd, 1982, p. 265). As such, much of popular theatre, like popular education, seeks conscientization and empowerment. This is especially exciting considering that our films have the potential to influence thousands upon thousands of viewers. Using today's technology, the revolutionary possibilities of popular theatre can be harnessed to affect a mass audience and change the perception of youth homelessness on a large scale. The animated shorts have been disseminated widely through community events, academic conferences, educational settings, policymakers' meetings, and YouTube. Many post-screening discussions have been occasions to dialogue and reflect upon youth poverty and homelessness and the diverse ways in which young people can feel both supported and rejected living on the streets.

Figure 10
Clip from *This Film Is More Than Its Title*

Participatory Research

Embedded within popular education and theatre is a fundamental deconstruction of the "expert" and a democratization of the processes through which we can collectively develop empowered spaces. Participatory research is a research model popularized in the 1970s that is predicated on subject participation. Like popular theatre and popular education, participatory research is "research 'for,' 'with' and 'by' the people rather than 'on' the people" (Conrad, 2004, p. 15). While traditional research Methods create a hierarchy between the researcher and researched, participatory research seeks to break down this distinction. As Conrad (2004) explains it, "Participatory research stresses the inherent capacity for participants to create their own knowledge based on their experiences" (p. 15). Within this process, the grounded knowledge that emerges is of a collective and pragmatic nature that is understood through its myriad contexts.

Employing the arts in participatory social inquiry not only can stay true to the goals of participatory research (Reason, 1998, p. 262) and anti-oppressive practice but can also allow these goals to be authentically realized. This worldview sees human beings as co-creating their reality through participation: through their experience, their imagination and intuition, their thinking, and their action. *Walking Through Wonderland* and *This Film Is More Than Its Title* are good examples of this: the youth participants were co-creators of these works, both teachers and students within the processes of making these art forms. This process illustrates tremendous potential both for informal distribution of academic knowledge and for the possibility of breaking down the boundary between researcher and researched by allowing all participants to truly engage in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. While unintentional, it was quite evident soon after we began the project that the youth participants were deeply engaged not only in building particular film-based skill sets but also in the manner in which their stories and our research could be told in a creative and authentic manner. As one of the participants later explained to me, their sense of taking ownership and truly caring about the project was the extension of feeling "as if our ideas and stories actually mattered as much as what the research talked about." Authentic participation stemmed from a sense of being listened to and being heard—and hence believing that they were truly co-creators in the project.

DISCUSSION

These three similar and loosely connected epistemologies form a powerful lens that can radically turn "research" into action. At the same time, these areas of thought reveal that, methodologically, what is required is a continuous discursive engagement both with those whom we study or "help" and with our own subject positioning in relation to "them." Of course, such a statement is not "new." Feminist study, for instance, has over 40 years of critical scholarship interrogating how the gendered dimensions of the everyday shape routine discourse and actions (Smith, 1987). What is perhaps (modestly) original is the notion that work with street youth is necessarily a process first about critically stripping ourselves (i.e., the researchers) of our "intellectual techniques" (Rose, 1999). While recognizing that we neither can nor (as we argue) should ever become a blank slate, the act of working within an anti-oppressive framework involves challenging our "gaze of expertise" and cautions us (the researchers) against the risk of committing ourselves to our own critiques concerning social justice and power. In other words, to investigate how power, for example, can manifest itself through marginalization or poverty, we have to first investigate ourselves as products of power. This requires critically examining our training, our methodologies, and the knowledge they (re)produce. As Bhattacharyya (1998) so eloquently observes, "The wish to own through your eyes collapses sensual appreciation onto an adjunct of power, just another backup to the nasty ways of the world. And, of course, you miss all the magical things which are really going on" (p. 53).

One of our objectives was to develop a meaningful and creative narrative concerning broad-range health risks and service needs for young people on the street—i.e., knowledge mobilization to use the art works/popular media as a graphic *springboard to action* among decision-makers, policy-makers, service providers, and educators. At the same time, there was something else happening—more fluid, organic, more complex. That is, we as a team were creating a particular space where it was permitted to openly share one's stories of trauma, of failure, of fragility, of broken dreams, and of hope, of laughter, of new dreams, of life. Working in the field, researching in the field, we know what street life is about. We have a sense of the marginalization, the alienation, the trauma, the non-citizenship. Yet this small art studio became a place where there was a sense of belonging, of citizenship—a place of healing and of reinvention. Ironically enough, and despite claims within some anti-oppressive scholarship that the liberating values of anti-oppressive practice are lacking in rigour (Strier, 2006), to get to this place of reinvention, to find ourselves in this art studio with others, with youth, with "our subjects," we still needed that element of mainstream scholarship and Expertise to get us there. What we are arguing is that once "there," in the field, we collectively as researchers need to bring more routinely to our work the spirit and lens of anti-oppressive methodologies and practices in order to bring *more rigour to our work*, not less.

Artists have the ability to create and rule over their own worlds, to take charge of and manipulate what is seen and what remains hidden. The work produced in such a fashion assumes an audience in a way that an interview or survey does not, and has an ability to convey emotion and to engender empathy in this audience. Alternative methods of dissemination also "force the terms in which [the researched] already express their experience to take on meaning in the reader's context" (Edmondson, 2000, p. 191).

CONCLUSION

By no means do we want to simply glamorize the ways in which a sense of community or belonging naturally emerged. It was a process of many struggles—to build trust, to engage in authentic participation, to collaborate, to allow local, grounded leadership to evolve, to deal with conflict, to deal with participants quitting many times and with relationship tensions between youth and between adults involved. With or without these final art products, it was a very powerful experience. One of the contributions we want to put forth in this paper is that it is this kind of experience that so often gets silenced when research is written up, as it (necessarily?) gives way to the formalized and academic discourse required by publishers, by colleagues, and by what we might loosely describe as the bureaucracy of contemporary academic scholarship.

Conversely, in undertaking research there is always an experience of *some* kind. This is also what happens in the process of creating or building an art form. As researchers, we need to explore within and without, we need to be cognizant of our real and artificial fears, we need to find courage, and we need to take risks with our methods and our approaches to a field of study. As Foucault (1988) so succinctly notes, "A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest" (p. 155). In the research experience explored here, through the collective act and art of storytelling, we managed to undermine the formalized discourse and application of that discourse to "our subjects." Simultaneously, by decentring the social as the only reality we can grasp, we opened new avenues for thought and action that otherwise our "Method" might have missed.

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