

The Pleasure of Your Company: Artstories UK, A Joyful Community-Based Art Experience

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ABSTRACT

This visual/video essay tells the story of the author's art-based research with immigrant youth of color in Edinburgh, Scotland. Despite experiencing racially motivated aggressions causing injury, harm, and trauma to them as individuals, and the institutions and communities they inhabit, youth created artworks expressing hope and healing as a peaceful and joyful form of resistance and resilience.

KEYWORDS:social justice art; community-based art education; creative youth development; education for hope and healing; Black joy

Life is a series of painful or joyful moments, which follow each other in an endless cycle. Whenever pain comes near us our only salvation is to seek places of beauty, joy, and peace.

- Buddha

My research and teaching for the past 18 years has focused on acts of social justice and transformation through art making, primarily with marginalized communities of learners across the lifespan in the U.S. and abroad. I see community-based art making as a space where people from differing backgrounds and beliefs can come together through art to learn from one another and build community (Lawton, et.al., 2019). This is my life's work. Why? Because as a Black woman I have lived in such communities and have personally experienced marginalization, despite being highly educated, middle-class, and well paid. I grew up in an intergenerational family where arts activities were commonplace, a means of socialization, teaching moral values, learning and celebrating cultural history, and developing a positive self-concept. As a facilitator of community-based art experiences I learn as much from the communities I engage with as they learn from me. The exchange is reciprocal and often transformational. Sometimes the work comes with feelings of despair, particularly when participants live in extreme poverty, suffer from poor health, lack of access to educational opportunities, quality goods, and services due to systemic oppression; making for a hard life.



Figure 1. *Author demonstrating decorative paper techniques*



Figure 2. *Paste Paper Design*

My most recent community-based art education (CBAE) research took me to Edinburgh, Scotland, a country with a very long history of persecution, violence, and hardship, but also fierce cultural pride. I was interested in parallels between the sociopolitical climate in the UK on the eve of Brexit and the Trump administration's policies in the U.S. The political climate in Edinburgh for the most part did not align with the ideals of Brexit. There were daily demonstrations outside the Scottish Parliament calling for independence from Great Britain. However, on two occasions I had conversations with folks who admired changes wrought by the Trump administration.

I was fortunate to work with SCOREScotland (Strengthening Communities for Race Equality Scotland) a youth group composed of resilient Black and Brown immigrants. SCOREScotland is housed within WHALEArts (Wester Hailes Art Center) a community arts center in the Wester Hailes community of Edinburgh, where many immigrant families have settled due to the lower cost of housing. Wester Hailes was a predominantly White community and the influx of immigrants from African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian countries has led to some tensions there. The existence of SCOREScotland is itself an act of resistance; providing positive outlets and opportunities for immigrant youth of color to engage in joyful communal acts that celebrate their cultures and build self-esteem.



Figure 3. *Creating decorative paper backgrounds for the stories*



Figure 4. *Cutting tissue paper shapes for decorative book pages*

WHALEArts provides opportunities for Wester Hailes residents to engage in art, crafts, theatre, gardening, cooking, book clubs, and more. However, most of these activities are racially and culturally segregated. Only the cooking class, set up for members of the community to make and share their food traditions, had participants from many cultures and ages, and even then, there were tensions. Initially I wanted Artstories UK to be intergenerational, multicultural and multiracial, but after speaking with the director of SCOREscotland, I realized that the immigrant youth, aged 13-18, needed their own space; a joyful and positive place free from the constant racial, ethnic, and religious aggressions they experienced at school with peers and teachers and in their neighborhood.

During my first visit to WHALEArts to meet the SCOREscotland youth and talk with them about the Artstories UK handmade book project, they were in the midst of a frank discussion with community council members about their experiences with racism at school. In the UK the role of a council member, is similar to that of an alderman or city council member in the U.S. political system. I was shocked by their stories of racially motivated aggressions with peers and teachers, wondering how they could concentrate on their studies when their teachers, who should have supported them, treated them so inhumanely. I anticipated that their handmade books would focus on negative stories of lived experience. I could not have been more wrong. Instead of focusing on negativity youth participants created handmade books expressing the joy of living, creating written and



Figure 5. *Sharing design ideas.*

visual principles to live by. For me and them creative expression became an exercise in radical hope and healing. There is a sense of hopelessness among youth of color, particularly in places like the U.S. and Europe where the sociopolitical structure views them as a threat, and seeks to silence their voices and presence in a community. “Hope, in and of itself, is an important form of resistance, both political and personal, and reaffirms what is possible, and worth fighting for” (Ginwright, 2016, p.2). Social justice activism through creative youth development is focused both inward, helping to heal wounds inflicted by systemic oppression, and outward focusing on social change (Ginwright, 2016). Not only was my time with the SCOREscotland youth pleasurable, but I learned how youth are intrinsically motivated, hopeful about the future, resilient, and self-confident in the face of often demeaning encounters and adverse environments. These youth embodied the power of positivity and demonstrated the ways in which communal art making can establish common ground from which to build healthy relationships and purposeful lives. For example, the text some participants included in their books reflect joy through resistance: “Being yourself is the best medicine you can ever taste;” “Wear your differences like a badge;” “Overcoming is something to show off. BIPOC scholars and cultural producers describe how joy and pain are two sides of the same coin

for Black people: as exemplified by gospel singer Shirley Cesar, “ the world didn’t give it [joy] to me, and the world can’t take it away” (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 823) and scholar Cornell West, who “ asserts that, for Black folks, joy and pain live together” (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 823). “Joy is resistance. Oppression doesn’t have room for your happiness. You resist it when you find joy anyhow” (Brittany Packnett, 2017, as cited in Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 823). Community-based art education is both a labor of love, and a form of social justice activism, making it hard but joyful work. This visual/ video essay recounts my artistic journey with SCOREScotland youth and the beautiful and lasting memories we made together.



Figure 6. *Constructing book forms*



Figure 7. Finalizing the books



Figure 8. Completed books



Figure 9. *Exhibition Celebration at WHALEarts*



Figure 10. *Exhibition at the Edinburgh College of Art Library*

Link to video: <https://vimeo.com/363346007>

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