Remixing the Released Imagination

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present a DJ-inspired approach to arts-based educational research that borrows from found poetry analysis (Wiggins, 2011) to remix passages from Maxine Greene's (1995) *Releasing the Imagination*. I describe revisiting Greene's classic text twenty years after its major influence on me as a community arts practitioner. In rereading the text, I struggled with how I failed to see the ways in which her conception of "community" suppresses and reproduces racial conflict. I then describe using an absurdist approach to remixing that borrows materials from Greene's text and from William Pope.L's *Skin Set* (2013) to create a new text, or found poem. After presenting the outcome, I invite other community arts practitioners to consider playful, absurdist arts-based methodologies that may offer protected pedagogic spaces, albeit momentary ones, to trouble concepts we revere. In particular, I suggest that this irreverent approach to remixing can be useful in addressing the racialized tensions that can be silenced in the name of "community" because of the found poem's lack of preciousness and its potential for humor.

Introduction

In this paper, I use a DJ-inspired approach to arts-based educational research that borrows from found poetry analysis (Wiggins, 2011) to remix passages from Maxine Greene's (1995) *Releasing the Imagination*. I developed this methodology in response to disillusionment I encountered as I re-engaged with Greene's ideas about community, diversity, and difference—ideas that were once central to my practice in community arts education. This use of remix, I argue, is a playful reflexive practice for use by artists, educators, researchers, and our students as we wrestle with the weight of racial injustice that, at times, may feel irresolvable.

Before I begin, I should state clearly that while I engage critically and creatively with *Releasing the Imagination*, this paper itself is not principally concerned with critiquing Greene's scholarship. In this often-cited book, Greene outlines her vision for the ways in which the arts provide the foundation for people to engage with difference through imagining alternative worlds and possibilities, thus transforming individuals into discursive democrats who acknowledge the vast array of different identities while working together to create a better society. *Releasing the Imagination* is twenty years old, and since its publication, the book has been highly influential in art education. It has provided inspiration for many art educators as they attempt to "release" multiple voices through artistic creation, particularly those voices that have been silenced and subordinated. And given Greene's passing in May 2014, criticism of *Releasing the Imagination* is untimely.

Yet the timing of Greene's death is not inconsequential to this paper. Her passing in 2014 re-released her voice in my imagination at the same time that I began to brood over the tragedies, and subsequent social unrest, in Ferguson, Missouri. In August of 2014, months after Greene's death, an unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, was fatally shot by Officer Darren Wilson. Brown's death, as well as the failure of a grand jury to indict Wilson months later, led to widespread protest and increased awareness outside communities of color of the excessive use of force among police within those communities. These events led me to question my impact as an arts educator among low-income youth from communities of color. It also challenged me to question how I read Greene two decades ago and drew on her theorization in my community arts practice. Today, I continue to struggle with discerning what critical methodologies might be available to artists, researchers, and educators when events like Ferguson make commitments to arts-enriched, democratic communities seem inadequate and absurd.

The purpose of this article is thus to critique how I read Greene two decades ago and present a remix methodology that I have used to do so. In presenting this remix methodology, I describe how I attempted to negotiate the disillusion with myself as a community artist and researcher and what I learned in the process that may have implications for community arts practice and art education research.

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Background

Maxine Greene was highly influential in my intellectual life; my interest in art education emerged as an undergraduate when I read her *Releasing the Imagination* (1995). Her text invited me to consider myself as an artist who approached the social world as a material that might be re-imagined, and thus manipulated, for the common good. This social imagination with a moral purpose led to my interest in community-based arts; her work provided the theoretical footing that I needed to start a community arts and humanities program for marginalized youth.

In Providence, Rhode Island, I opened a storefront studio, New Urban Arts, to house an inclusive arts "community," which at first was comprised of high school students, largely from low-income communities of color, and emerging artists, largely from racially privileged and economically affluent backgrounds. I was interested in how this multi-racial, cross-class inclusive community could serve as both a means and an end. My "capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society" would be realized in the studio (Greene, 1995, p. 5). This community, I imagined, would be free to a large extent from racial and class conflict as youth and artists engaged in meaningful and collaborative inquiry.

Since then, scholars in art education have drawn on postmodern theory to critique the ways in which collective human agency, through what is often called "community," may suppress the creative forces of individual desire and reduce the countless and specific arrays of identities across factors including race, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, and so on (Holland, 2015; Illeris, 2015). From this perspective, "community" exerts its own form of pastoral control, coercing people into White, middle-class subjectivities that value engaging in dialogue and acknowledging individual difference as long as those differences serve broader aims of the community, or society at large (Schutz, 2004). Amidst these potentially different values and approaches, some community arts practitioners may be at risk to accept uncritically the notion that artistic practice helps build relationships across difference, when such "community building" may simply be coercing people into performing aspects of Whiteness.

The question of power underpins why and in what ways pastoral control occurs. As some community arts practitioners may value a kind of "discursive democracy," which focuses on collective dialogue that avoids conflict; some of their constituents may prefer "democratic solidarity" that fosters mass action under the guidance of a relatively small number of leaders. This model depends upon constructing a working class subjectivity that hinges upon a constructed, and yet viscerally understood, rhetoric of "us" and "them." In community arts practice, the question may not be which form of pastoral control exists, but rather who is privileged with the right to decide the subjectivities that are valued more than others. While scholars have examined how and why educators and students might transgress communal norms through, for example, inane expressions borrowed from popular visual culture (Duncum, 2009; Grace & Tobin, 2002), less attention in art education has been paid to the ways in which community artists and their constituents might permit one another to transgress visions of "community" and permit individual subjectivities born out of anger towards racial injustice.

To help address this gap, Ruth-Nicole Brown and I (2014) considered the pedagogic possibilities of an exhibition curated by Kara Walker, *Ruffneck Constructivists*, that was held at Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, in 2014. In this exhibition, the architectural forms and meanings that contain all the "angst and braggadocio and ego and rage that Black creatives have brought forth in other fields, particularly music, but also underground entrepreneurship, dance, 'thug life,' and spiritualism" (Walker, 2014, para. 1) are investigated. We examined youth's artistic practices that, much like those artworks exhibited in Walker's show, express pain and a sense of absurdity that the U.S. still requires a "New Civil Rights Agenda" nearly 60 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Orfield, 2014), or that many White and other Americans still needs convincing that "Black Lives Matter."

In this paper, I continue this project by considering the creative possibilities afforded by Walker's exhibition for my own scholarly practice. Walker's exhibition continues to be fruitful as I consider how to move forward as a community artist and researcher in light of the events in Ferguson, which are difficult to reconcile with the way that I drew on Greene's theorization in the past. In particular, I considered work by William Pope.L, one artist featured in *Ruffneck Constructivists*, because his artistic practice suggests releasing pleasure through an absurdist approach to remixing representations of race. I wanted to consider releasing this pleasure through remixing to counteract my disillusion with how my approach to community arts practice, informed by my reading of Greene, may have suppressed youth's voices born out of a sense of anger towards their marginalization due to a variety of social factors including race. The approach to remixing that I developed to do so, which I propose here, is not without its own problems and limitations, particularly given my subject position as a White author. Before I present this methodology and its limitations, I describe and theorize Pope.L's artistic practice in relation to race, representation, and remixing.

Pope.L's Play amidst the Irresolvable

As an artist, Pope.L makes objects, street performances, and installation/performances that have drawn controversy for his absurdist treatment of racial conflict in the U.S. (Bessire, 2002). His artwork in Walker's exhibition *Ruffneck Constructivists* is no exception. In this exhibition, Pope.L presents *Claim*, an installation in which he affixes candid street photographs of Philadelphians—portraits that he claims are portraits of Jewish people—to slices of *non-kosher* bologna. The lunchmeat is nailed to a gallery wall in a grid. The expansive grid spans the length of the gallery wall, floor to ceiling. Over time, sweat from the rotten meat streaked down the wall and stunk up the gallery. When I viewed *Claim* in person, I could not stop my gag reflex. It was hard to decipher whether I was gagging because of the stink or because of the norms of racial representation that Pope.L transgressed through his grid, a grid that was oddly beautiful in its geometry.

In exploring the way in which naming and measuring people as raced is a violent, rotten act, *Claim* is representative of Pope.L's tendency in his artwork to explore two irresolvable positions (Bessire, 2002). The first is that race is the defining factor in U.S. social life. The second is that race is untenable; we cannot define essential types of individuals based on perceived physical traits. Pope.L's creative vision emerges from this fissure, as Bessire points out, producing work that both conveys difficult reminders about the U.S.'s relationship to race and then undermining that messaging through humor, absurdity, and intended offense.

Pope.L's referential artistic practice is useful for me when considering how and why to remix. Amidst the irresolvability of race in the U.S., the artist reverts to humor and play through an artistic practice that draws on remixing. He writes:

> Like Jorge Luis Borges, like Richard Pryor, when confronted with the irresolvable, I revert to play. I want to ignore the oncoming locomotive, and I also want to mount it and ride all the way into the tunnel and out the other side. Play is a dance, an approach, a technique to make disillusion knowable yet bearable. It is not the slip on the banana peel, nor the landing, nor the anticipation of slip or landing; it is the universe of unknowns that rush in from the hereafter on the other side. (Hoffman, 2002, para. 17)

I am drawn to how Pope.L invites us to consider artistic techniques for making disillusion knowable yet bearable, techniques that may be useful, for example, while contending with the disillusion that arises as a community artist post-Ferguson. For example, in his series of drawings *Skin Set* (2013), Pope.L remixes language in sometimes highly offensive and vulgar ways to draw attention to the absurdity of "being raced" through language when such claims have no scientific grounding. One drawing reads, "Green People are America Eat its Ass-Ness." Another declares, "Purple People Are Reason Bicarbonate." In creating a universe of unknowns by remixing language, Pope.L's work illustrates the absurdity of making any claims based on biological race, and yet, that the history of the United States can only

be explained through relying on this social construct.

Pope.L's play amidst the irresolvable can be theorized as a postmodern means of reaction (Lather, 1991). His reactionary approach to representation occurs when an ultimate aim or grand narrative such as "racial justice" or "community" collapses, a collapse necessitated by realization that collective human agency needed to achieve those aims suppresses individual desire, co-opts human agency, and smooths over individual differences. The only methodology left—for making art, for conducting empirical research, for living life—is an attempt, as Baudrillard put it, "'to reach a point where one can live with what is left. It is more survival among the remnants than anything else'" (1984, in Gane, 1993, p. 95).

In his survival among the remnants, Pope.L seeks out pleasure in combining artifacts, including the "colored" language in *Skin Set*, as a way to contend with his "oncoming locomotives" (Hoffman, 2002, para. 17). One locomotive we might imagine is the seemingly inevitable tragedy such as the events in Ferguson. Pope.L's play with texts, his mashing up of raced images and degrading lunchmeat, can be considered as a remix, whereby his aim is not to create "new artistic form" or lead us to the promised land of "racial justice" or "community" but rather to seek out ways to make disillusion bearable by combining readymade material in playful ways. As I wrestled with the tragedy of Ferguson, and perhaps even the sadness of Greene's death, I turned to experiment with how I might make my disillusion with myself as a community artist by remixing words from Greene's *Releasing the Imagination* and Pope.L's *Skin Set*, an act that struck me as absurd, yet somehow necessary in my intellectual development.

Before I describe this approach and its personal necessity, I must acknowledge that although I have appropriated Pope.L's work for playful pleasure, what is at stake for me as a White scholar is different from what is at stake for Pope.L as a Black artist. In other words, neither of us can escape the inscribed positions of our raced bodies. For Pope.L, this inevitability means that his life may be literally at stake when, for example, he chooses to crawl across the sidewalks

and streets of Manhattan in a Superman costume, as he has done. For me, I can remix representations of race from the safer confines of my academic office and my White body. This crucial difference has implications that I discuss after I present my remix.

Remixing Greene and Pope.L

To begin this remixing project, I reread parts of Greene's (1995) *Releasing the Imagination* to examine my own previous assumptions in creating a multiracial, cross-class community released through the arts. As I reread the text, I was startled by the ways in which racial conflict was embedded in Greene's writing style, particularly her use of pronouns. For example, she positions herself and her audience as "we" and "us" and positions everyone else as "they" and "them." Greene writes, for example, that "for years, *we* knew no more about people like *her*… the plight of young island women" (1995, p. 160, my emphasis). "Her" refers to Jamaica Kincaid's character Lucy in *Antigua*, and "we" appears to refer to continental Whites who do not know the "plight of young island women." Of course, so-called island girls know their plight. They know it viscerally. "Their" imaginations need not be released to make the empathic leap into bodies of others to understand that plight. Through her use of pronouns, Greene positions imaginations and the need for releasing it in the bodies and minds of White people. She reinforces the invisibility of "other" bodies through silently omitting them as subjects with agency. White imaginations are portrayed as unraced, with the authority to speak for others. As I considered these criticisms, I cringed at my inability to see these assumptions when I started New Urban Arts nearly twenty years ago.

At the same time, Greene (1995) does draw on Morrison's Africanist literary theory to make her case in *Releasing the Imagination*. In developing this theory, Morrison argues that too often Black people have signified little or nothing in the imaginations of White writers, other than,

as the objects of an occasional bout of jungle fever… to provide

local color… to lend some touch of verisimilitude… to supply a needed moral gesture, humor, or a bit of pathos. (2007, p. 15)

Although Greene relies on this literary theory, I would argue that in Greene's writing Black people remain "shadowless," as Morrison (p. 10) puts it. Even as Greene attempts to "open up our experience . . . to existential possibilities of multiple kinds" (p. 161), she creates opportunities for "them" to tell "their" stories, which are stories of pathos. She invites "them" to explain, presumably to the White "we," how "poverty and exclusion have mediated *their* own sense of the past" (p. 166, my emphasis). Greene has set a trap for herself. By reducing, not releasing, Black imaginations, Greene provides "them" the uncompensated burden of telling "us" the "diverse stories" that make "inescapable the braids of experience woven into the fabric of U.S. plurality" (p. 166). And yet, her claim to "release" Black imaginations can be critiqued as an act of colonization whereby Black imaginations are absorbed and subsumed, not woven, into "our" dominant ones.

In rereading Greene, I considered how my failure to see these assumptions may have structured my own approach to community arts practice. In particular, I questioned the extent to which I allowed "others" to speak and imagine for themselves. I wondered how my vision for a utopic community did not afford the emergence of arts-based methodologies that are necessary to confront the irresolvable nature of racial conflict in the U.S. I became disillusioned with my own color blindness as a community artist.

In my effort to prevent this disillusion from hardening into apathy and cynicism, qualities that are not useful for artists/educators/ researchers, I turned to Pope.L and his artistic practice. And in an unexpected turn, I became inspired through listening to DJ Danger Mouse's *Grey Album*. In this album, Danger Mouse cuts and pastes sounds from Jay-Z's *Black Album* and the Beatles' *White Album*. He remixes, taking what he likes and leaving behind the rest, to produce a new sound that playfully pushes music in an unanticipated direction. As I listened to the *Grey Album*, I wondered what might happen if I remixed passages from Greene's *Releasing the Imagination* (1995)

and text from William Pope.L's drawing series *Skin Set* (2013) to create something new.

After I selected several examples of text from Pope.L's *Skin Set* (2013) series, I then selected a passage from Greene's *Releasing the Imagination* (1995) in which she ossifies race through the use of pronouns. I decided to create a mash-up by inserting text from Pope.L's drawings into Greene's passage to draw attention to the assumptions embedded in her text, assumptions I had failed to identify two decades earlier. This dialogic approach is broadly consistent with a postmodern representational approach (Lather, 1991), in which words are spoken non-hierarchically from multiple voices, thus continually opening meaning to interpretation and re-interpretation. I opted for this approach to explore releasing pleasure through a playful, absurdist approach to contend with the irresolvable nature of my subject position as a White arts educator and my previous failures in reading Greene.

As I cut and pasted this poly-vocal text, the result felt inadequate but I was unsure how or why. The first result is presented below. Consider two performers reading this bi-vocal text: one speaks Greene's (1995) words in non-italicized text, from p. 160, and the other speaks Pope.L's (2013) words in italics. (Note: this text contains vulgar, racially offensive and sexual content.)

> Looking back at the gaps in our own lived experiences, we *Green People Are America Eat Its Ass-ness* might think of silences like those Tillie Olson had in mind when she spoke of literary history "dark with silences," the "unnatural silences" of women who worked too hard or were not embarrassed to express themselves (1978, p. 6) and of others who did not have the words or had not mastered the proper ways of knowing. We *Blue People Cannot Conceive of Themselves* might ponder the plight of young island women, like Jamaica Kincaid's "Lucy" from Antigua, forced to be "two-faced" in a postcolonial school: "outside, I seemed one way, inside I was another; outside false, inside true" (1990, p. 18). For years, we *Black People Are A Musical About Hard Candy, Pork Rinds, Pussy and Money* knew no more about people like

her (who saw "sorrow and bitterness" in the faces of daffodils because of the Wordsworth poem she had been forced to learn) than we *Orange People Are My Balls In Summer* did about the Barbadians that Paule Marshall ([1959] 1981) has described, people living their fragmented lives in Brooklyn. We *White People Are a Desalination Plant in Puerto Rico* had little consciousness of what Gloria Anzaldua (1987) calls "borderlands," or *la frontera*, on which so many Latinos live or of the Cuban immigrants in "The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love," the musicians whose music is never heard outside their clubs, their enclosed world (Hijuelos, 1989). Who of us *Red People Are the Niggerss of the Canyon* truly wondered about the builders of the railroads, those Maxine Hong Kingston calls "China Men," chopping trees in the Sandalwood Mountains and the Sierra Nevada.

This mashup could go on and on; thankfully it does not. Somewhat paradoxically given their tone and content, Pope.L's words are relegated to redeeming the failure of Greene's White imagination. I found my role for Pope.L reproduces offensive tropes found in Hollywood cinema or texts critiqued by Morrison (2007). Pope.L's words play the role of incompetent, bumbling sidekick to Greene's philosophical invincibility (e.g. Eddie Murphy in *Beverly Hills Cop*) or, perhaps Greene's text is elevated now that it stands side-by-side with non-White knowledge (e.g. Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*). Either way, I was uncomfortable with the way in which I relegated Pope.L and his words to this subservient and marginal role.

So I continued to play with the text to attempt to redress these problems. I considered using found poetry analysis to remove words from this mashup (cf. Denmead & Hickman, 2014; Wiggins, 2012). This approach to remix moves beyond "the limits of language and evokes what cannot be articulated" (Eisner, 1997, p. 4). I left behind words to help me invent visions of "what might be," as Greene (1995, p. 5) puts it, while "making disillusion knowable yet bearable," as Pope.L describes (Hoffman, 2002, para. 17). I deselected words by making them gray, and bolded those I selected. My criteria for bolding and greying

words were largely poetic. I used alliteration and repetition, for example, by selecting "silences… spoke… dark with silences." I established rhythm through the "p" sounds of "Pork Rinds, Pussy… and… the Wordsworth poem." I created unexpected collisions in meaning by putting words like "Pork Rinds" and "Wordsworth poem" next to each other. Their juxtaposition suggested implicit hierarchies, which could then be subverted by speaking the words together in the same poem. In creating form, I established space by choosing words across and down the block of text to suggest "parts" amidst a "whole." I did not, however, aim to suggest any racial symbolism by my use of black and grey fonts, but rather I used the visual foreground and background to suggest that there are two poems to be read. One is written through selection (black) and the other is written through erasure (grey); in other words, the poem(s) can be read by reading black, grey or both black and grey:

> [Looking back at the gaps in our own lived experiences, we] Green People Are America Eat Its Ass-ness [might think of silences like those Tillie Olson had in mind when she spoke of literary history "dark with silences," the "unnatural silences" of women who worked too hard or were not embarrassed to express themselves (1978, p. 6) and of others who did not have the words or had not mastered the proper ways of knowing. We] Blue People Cannot Conceive of Themselves [might ponder the plight of young island women, like Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* from Antigua, forced to be "two-faced" in a postcolonial school: "outside, I seemed one way, inside I was another; outside false, inside true" (1990, p. 18). For years, we [Black People Are A Musical About Hard Candy, Pork Rinds, Pussy and Money] knew no more about people like her (who saw "sorrow and bitterness" in the faces of daffodils because of the Wordsworth poem she had been forced to learn) than we] Orange People Are My Balls In Summer [did about the Barbadians that Paule Marshall ((1959] 1981) has described, people living their fragmented lives in Brooklyn. We] White People Are a Desalination Plant in Puerto Rico [had little consciousness of what Gloria Anzaldua (1987)

calls "borderlands," or *la frontera,* on which so many Latinos live or of the Cuban immigrants in *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs* of Love, the musicians whose music is never heard outside their clubs, their enclosed world (Hijuelos, 1989). Who of us] Red People Are the Niggerss of the Canyon [truly wondered about the builders of the railroad, those Maxine Hong Kingston calls "China Men," chopping trees in the Sandalwood Mountains and the Sierra Nevada.]

For me, this remixed found poem improves upon the previous version. I laughed at the playful combinations of words, both in terms of uttering their unexpected sounds and contemplating their colliding meanings. I was moved, for example, by imagining what it might mean to live in a desalination plant on the border, being stuck in a musical, and the Wordsworth poem she had been forced to learn.

Given the ways in which language nails people to the wall like lunchmeat, testing the pliability of the text untethered me from this world, from this fixed world of "us" and "them." It moved me beyond a crippling spiral of masochism that can result from dwelling on my own racial biases and beyond a paralyzing dissolution that can arise when recognizing the irresolvable nature of racial conflict itself. I rediscovered playing with material, permission that both Greene and Pope.L afford. When "we" cannot imagine and create a grand solution that might stick, at least we can release ourselves momentarily. "We" can mount the train and ride it out the other side. Of course, once the remixing is over, "we" remain in raced, classed, gendered, and credentialed bodies that this absurdist approach to remixing does not erase.

I appreciate that this specific approach to remixing might not register for others as significant to them or particularly useful. Others might consider my approach to be inconsistent with remixing itself, as remixing in hip-hop culture more likely entails selecting revered materials for appropriation. Altering sounds and texts through remixing registers as a sign of respect. From this perspective, critiquing Green's text through a remix is not fitting. However, I hope my absurdist approach to remixing invites other readers to consider its pedagogic val-

ue. Using this approach, the resulting form, the "found poem," is not precious to me. It is far less significant than the mindset it cultivates. For me, remixing as an absurdist practice cultivates an ease with "testing the pliability" of forms and ideas (Lucero & Lucero, 2014, p. viii), *particularly* those forms and ideas we revere. Cultivating this ease can be relatively cheap and easy; the materials for a found poem come readymade and the assemblages can occur accidentally and quickly. For community arts practitioners, cultivating this flexibility of mind and willingness to tamper with ideas we revere is crucial. In particular, we must continue to test the pliability of the concept of "community" itself. Despite progress by art education scholars who are introducing theories to approach the concept in new ways (Holland, 2015; Illeris, 2015), "community" remains a trap for what it "assumes, silences, and reproduces with regards to racial conflict" (Chernoff, 2015, p. 97). To address the racialized tensions that can be silenced in the name of "community," perhaps those who educate community arts practitioners might consider their own absurdist approaches to remixing that brings these racialized tensions to the surface. Such an irreverent approach to remixing may offer a protected pedagogic space, albeit a momentary one, that may be less threatening because of its lack of preciousness and its potential for humor.

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