The Clothesline Project: Arts-in-Action to End the Violence Against Women

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Abstract

The project described in this article utilizes art to call attention to the epidemic of violence against women on our college campuses and within our broader society. In higher education, the arts represent a hopeful space within which society can question, experiment within, and even confront itself. Understanding the ways that the arts can help students connect to culture and community enables us to use the arts to make learning exciting, meaningful, and supportive of democratic principles. Through its use of the arts, higher education institutions can offer important pedagogical spaces for social criticism and inspire collective action to stop the violence against women. The essay concludes by suggesting ways that a collective art project can reach out to victims and organize a network of allies to change institutional policies and practices that protect sexual predators and silence victims.

Key words: violence against women, art as social commentary, art-in-action, arts in higher education

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"Works of art, if you move inside them, open up worlds of possibility."

Maxine Greene (1917-2014)

Introduction

As sexual assault becomes a deadly epidemic on college campuses, the Clothesline Project at George Mason University provides an example of a public art project that engages the campus community in individual and collective community participatory action to stop violence against women. The open-air art exhibit offers a space for individual and collective community education, reflection and transformational praxis. Originally started with thirty-one shirts hung in Cape Cod, Massachusetts in 1990, the Clothesline Project has spread throughout the U.S. and many other countries (http://www.clotheslineproject.org/[1]). Displayed on T-shirts are tributes to mothers, sisters and friends who have experienced domestic violence, rape and abuse. Some of the T-shirts are expressions of the survivors themselves, and others are designed by caring friends and family members.

Arts programs have long been used to help people communicate, share beliefs, learn skills and communicate information. In higher education, the arts represent a hopeful space within which society can question, experiment with, and even confront itself. Understanding the ways that the arts can help students connect to culture and community enables us to use the arts to make learning exciting, meaningful, and supportive of democratic principles (Grant, 2014). Higher education institutions through use of the arts can offer important space for social criticism and inspire collective action. Violence against women is knowledge learned and must be "unlearned'' through transformed practice (Britzman, 1991). The photos of the Clothesline Project described in this article offer an opportunity to see "art-in-action" to call attention to the epidemic of violence against women on our campuses and within the broader society.

Gendered Violence and Higher Education.

Historically, women's increasing involvement in activities outside the home and their presence in the public sphere have led to the reconceptualization of the way our culture defines feminism and understands sexual assault and gender-based violence (Gilbert & Eby, 2004). "Rape [and sexual assault] haunts the lives of women on a daily basis… More than other crimes, fear of rape leads us, consciously and unconsciously, to restrict our movements and our life choices" (Niarchos, 1995, p. 649). Heightened attention to incidences of violence against women by professional athletes, and recently, allegations of sexual misconduct by powerful male celebrities have intensified the discussion and need to redefine rape and sexual assault to fit the sexual, racial, and economic inequalities of the twenty-first century (Freedman, 2013).

Violence against women cuts across class, race, age, (dis)ability, religion, ethnicity and national boundaries. The most common form of violence against women is domestic violence, the physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse of women by their intimate partners. There are many reasons why domestic violence is unreported, including self-blame, shame, the stigma of being a victim, the fear of retribution for reporting the abuse, victim-blaming on the part of family and friends and societal attitudes that support gender-based violence as "normal" (Watts, Heise, Ellsberg & Garcia-Moreno, 2001). While men perpetrate most violence against women, men (and transgendered persons) may also be the victims of gender-based violence (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2014).

Rape and sexual assault have long served as a military strategy and until recently, largely been ignored by historians, sociologists, and journalists. In times of war and peace, "These aggressions against women have conditioned women to the fact that we are vulnerable to attack at any time because of our gender" (Niarchos, 1995, p. 649). In addition to oppressing women,

rape has been used as expression of male sexual attitudes in a culture both racist and patriarchal.

For example, during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequent enslavement of people of

African descent, rape served as a method of racial control as Black men were helpless in

defending their wives, mothers, and daughters against the supremacy of White men. Even today,

intersectionalities of racism and gender-based oppression may intensify oppression for women of

color (Crenshaw, 1991).

Violence against women cuts across multiple identities and hierarchies of power. A case

that has epitomized the racial and gender divide is the case of Marissa Alexander (Martin, 2012).

As reported on Democracy Now, Marissa Alexander, a 31-year-old, African-American mother of

three, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for firing what she maintains was a warning shot at her

abusive husband. Insisting that she had been defending herself when she fired a shot into a wall

near her husband, Alexander turned down a plea bargain that would have seen her jailed for three

years. She attempted to use Florida's Stand Your Ground law in her defense. But in March 2012,

the jury convicted her, after only 12 minutes of deliberation. Using a similar defense, George

Zimmerman was acquitted on the charge of first-degree murder for the death of Trayvon Martin

(Goodman, 2013).

Reports by students and employees of sexual assault, including rape, forcible sodomy,

forcible fondling and sexual assault with an object are rising at American universities (Anderson,

2014). Many institutions, including the military, religious organizations and universities may not

encourage reportage of sexual assault and may even penalize those who report abuse in the

desire to protect the reputations of the institutions and those in command and in leadership

positions. To address the epidemic of sexual violence on college campuses, California recently

passed Senate Bill 967

(https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140SB967[2]). This

law requires colleges receiving state-financed student aid to change the definition of consent in

their sexual assault policies, replacing the traditional "no means no" standard with "affirmative

consent." The change means that the person initiating sex must obtain a "yes" rather than placing

responsibility on the intended partner to convey a "no." A similar bill is now under consideration

by the New York state legislature.

The Clothesline Project: A Space for Individual and Collective Community Participatory

Action

The purpose of the Clothesline Project is four-fold:

1. To bear witness to the survivors as well as the victims of the war against women.

2. To help with the healing process for people who have lost a loved one or are
   survivors of this violence.

3. To educate, document and raise society's awareness of the extent of the problem of
   violence against women.

4. To provide a nationwide network of support, encouragement and information for
   other communities starting their own Clothesline Projects.

(The Clothesline Project, n.d.)

Figures 1-4. Photos by Shelley Wong.

The Clothesline project is an ***intentional*** undertaking to nurture a place, a space to enter into discussions about violence against women. It consists of a series of painted t-shirts hung on a clothesline. T-shirt art is almost always found in public spaces outside of museums. In contrast to a mural on the wall of a public space which is more permanent, T-shirt art, like automobile bumper stickers, affords mobility and can be found in busy urban centers, on a crowded beach or near a mountain stream. Like bumper stickers, T-shirt art can be a form of political expression or sloganeering. In addition it affords, when worn on a body, the possibility of personal expression—high fashion, political commentary, words of wisdom, sarcasm or irreverent humor.

T-shirt art is multimodal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996)—affording visual images combining

text, graphic design and textual collages.

In the Clothesline Project the individual t-shirts hung in a series with clothespins combine

into a larger composition. The clothesline is an artistic image commonly found in urban and rural

watercolor landscapes. Reminiscent of quilting, in which each square contributes to the quilt and

the patchwork design, each T-shirt has its own message and design. When hung in a series with

other T-shirts on the clothesline, the messages and images are amplified, and flow together in

solidarity, creating a composition in which the whole is made more powerful than the sum of the

parts. Drawing on the symbolic materials of *women's work—*the clothesline—like quilting—

evokes working class and indigenous Native and Pacific Islander heritage and embodies the

power of wise grandmothers, aunts and women who have gone before us (Rongokea, 2001). To

some, the Clothesline Project, similar to quilting, may not be considered art at all. Originally,

quilting was dismissed as a folk art or craft. It gained recognition as an art form in the late 20th

century when African-American scholars began to utilize metaphors of quilting (and other

African-American artistic expressions) in womanist literature, ethnic and women's studies and

education (Walker, 1994; Collins, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Naming the Oppression: Gender-based violence

The Clothesline Project opens up a space to explore a topic that has too often been

ignored: the war against women. Is there a "war against women" or a "war against people of

color"? Crenshaw (1991) points out that historically, the dominant discourses of the majority

white European-American women's movement did not sufficiently interrogate racism and class

oppression. In addition, the discourses of solidarity among people of color, who historically

opposed the lynching (and currently, the cradle-to-prison pipeline of African American males)

have not sufficiently emphasized domestic violence, battering, rape and other forms of gender-based violence perpetrated against women and transgendered people of color.

The process of naming the sources of any aspect of oppression—in this case misogyny (Davies, 2012) and gender-based violence—is a complex process of conscientization, or consciousness-raising (Freire, 1970). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Brazilian educator Paulo Freire utilized problem posing in teaching adult peasants how to read. He asked his adult students who had never had the opportunity to go to school to identify vocabulary or key terms drawn from their everyday realities as source-reading material to fashion his literacy curriculum. In contrast to what he called "banking pedagogies," in which the teacher deposits knowledge into the heads of students as if they were empty vessels, Freire's pedagogy was dialogic, in which students and teachers learned from each other through a process of dialogue and reflection on the source of their oppression (Freire, 1970). Reading the *word* became a means of reading the *world*, or understanding their local situation, analyzing their realities to understand their place in the world and how to change it (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As a Marxist, Freire saw that the reason why his students were illiterate was a historical problem, requiring a *systematic* understanding of political economy and the workings of the systems of domination and oppression.

Naming the oppression of women is both a deep experiential and moral encounter with a reflection on one's history and analysis of the roots of the problem (Wong, 2005). Problem posing around how to address violence against women is a political project linking the local and global, pushing students, teachers, and literacy researchers to learn from the experiences of women (and transgendered and men) in local classrooms and communities from their "raced,

classed, gendered, and queered vantage points" to engage the global through local political

action (Blackburn & Clark, 2007, p.3).

Domestic violence may be seen as a personal issue, and victims may be unaware of how

to resist, out of conflicting feelings of love and fear for one's spouse or partner and because the

violence is seen as "normal" in society. Domestic violence is a manifestation of internalized

oppression in which the victims themselves, especially children, have been taught to love their

abusers. Discussions of sexual assault and the dating/partner are not easy conversations to have

within any community. Designing brochures, websites, and tools for outreach are a way to open

conversations to stop (and prevent) the violence.

Probing into the causes of violence against women is also a potentially emancipatory,

participatory political project for an end to war, militarism and exploitation (Wong & Grant,

2014). For those communities which have not been protected by law enforcement, or in the case

of the most vulnerable—poor, people of color and undocumented immigrant communities that

have been subject to racial profiling, police harassment and police brutality—inquiring into how

"violence is a learned behavior" and how to *unlearn* it cannot be isolated separately from the

macro systemic structures and processes of war, racism, exploitation and empire (Motha, 2014).

It also requires that teachers, students and literacy researchers make *explicit* connections between

symbolic violence (Grant & Wong, 2008) and the language required for survival in daily life as

well as the language, actions, and movement needed to raise critical consciousness of systemic

injustice worldwide.

We conclude with examples of class activities and projects that involve students in a

range of activities, both media- and text-derived, that are grounded in pedagogical principles

associated with critical multimodal discourse analysis and literacy. Critical Discourse Analysis

(CDA) can be used to analyze texts, movies, media, and social networks covering a wide range

of topics, including politics, immigration, racism, sexism, homophobia, crime and many more.

The discourse can be any audio, video, or written text that is publicly available, such as YouTube

video clips, talk show segments, newspaper articles, magazine ads, and so forth. Keeping in

mind that issues of rape and gendered violence are sensitive and must be addressed in

developmentally and contextually appropriate ways, our suggestions are organized to reflect

these principles.

University/adult setting. At George Mason University, the Wellness, Alcohol, and

Violence Education and Services (WAVES) designs brochures to help the community to end

violence against women and honor its victims. Students could read the brochure and use online

sources to access information about California Senate Bill 967. Next, they can employ CDA to

discuss the language of "affirmative consent," focusing on the variety of ways this change could

be interpreted or misinterpreted. Finally, students can form small working groups to design a

brochure or billboard, develop a commercial or video, or create a photo montage or PowerPoint

presentation to inform the campus community about the impending changes to policy regarding

sexual assault under "affirmative consent." Follow-up activities could involve students in

fieldwork hours for course credit or volunteering at a shelter for women and children survivors

of sexual or domestic violence. In more advanced university courses, students might engage in

qualitative research using methodological tools for action research or case study.

K-12 setting. Violence against women and girls is a globally entrenched human rights

issue. Actively engaging children in activities that begin to gradually change mindsets and

cultural beliefs is of paramount importance. In K-12 classes, teachers must, of course, begin by

establishing an environment of open communication, one where children feel safe sharing their

experiences and feelings. For an initial activity, teachers can use a Venn diagram depicting "Jobs

for Girls/Jobs for Boys." This could be a first step in identifying students' perspectives about

gender roles. Ask boys to fill in the area for girls, while girls complete the area for boys. Next,

have them engage in small group discussion to identify jobs both girls and boys share.

Subsequent activities would involve a teacher-guided discussion, in which students are asked to

"think about a time when someone said or did something that made you feel bad, uncomfortable

or afraid." Next, introduce a word map (K-2) or concept web (grade 3 and above) for "bullying,"

define it, and ask for examples of bullying behavior (e.g., name-calling, isolating or excluding,

etc.). Culminating activities could include: developing bookmarks or posters to stop bullying;

writing a rap or poem about bullying or violence; or working in small groups, students could

develop PowerPoint presentations or a video as part of a campaign to stop bullying. For late

elementary through high school students, teachers could have students share through discussion

or journal writing a personal story about being bullied or witnessing bullying. Teachers can focus

the discussion/responses by including discussion/writing prompts: (1) How did you feel when

you were bullied or saw someone being bullied? (4) Why do you think no one stopped it?

Teachers might give older students a KWL chart to focus initial discussion and assess prior

knowledge (K) about bullying or rape and sexual violence. The questions generated (W) could

be a starting point for online research on bullying or sexual violence. Culminating activities

could include developing a brochure, making a short video/film, creating a collage or video

montage of images showing the survivors of bullying and violence, or making bumper stickers or

posters to raise awareness about bullying or rape and sexual violence in schools and their

communities. Another possibility would be to conduct online research and collect data on

bullying or rape and sexual violence in the U.S. Then, compare U.S. data with data from one or

more other countries. This would help students to see the pervasive nature of bullying, rape, and
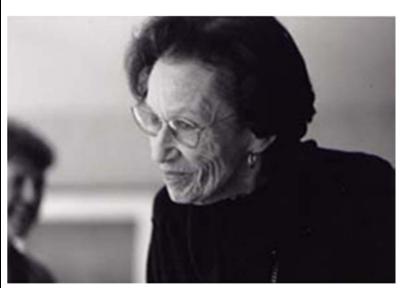
other forms of violence against women.

Figure 5. "We understand aesthetic education to be an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with works of art by enabling learners to notice what there is to be noticed and to lend works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful." "Social imagination is the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficit society, in the streets where we live and our schools. Social imagination not only suggests but also requires that one take action to repair or renew." (Greene, cited in The Maxine Greene Center for Aesthetic Education and Social Imagination, 2014)

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