

# PREFACE

## WHAT BROUGHT US HERE?

### **Moshoula**

Love...Inspiration...Passion...Power...Possibility...These are the words that come to my mind when I think about what brings me to engage in the arts as a form of research and social change. My journey with the arts began prior to my entrance into higher education; through my own practices of art-making (as a creator and consumer of art). However, as a working-class woman of color, I was most drawn to lowbrow art and other DIY practices that were rooted in marginalized and underground communities. My positionality informed my criticism of mainstream art; its lack of accessibility and the power of who determined what was considered legitimate art.

My engagement with the visual arts developed and flourished in childhood. As a bicultural woman, art seemed to transcend ethnic identities and spatial boundaries, connecting my two worlds in a way that language could not. Art served as a source of knowledge and as a form of expression for the feelings and experiences that I could not articulate as a first-generation immigrant in the U.S. From a very young age, engaging with art and producing my own art was a source of inspiration. My self-expression has taken shape in multiple forms and through various media; such as painting, drawing, ceramics, collage, jewelry making, sewing, and photography. It wasn't until college that my personal art entered the public realm. In the early stages of my youth, my art-making didn't have

a distinct purpose, other than self-expression. As I entered adulthood, I set art-making aside for a few years to pursue social work.

After years of working in various social service organizations with diverse marginalized populations, it wasn't until I entered academia that I began to revisit art-making and see art as a tool for individual and collective empowerment and social change. My relationship *to* and *with* the arts moved from a place for self-expression to a space of responding to social conditions and social relations. As I merged my intersecting identities of educator-researcher-artist-activist, I began to envision the endless opportunities of the arts for decolonizing knowledge, for challenging the construction and representation of knowledge, and for engaging individuals, groups and communities beyond academia.

My personal creativity and commitment to the artistic process are also inspired by the artistic images and creativity of others. It is my love for the arts and my identity as a visual artist that fuels my passion for incorporating artistic inquiry into my research *with* participants. This intricate and reciprocal practice of co-creating art, knowledge, and meaning with others in order to engage in social change served to inspire the conceptualization of this anthology.

Having known Karen for many years and having had the privilege of collaborating with her on other scholarly projects, I invited her to participate as a co-author of this edited collection. As my kindred spirit, Karen shares the same passion and dedication to making visible the various ways in which arts-based research practices have the potential for revitalizing social justice work. Coming together in solidarity, we wanted to collect the diverse voices of people who are taking up art as a form of anti-oppressive research practice in an effort to enable personal and community expression, to generate empathy and unity, to disrupt dominant ways of seeing and knowing, to make art and art-making practices more accessible, and to examine and challenge privilege, power, and oppression at the individual, social, and structural level. We are motivated by a conviction that the arts make a unique contribution to the process of change, both personal and societal.

### **Karen**

My immediate family is full of dabblers. My childhood “art memories” all revolve around my mother. My mother was a stay-at-home mom but, oddly enough, I don't really think of her in that light—she's never been the apron-wearing, cookie-baking sort I guess. When I was young

I thought of her as an artist. I remember her sculptures and drawings—the drapery burlap person, the metal bird, the drawing of the face with glasses. I remember that she drove 45 mins to figure drawing class for what seems like many years of my life. I remember her jewelry-making materials in a reclaimed cardboard box with vivid 1970s pop-art designs on the front—possibly of a hot-air balloon. I remember a ring she made and wonder as I write this if she still has it and hope she does so I can ask for it...

My father, while a photographer for many years, seems to be more solidly immortalized in my art memories once he began to work with pottery when I was in my early 20s. I still have one of his early, tiny, mugs with its characteristic white speckled denim blue glaze that he developed. He dove into pottery and stayed there for a good 20 or so years, having a fondness for creating glazes, throwing pots, making tile wall hangings, and hand-building large sculptural pieces that dot their yard. Since he stopped doing pottery, he has returned to photography with gusto. His photos generally gravitate towards the natural world of color, texture, and detail—deep colors, dragonfly wings, rain-dappled leaves...

My older sister was supposed to be “the artist.” She drew throughout her youth though I can really only recall her Bob Newhart comic with much clarity—and even that has grown fuzzy in my mind. Somehow it seemed a given that she would go on to art school, which she did for a time, enrolling in Rochester Institute of Technology as an art major and completing 3 years there. Detailed printmaking creations are what I can see in my mind’s eye. I recall that they took a long time to create and I often wondered about the level of patience they required to execute. After a time she chose to leave RIT as she found that turning art into her work took the pleasure out of it for her. Over the years she has dabbled in fiber arts—dyeing and spinning—and has moved more into working with her hands through soap-making and gardening endeavors.

I was never “the artist” and I don’t really recall aspiring to be such. I did often harbor a wish that I could sing but never did anything about that. I considered taking up an instrument when I was in elementary school. I still remember submitting my top three choices of instruments for band in junior high school. I remember that flute, clarinet, and saxophone were on the list and I was given the opportunity to play flute or clarinet—I can’t recall which one. I declined, but I don’t know why. Because I love saxophone, I romanticize that I really wanted to play saxophone and was disappointed that I was given the more “feminine”

instrument as a choice but, to be honest, I may have created this narrative based on foggy memory rather than actual events. I worked in the theater production crew for a couple of years in junior high, preferring the backstage to the front stage given my shy demeanor. And I always wished I could draw. For some reason that was a marker of being “good at art.” I can assure you—I cannot draw.

Though I created things over the years, I must admit, I never saw any of it as art. Craftiness I guess. The non-artist’s art.<sup>1</sup> I made tie-dye and did beadwork which may have been more reflective of a need to fund Grateful Dead concerts and my deep-seated disappointment that I had not been born earlier and come of age in the 1960s. I painted walls with sponges and some sort of freehand designs, which I can’t recall. I sewed a lot, but almost always from patterns since I am completely unable to move from 2- to 3-dimensional forms. I made dolls for my daughter—lovingly hand sewn wool and cotton dolls following the Waldorf



Fig. P.1 What came before

traditions. I took jewelry-making classes, tried my hand at pottery under my father's tutelage, and made handmade gifts.

I think of qualitative research as art, though I daresay my self-critique places my own earlier research endeavors solidly in a more mainstream, traditional iteration of qualitative research and less "art." I pushed beyond constraints and moved more into art only in the ways that I wove autoethnography into a traditional format in my dissertation and wrote an autoethnographic piece reflecting on researcher positionality (Morgaine 2014), which taps into my more creative impulses. Up until my current research project (see Chap. 13), my research has been limited, as I devoted time to teaching and writing on anti-oppressive social work practice. Some of these limits have been self-imposed as I continue to struggle with my "place" in research as a cis-gendered, white, queer, female who is most deeply moved to do racial justice work and to simply "resist." This is where I work to come full circle; and then around again, perhaps with a new relationship to research and the possibilities.

### **ABR as Emerging Practice**

Arts-based research (ABR) and other forms of arts-based inquiry have developed over the past few decades alongside the calls for researchers to engage in reflexivity (Lather 1991), become reflexive activists (Denzin 1999, 2000), and to decolonize knowledge and the process by which we acquire knowledge (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Elliot Eisner in 1991 distinguished Presidential Address to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) called for an expansion of research methodologies to include literature, poetry, visual arts, dance, and music noting using arts-based research methodologies "give us insights that inform us in the special ways that only artistically rendered forms make possible...we won't have long to wait until they are called to center stage" (as cited in Cole and Knowles 2008, p. 58). Situated in the "new paradigm" of qualitative research, Eisner described alternative definitions of research as "virtually any careful, reflective, systematic study of phenomena undertaken to advance human understanding can count as a form of research" (1997, p. 262). In Denzin's challenge to researchers in this new paradigm, he encouraged qualitative researchers to embrace a "radical, ethical aesthetic," (2000, p. 26) and to focus on the process, rather than simply the end product, which ABR can serve as natural "catalyst" for (Finley 2003, p. 287). This decolonization of research can be supported by artist-researchers who create and

inhabit “open spaces and multiple entrances to their work” (Finley 2003, p. 288) that can allow for multiple readings, entry points, and possibilities for participation. Yvonna Lincoln also initiated a dialogue in 1995 about the new paradigm and the need for scholars within this paradigm to commit:

First, to deep participant and researcher interactions and involvements; second, to professional, personal, and political actions that might improve participants’ lives; and third, to future-oriented work that is based in a visionary perspective that encompasses social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse, and caring. (Finley 2003, p. 282)

The emergence of ABR and related methodologies, such as arts-based inquiry, image-based research, and visual sociology, (Cole and Knowles 2008) took place during a particularly fertile period in social science research. Dialogue from practitioners seeking to engage in more critical, participatory, politically relevant, and decolonizing research and backlash from positivist and post-positivist practitioners who observed more traditional qualitative research gaining traction provided a vibrant jumping off point for ABR. As to be expected, there were points of convergence and divergence particularly regarding questions of quality/skillfulness, evaluation/standards, and goals/strengths of ABR.

### **Dialogue and Debate**

The question of who can or “should” use arts-based research methodologies continues to circulate and prompts a variety of responses. For example, some proponents of ABR stress that it is necessary for researchers to develop requisite skills and techniques in the chosen art form so as not to appear amateurish in their endeavors. One way to address varied skill sets, according to Eisner (2008) is to create collaborative teams of researchers working with artists who are trained in the necessary techniques and possess artistic talents. Others suggest that arts-based researchers should remain open to a more expansive understanding of what qualifies as “art” and to create space for vernacular, folk, popular culture, and outsider art (Denzin 2000; Finley 2003). Seeing the dynamic and social/historical contexts in which we define, create, and consume “art,” Finley questions what art truly is, if we “know it when we see it?” (p. 291) and whether good art is also good research and/or is good research good art (Finley 2003, p. 285)?

Often the dialogue about what makes “good” arts-based research implicitly presumes that the art is the end product yet art can often be part of the process and a conduit through which a researcher accesses data. A “natural” outcome of these conversations is the debate about how ABR should be evaluated and whether there should be standards akin to traditional qualitative research criteria.

From Eisner’s perspective, arts-based inquiries are not “science,” and thus, cannot be compared to other forms of scientific inquiry (Finley 2003). Somewhat akin to this perspective, Leavy (2014) suggests that ABR goals differ from traditional qualitative research and, as such, needs to be “assessed on its own terms” (p. 257), using the concept of vigor, rather than rigor. Others propose that the quality of an ABR project can be assessed by its “ability to “promote dialogic creativity and its performative qualities” (Finley 2008, p. 78). One important aspect of this form of assessment is to shift the focus of assessment from the structural form of the art to prioritizing “diversity, inclusivity, dialogic creativity and openness to the participation of an ephemeral, dynamic community of participants” (Finley 2008, p. 78).

Advocating for a transdisciplinary model that will move away from the specificity of assessing a particular artistic medium, Lafreniere and Cox (2012) propose a framework that will include “normative, substantive, and performative criteria” (p. 323). This framework poses three questions:

- (1) Does the artistic piece derive from data collected, interpreted and analyzed through rigorous and ethical qualitative or other research practices?
- (2) Is the research work created and produced according to the technical and artistic properties of its genre(s)?
- (3) Does the artistic work have an effect on the audience that enhances appreciation for the experiences of research participants and/or the overall study findings? (P. 323).

While there remain divergent views about how to evaluate ABR and what impact “standardization” could have on the field, there are general points of convergence regarding the goals and strengths of ABR.

### **Convergence**

The use of the arts as a medium through which researchers examine and represent the social world is seen as an accessible way to connect to emotions and support empathic responses (Eisner 2008). Leavy notes

that arts-based research has the “capacity to evoke emotions, promote reflection, and transform the way people think” (2014, p. 255). In addition to promoting a new way of knowing, seeing, and experiencing social issues, centering the “audience” for the research and the accessibility of art as a medium to tell a research story is woven throughout the history of ABR (Cole and Knowles 2008; Eisner 2008; Finley 2008; Jones and Leavy 2014; Leavy 2015). In a recent conversation between Kip Jones and Patricia Leavy (2014), Leavy stated:

Finally, and perhaps what has ultimately been the most important for my work is that I think about issues of “audience” much more seriously. Like you, I believe in public scholarship and making our work accessible to broad audiences. I believe there is an ethical and practical mandate for getting our work beyond the academy. And frankly from a personal point of view I think about the overall impact of my work and the further we disseminate our work the higher the impact. Now no matter what I am working on I think seriously about issues of audience.” (P. 3).

From the initial emergence of ABR to the present moment, there has been a consistent focus on the emancipatory, participatory, and social justice possibilities of the method. As arts-based methodologies have expanded the ideas about what constitutes research and knowledge production, particularly in the academy, proponents of ABR have pressed to bring social science research out of the elitist institutions of both academies and museums (Finley 2008; Leavy 2015). Hand-in-hand with this potential and call for research to promote social change is the call for research to engage anti-oppressive principles and practices—being truly transgressive both within the institutions and for ourselves as researchers. This charge asks researchers to center power relations in the research process so they can be problematized and dismantled (Brown and Strega 2005).

### WHY IS IT CRITICAL AND IMPORTANT TO MERGE AOP/ABR?

At a time of growing inequality, we are witnessing various forms of oppression that are present from the local level to the global realm. In a context where the challenges we face as a people and communities are becoming more layered and complex, our means of responding to need incorporate creative and decolonizing approaches that challenge

relations of domination and subordination and the relatively new relations of neoliberal globalization. This anthology merges arts-based and anti-oppressive research practices with the vision that the intersections of these approaches have the potential to revitalize social (justice) work and to affirm creative responses to challenging and changing social contexts.

Anti-oppressive practice challenges oppression in its multiple, intersecting forms (Adams, Dominelli and Payne 2009; Mullaly 2002) and attempts to analyze how power works to marginalize people, as well as how power can be used to liberate and empower people across a wide range of social settings, relations, environments, and systems (Baines 2011). Arts-based research makes use of the diverse ways of knowing and experiencing the world (Finley 2008). Three main goals of arts-based research are: (1) social activism by giving voice to those with less power in society (Barone 2000; Finley and Finley 1999); (2) making connections between research and lived experience (Garoian 1999); and (3) making meaning through multiple senses and medium (Norris 2000). What distinguishes arts-based research are the multiple creative ways of representing experiences and the different representational forms (medium) of expression that can effectively enhance the understanding of the human condition and experience. Merging ABR/AOP provides new ways to look at the complexities of oppressions operating within neoliberal, post-colonial societies and serves to mobilize peoples' imaginations and resources for social change.

While most research exists in a complicated web of power, neoliberalism, patriarchy, Western linear thinking, and elitism (Steinberg 2012), the arts offer alternate ways of thinking, doing, and rendering interpretations and understandings (Barone and Eisner 2011; Leavy 2009) that challenge power, privilege, and dominant forms of creating, representing and disseminating knowledge. It is in its willingness to expose vulnerability and embrace ambiguity and the messiness of lived experience that the intersections of arts-based and anti-oppressive research practices hold power to make positive changes in people's lives. Artistic transformation is driven by "uncertainty and mystery rather than reliability and predictability" (McNiff 1998, p. 43).

We believe in the possibilities inspired by the power of arts as a catalyst for both personal and social transformation in a local and global context. The arts invite new ways of seeing, of being *with*, attuning us to the

fissures present in our current ways of being (Walsh, Bickel and Leggo 2014), while anti-oppressive practices sensitize us to power, voice, privilege, and oppression. Their emergence lends to the use of art as a way to explore the range of interconnected societal structures that impact individuals, groups, and communities. Art engages us in ways that are emotional, sensory, and embodied, as well as intellectually and cognitively. Art seems to have a unique capacity to generate complex, nuanced, and empathic understandings that are, potentially linked to social solidarity (Sinding and Barnes 2015). It has the potential to interrupt our habits of seeing and to challenge and alter what and how we know, thus undoing dominant and oppressive ways of knowing and instigating acts of resistance.

### WHAT YOU WILL FIND

This edited volume includes an eclectic mix of arts-based research, pedagogy, and practice that are attentive to diverse knowledges and intersecting identities, attuned to various forms of personal and collective expression, and conscious of the social, economic, and political conditions that perpetuate inequality and oppression. This diverse collection of research studies across disciplinary boundaries is united by the use of arts practices as sites for social change-oriented research.

We have grouped the chapters thematically according to what is understood as various parts/aspects of the research process. These clusters of chapters do not represent mutually exclusive research practices, but rather, are offered as encounters with anti-oppressive and arts-based approaches to research, operating across the blurred and overlapping boundaries of the research process. These chapters in this anthology reflect the myriad of ways in which the arts can be used to open up new ways of envisioning, representing, and living out our commitments to social justice. These chapters draw on various arts-based methods, including literary, visual, and performing arts and include storytelling, poetry, photography, digital technology, collage, short film-making, and performance. The contributors of this anthology highlight the need for anti-oppressive and arts-based research practice to engage in creative art forms in order to make connections between personal lived experiences and wider social relations.

The research projects featured in this anthology cross-disciplinary boundaries and feature a variety of different fields in the arts, humanities, social sciences, social work, health, and medicine. We hope that this edited volume inspires readers—academics, practitioners, activists, artists, students, and professionals—to develop their own meaningful anti-oppressive arts-based research practice that is creative, radical, and politically grounded in social justice. Art scholarship is another way to communicate research results, with the potential to engage more varied audiences than traditional forms of research dissemination might, in ways that are emotional, empathetic, and embodied, as well as intellectual. It is our vision that this collection of voices and works of art inspire critical conversations and motivate ideas for engaging in social justice-oriented research.

Northridge, USA

Moshoula Capous-Desyllas  
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## NOTE

1. This was how I reflected on my own abilities—it is not meant to generalize to all forms of craft/art.



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