

Leaping into the Disassociated Space: Unknowing Activism, Agency and Youth Identity in “Notes From Nowhere”

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ABSTRACT

As young people’s identities continue to be formed by social media, popular culture, and peer approval, mirrored representations of unquestioned ideals have taken center stage. Through an investigative inquiry into this practice, Weltsek and Hammoor emerge with a new possibility for understanding activism and self-formation in the drama classroom—dissociation. Using academic scaffolding and a playful graphic novel, the authors invite teachers, researchers, practitioners and learners to think into a theoretical moment of disconnect. It’s the moment young people talk about when they “let go” and are “consumed” by dramatic activities. The authors argue that moments of disconnect hold

hope for the development of individual agency, social justice and equity both for individuals on paths of self-discovery/creation, collective actions for communities that arise within the drama classroom, and for how we think about and share our scholarship. The graphic novel central to Weltsek and Hammoor's discussion offers a way of thinking into multimodality in scholarship and pedagogy.

"I decide, not you, ...don't tell me what I'm supposed to be or do."
(2016, post-performance student interview)

"I'm an African American, not the African American, being African American is only a part of who I am and how I act in the world. Doing drama lets me decide what I want people to see and how they see it. It's like a leap into the unknown." (2017, post-performance student interview)

AN INVITATION TO JOURNEY

As many in our field have noted, a strength of drama and theatre as art form, pedagogy, and research paradigm lies in the idea of multimodality (Wells & Sandretto, 2016; Lenters & Winters, 2013; Albers & Harste, 2007; Adomat, 2012; Schroeter & Wager, 2017). As Kress & Van Leeuwen, (2001) explain multimodality is "The use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined..." (p. 228). Drama and theatre as performative events are inherently multimodal. When doing drama and theatre we use sound, visuals, physical movement, and engage emotions and the tactile senses. Saldaña (2010) has done a great deal to offer theatre and drama research performatively through ethnodrama. Yet even here when the work is shared outside of the immediate performative moment, reflection appears through one modality, the written word.

In the tradition of visual research (Emmel & Clark, 2011; Grady, 2008) as an attempt to disrupt mono-modality and embrace the multimodal nature of drama and theatre, we invite you to come on a graphic journey with us. Here we explore what we call the "dissociated

space,” a space in the process of becoming where an artist/participant/scholar becomes nothing and no “one” exists. It is a moment of rupture where time and space have no meaning and that thing called self is merely a sensation and not a thought at all. It is here, in this non-space that we imagine youth create themselves as the ultimate act of social justice and equity within and through drama. We posit this notion to provoke the idea that this space is the true space of inquiry and creativity where all drama for social action with, by and for youth must begin. It is the moment before youth identity emerges and connections are made. It is a moment for us “teachers” to step back, remove ourselves and avoid the insidious, misguided and somewhat arrogant imposition of our interpretations upon that becoming. It is an act of radical pedagogy grounded in the activism of students as equal partners in the creation of reality. It is the moment before the big bang. It is nothing—it is everything and exists!

COMING TO THE EDGE

In our conversations with colleagues about the non-space and the possibility of dissociation many have adamantly refused to even consider the idea that “nothing” as a concept exists. This refusal felt like fear to us. The fear to entertain the possibility, no matter how theoretical the above syllogism “if you can name nothing it is something, and therefore no longer exists as nothing,” encouraged us to wonder about unknown, of the absence of fixed reality to dive into the Event Horizon. In an old tale of education a teacher leads a reluctant group of students on a long journey with an undisclosed destination. Throughout the journey the students complain about the difficulty of the obstacles with which they are confronted. Yet through the teacher’s constant care, concern and genuine love the students persevere, that is until the final challenge. The teacher leads the youths to the precipice of a tall mountain and invites the students to leap off. The students, understandably, fear for their lives and refuse. The teacher encourages, cajoles and supports them to take the leap. The students continue to refuse. The teacher, as the tale goes, then pushes the students over the edge. Rather than falling to their death, the students take flight and soar into the unknown.

THE LEAP

As our species continues to struggle with issues of justice and equity resultant from divisive binaries, impositions to “be” and to “act” taking the leap into the unknown creation of self can be overwhelming. The questions, especially for young people, emerge “Who am I?” and “How am I supposed to be?” As we leap into the unknown journey of the creation of self, the discovery of who we are and who we want and may appear in many forms. Popular culture, media, friends, family and even passing strangers read us, name us and consciously and or unconsciously force identities upon us. Many scholars argue that young people form identities based upon what they see in social and popular media (Ferguson, 2001; Giroux, 2001; Dwyer, 2001; Hagood, 2008; Lesko, 2012). Across these studies, the ways in which youths made sense of the world (and the ways the world made sense of them) was posited in direct correlation to how others named them. This is to say that, on this journey in the unknown creation of self, we may very well find ourselves in a Baudrillardian dystopian nightmare of simulation and simulacra:

The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself. (1994, p. 1)

Baudrillard’s simulacra inverts the idea that art imitates reality into reality imitates art. In a climate where agenda-laden identity images are perpetuated across the socio-political spectrum, each with their own bigoted notion of who and what is right and wrong, youths in particular can find themselves, as Freire explains with a

[c]hoice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors;

between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. (1997, p. 48)

All this to say that, youths may consciously or unconsciously enact identities not of their own making. Rather, youths mirror representations of consumed popular cultural archetypes, strained reproductions of community elders, and contentiously mitigated peer imposed performances. A young person's ability to create their self based upon their own critical interpretation, analysis, and understanding of how they view the world, society, politics, and of issues justice and equity can place many youths in horrendous positions. Many are compelled to conform, deny their self and or exist in isolation due to an indefatigable commitment to a sense of emerging self.

SOARING IN THE UNKNOWN

Gus had been leading a series of diversity training workshops that had the goal of youths creating an original play around the topic of social justice and equity. Throughout the process he used Theatre of the Oppressed strategies as a way to encourage the youths to cross literal and metaphorical cultural borders. As Onye, a youth drama participant commented after his involvement in a year-long emergent theatre experience which:

The hidden explanation is that we as humans (especially ones who dedicate themselves in order to do so), challenge ourselves immensely to eliminate and avoid mediocrity or only repeating what we see other people doing, or other people telling us. (2017, E-mail message to Weltsek)

Onye positions his own becoming in direct opposition to those socially imposed and potentially oppressive archetypal portrayals of self. More, he saw this becoming as a personal challenge to the subversion of these archetypes.

Indeed, much work in the field of drama with youth, both practical and theoretical, is committed to this challenge. Examples include the work of Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed (1985), Kathleen Gallagher's work with urban female youth (2001), Javier Cardona's work using the

arts for rehabilitation in prison systems in New York City, and Carmen Medina and Mia Perry's use of process drama as embodiment for the examination of the oppressive colonial effects of popular media in Puerto Rico (2015). To make a comprehensive list of all the work being done in the area of social justice and equity work with youth through drama would be impossible. In this piece, we seek to add to these conversations a wondering into how drama may function to create moments of rupture where young people step back and take a critical look at the roles they perform in life. We ask "How might the moment of critical self-deconstruction actually take place within a drama?"

In *Conversations with God*, author Neal Donald Walsch, speaking of ultimate knowing, shares that "[y]ou cannot create yourself until you *uncreate* (italics original) yourself. In a sense, you have to first 'not be' in order to be" (1995, p. 27). Reflecting on the work we have done using Theatre of the Oppressed and devised theatre as a launching point, this paper wonders how individual and collective discourse might emerge. How is meaning/knowing through drama made; especially meaning that boasts being radical, liberatory and transcendent across the bigoted, unjust and inequitable socially imposed archetypical ways of being? Being the academic rascallions we are we thought we'd attempt to provoke what we see as a trend towards fixed and overly conservative approaches to thinking about the way our field plays with (and wonders about) drama as social action with, by and for youth. To that end in this article's graphic portion, *Notes From Nowhere*, we attempt to provoke an extension of the field's notions of pedagogy and qualitative inquiry away from what we see as an unhealthy preoccupation with drawing conclusions, making connections and ultimately making concessions for the fallibility of teaching and any model and analysis of the so called evidence.

We argue that educators and practitioners, must pay attention to this non-space, this space of non-knowing as a way to reinforce and reinvest in the intangibility of education, the fallacy of institutionalized racist, sexist and classist thought and the arrogant centrist positioning of teacher/researcher as authority versus teacher/researcher as equal partner in a journey of meaning making and wonder. As Freire explains:

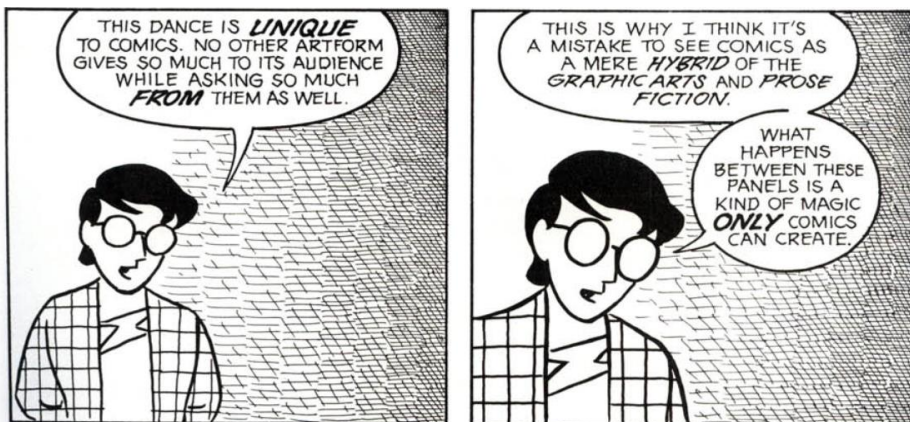
Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of

reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality. (1997, p. 79)

The challenge is to entertain the possibility that even with our best intentions to address issues of social justice and equity through drama with young people we may be duplicitous in merely perpetuating a banking method of education, albeit one where the deposit is radical and revolutionary. We ask, to carry the monetary metaphor, that we invest rather in the creation of spaces where young people may look at the multiplicity of possible agendas and decide for themselves how they will perform within a complex political socially constructed reality.

We see dissociated theory as a way to further provoke explorations within the great tradition of performance research, where we engage an audience in a dialogic experience. In a dissociated paradigm what is shared and learned from drama work as social justice and equity emerges within the moment and must dwell in the dissociated void. The goal of dwelling in the notion of inquiry as dissociated is to fully immerse oneself in the joyous event of epistemological preponderance and not to make connections, conclusions or concessions.

We have chosen the multimodal medium of a graphic novel for our leap in to the dissociated space. We feel the medium of sequential art allows us an opportunity to provoke inquiry and thought as we feel and experience the sensation of dissociating through the substyles of a visual and visceral literacy experience which provides a “Dazzling dance of the dialectic” (Ayers & Tanner 2010, p. XIV). As Scott McCloud reminds us,



(1994, p.94).

So, similar to the dissociated space, it is in the gutters, the space between the panels, the space between leap into the creative unknown of drama and emerging where student meaning is made. We believe, like William Ayers and Ryan Tanner that “We’re also playing off the subjective nature of not just comics but illustrations” (2010, p. XV). By embracing the graphic novel medium we free ourselves from forced static telling and rather dwell in a metaphor of images and words and in this way draw the reader into the dissociated space of the gutters where you are left to fill in the blanks. At one point we literally ask you to do just that in the hopes of actually experiencing our provocation of the possibilities for thinking about the dissociated space and having youth dwell there as they work towards exploring what it actually means to be and to be political.

We invite you to take a leap with us into the unknown of the dissociated space. Leave your self behind to create your “self” and your theory of drama and theatre education as essentially political in the act of self-creation. Our ultimate hope is that you embrace Freire’s notion that “The role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the *logos*” (1997, p. 79). We ask you to place aside your *doxa* and experience nothing.

①

NOTES FROM NOWHERE



Gus had been working in several research sites; one University, one High School and one Preschool each with its own unique focus on issues of social justice and equity. His role was to create and facilitate interactive arts based learning experiences that focused more on

individual student becoming than on the transmission of information. In the University an emergent theatre piece explored racism, in the High School a devised play focused on Cyber Bullying and in the Pre-School the problems with taking of other people's land through a Pioneer inspired process drama. Across Gus's experiences one constant emerged. The students all enjoyed, leaping into the unknown, letting go, going somewhere else.

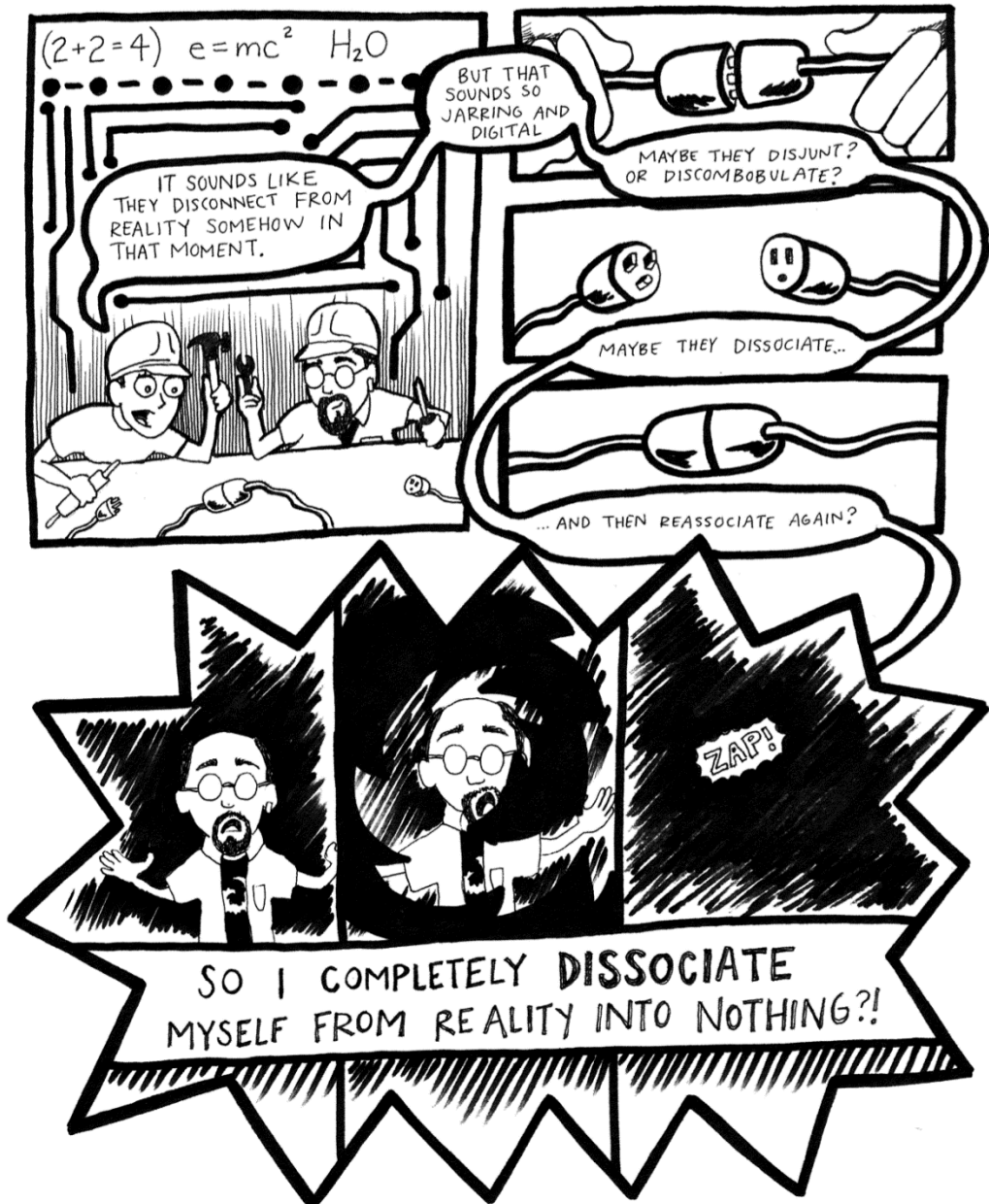
2)



We began to understand that what we were asking is how might creativity work to bring about an awareness of issues of social justice and equity with youth?

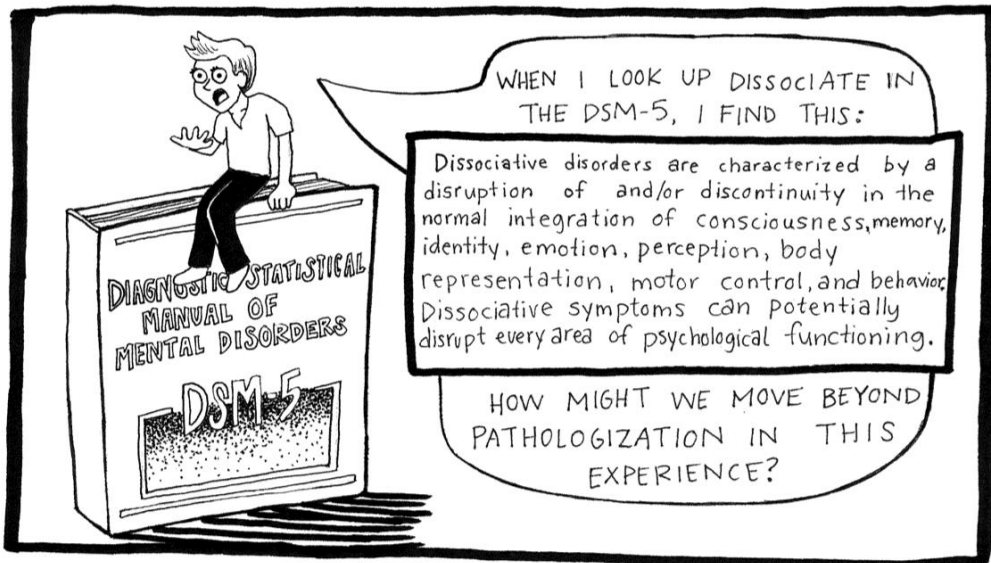
We imagined...

3)



Perhaps nothing as dramatic as that, yet we found value in the concept of the act of dissociation in a non-space. A space where we simply do not know. We began to struggle with that moment of awareness.

④



INDEED, CONSCIOUSNESS IS DEFINED BY INTENTIONALITY. BY INTENTIONALITY CONSCIOUSNESS TRANSCENDS ITSELF. IT UNIFIES ITSELF BY ESCAPING ITSELF.

THEY GRANT THE RIGHT NOT TO UNDERSTAND, THE RIGHT TO CONFUSE, TO EASE, TO HYPERBOLIZE LIFE: THE RIGHT TO PARODY OTHERS WHILE TALKING, THE RIGHT TO NOT BE TAKEN LITERALLY, NOT "TO BE ONESELF"; THE RIGHT TO LIVE A LIFE IN THE CHRONOTYPE OF THE ENTR'ACTE, THE CHRONOTYPE OF THEATRICAL SPACE, THE RIGHT TO ACT LIFE AS A COMEDY AND TO TREAT OTHERS AS ACTORS,



THE RIGHT TO RIP OFF MASKS, THE RIGHT TO RAGE AT OTHERS WITH PRIMEVAL (ALMOST CULTIC) RAGE - AND FINALLY, THE RIGHT TO BETRAY TO THE PUBLIC A PERSONAL LIFE, DOWN TO ITS MOST PRIVATE AND PRURIENT LITTLE SECRETS.

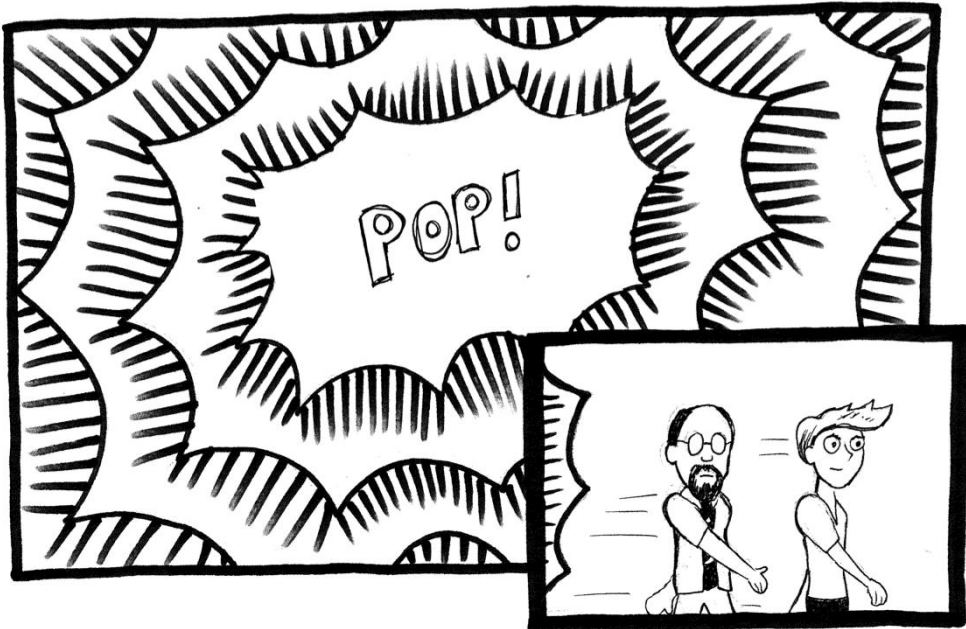
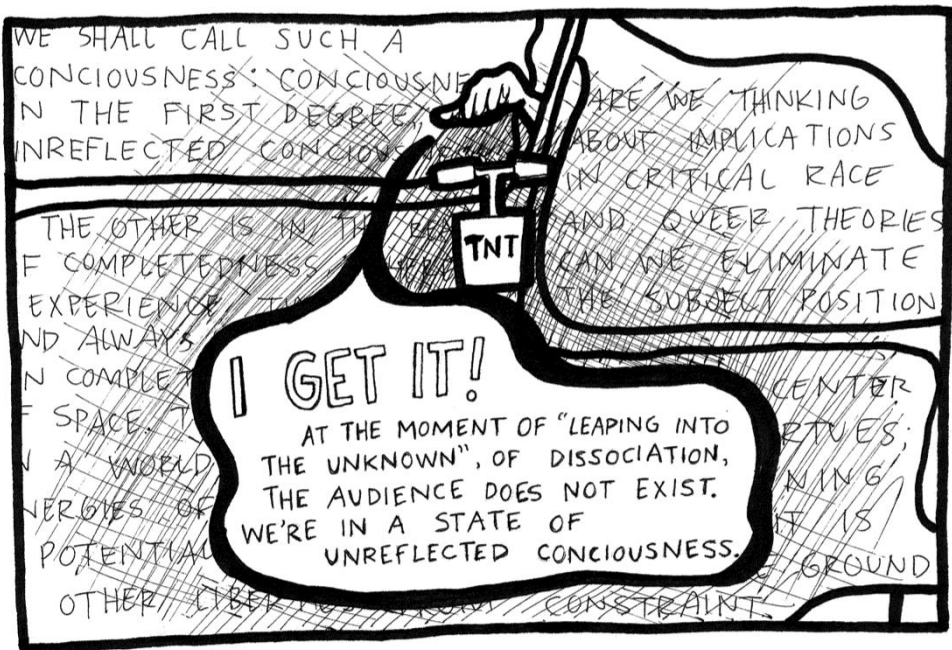
WAIT. WHERE WAS I?

I CAN IMAGINE THAT THE PERSON AS SUBJECT MIGHT DISAPPEAR TO THEMSELVES BUT WE'RE WORKING WITH THEATRE AND DRAMA. THERE'S ALWAYS AN OBJECT OR A SUBJECT - AN AUDIENCE EVEN IF IT IS THE SELF. THE OTHER THING I FOUND WHEN LOOKING UP DISSOCIATE IS A WARNING: "VOICES SHOULD NOT BE DISSOCIATED FROM THEIR SOCIAL CONTEXT"!

2



7)



You see, Sartre calls this state the unreflected consciousness; a moment prior to human cognition or human ontological imposition of

meaning. For us this state is valuable not only as a way to reposition how we approach the sharing of our thinking about our data, it also becomes a state through which we imagine teachers might approach work with students to think about what it means to be, and ultimately what it means to be political. Sumara speaks of the interstices (2005) and Rosenblatt the transaction (1978). For us neither of these images worked for the type of rupture, of complete detachment, we were looking for. In Rosenblatt the idea of transaction loomed within a discourse of consumerism that implied a fixity where the personified data and the reader each brought some “thing” barterable—tangible. Sumara, although less capitalistic, still relies on the notion that the items have a fixity that they bring some “thing” to the moment that is then altered within an interstitial space, yet never speaks of the space itself. We needed an idea that provided for a moment before meaning, an absence of meaning, a nothingness as a way to disrupt positivistic thinking and the teacher/researcher as Messiah. The idea of dissociation into “nothing” and re-association imagines a space for self-awareness as personal agency, learning, research sharing, and meaning making these others models do not. To enter into any moment first from a position of not knowing yields possibility rather than imposition.

To play with the dissociated sensation we provide the following [bit of data](#) from one of Gus’s research sites. Human subjects approval was applied for and approved through Gus’ university for all material used. So no worries, dive in! Take a moment to linger with the data. Then read the prompt on the next page and play with the thoughts, feelings and sensations the data inspired in you.

DEAR READERS, PLEASE WRITE, DRAW, SCRIBBLE, DOODLE OR MAKE A
GUM SCULPTURE OF WHAT HAPPENED IN THE DISSOCIATED SPACE.

If we were with you in actual physical time and space we would all play with the data as a way to make this data live as a way for we as researchers to resist the presentation of a bounded “That which I know,” and rather share in the wonder of the phenomena with the hope that we as an intellectual collective imagine possibilities. What follows are a few bits created by human subjects approved graduate students and colleagues.

Figure #1 Participant’s dissociated re-associated moment

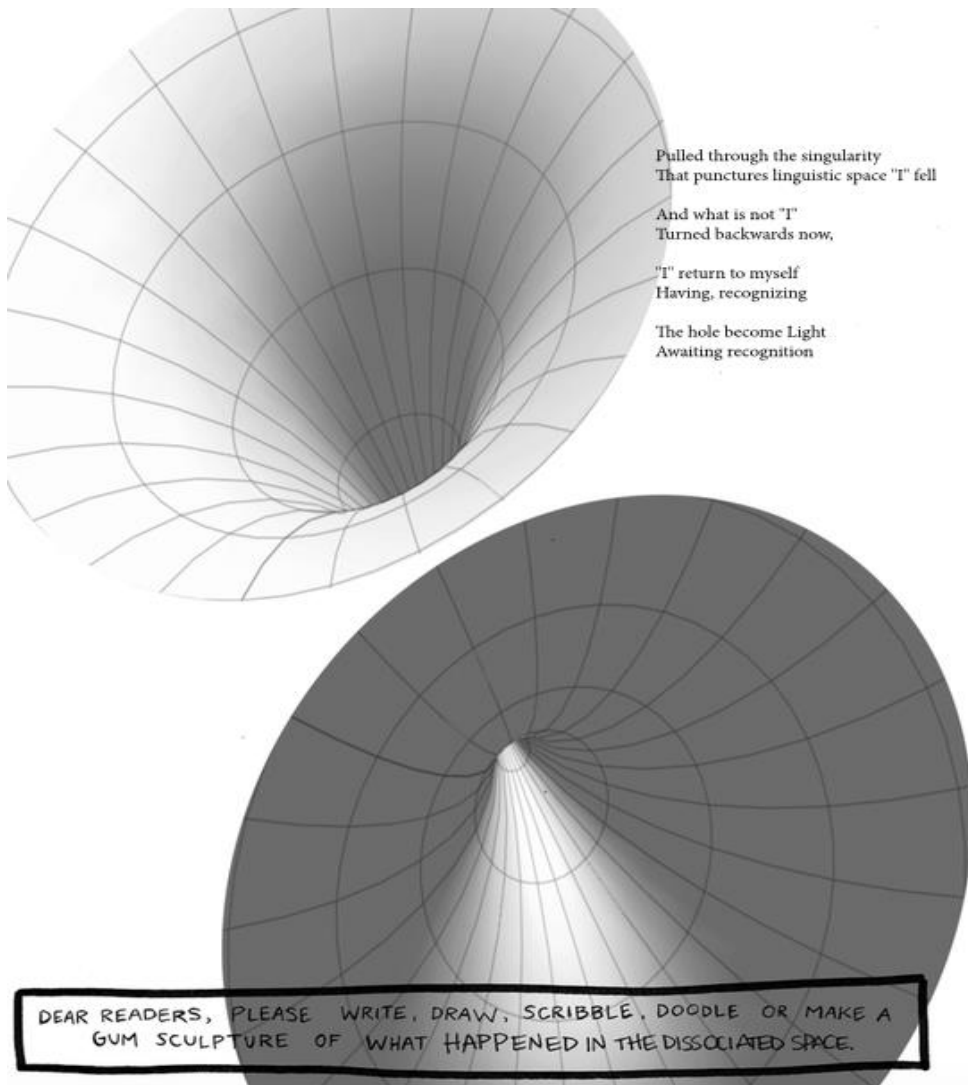


Figure #2 Participant's dissociated re-associated moment



DEAR READERS, PLEASE WRITE, DRAW, SCRIBBLE, DOODLE OR MAKE A GUM SCULPTURE OF WHAT HAPPENED IN THE DISSOCIATED SPACE.

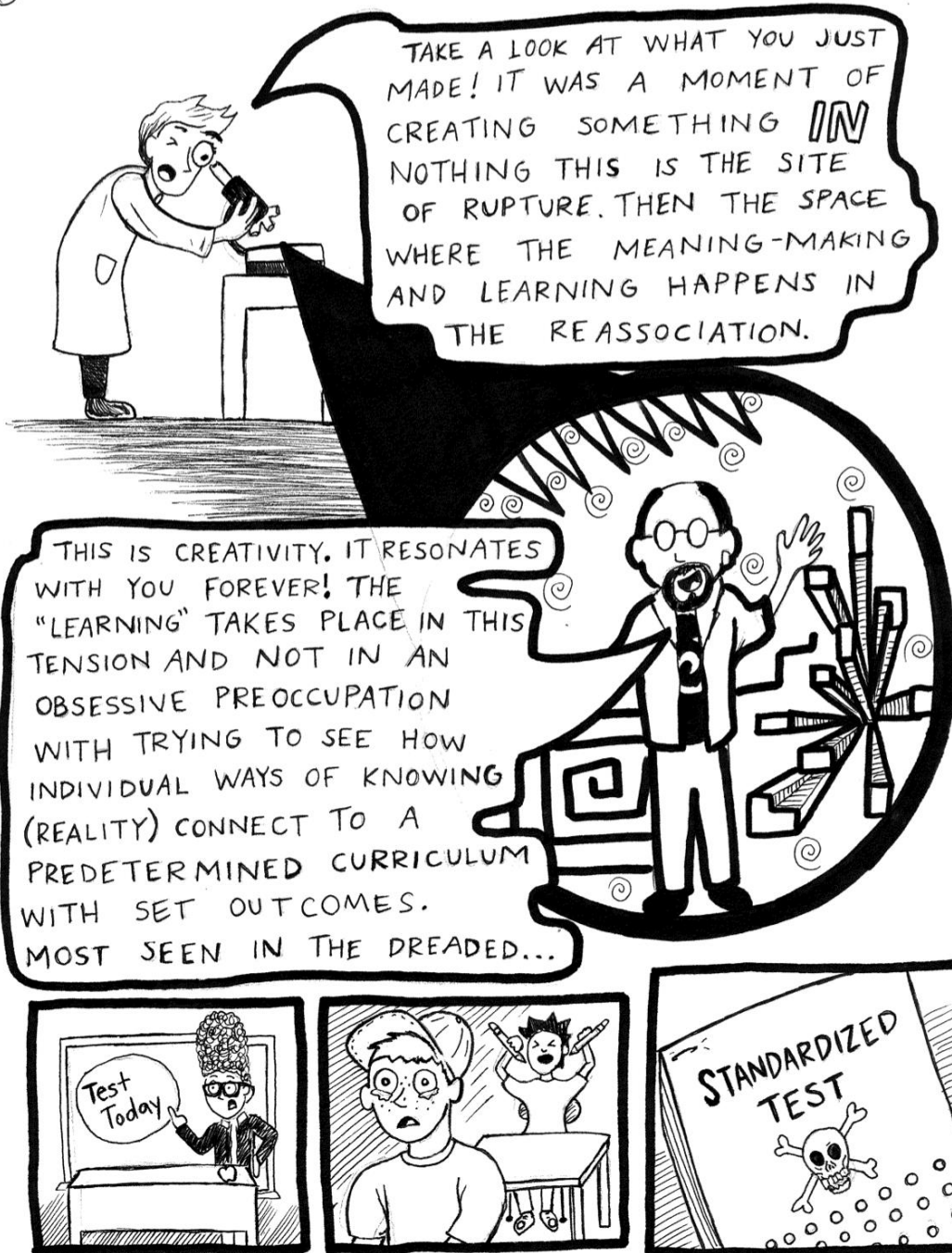
Figure #3 Participant's dissociated re-associated moment



As educator/scholars, these new imaginings with the data allow for further wonder about the complexities of meaning that may emerge within any one moment we term “educational” or wish to designate as “learning.” It is no longer the traditional positivist model of education/research “presentation” situated in refutation of presented

theories about data, rather it emerges as an honest event of interpretation of meaning situated within the students'/colleagues' playing with data that we found interesting. Similarly, these emergent interpretations represent the ways in which it is possible to resist the temptation to impose a meaning onto our students' experiences of a dramatic moment. Rather than imposing a critical interpretation as a way to promote a radical or reactionary agenda onto our students through drama, this dissociated example demands individual deconstruction, struggle with the ideas, and a re-imagining of the ideas or data in a way that is wholly unique to the individual. Teacher and or researcher voice is minimized in the challenge to the individual to make sense of the moment or the data. So now take a moment, if you did actually engage in our little experiment to . . . (dialogue taken up in the graphic panel).

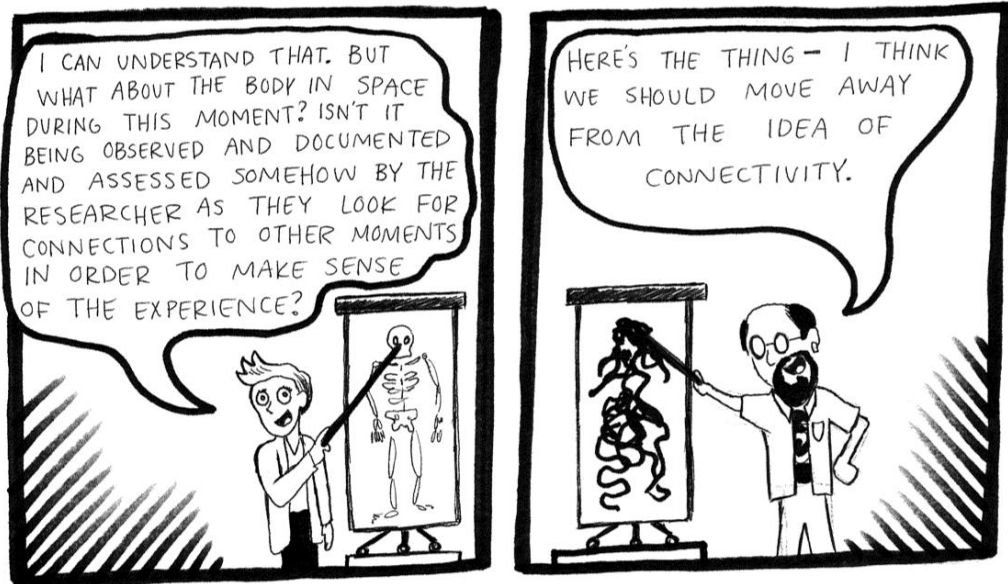
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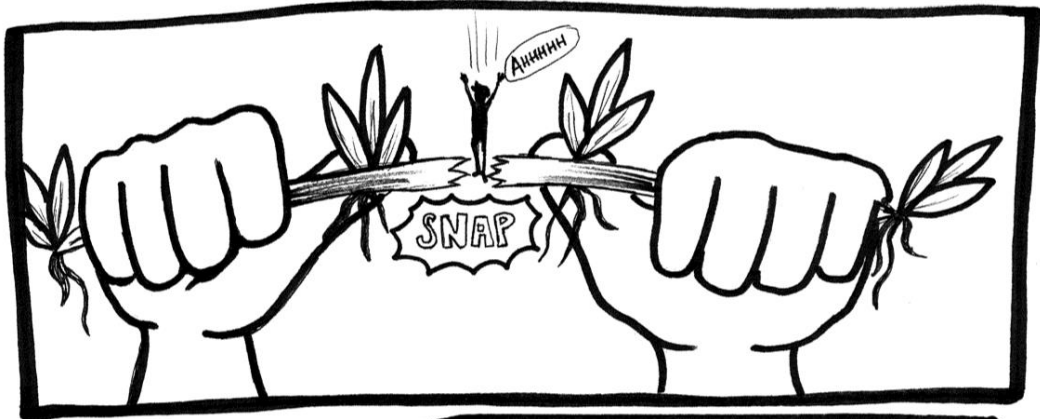


In the dissociated space, the curriculum *is critical thinking* as we collectively experience the ways in which students re-associate. As educators, practitioners and researchers, we wonder about the how, what and why in the ways student/researchers re-associate as they do.

In our work we find that each invitation to students to play within the creative space through drama strategies opens up this non-space. Reflect back, if you will on the video provided. In the video we see, let's call her Ciara. In the first traditional classroom moment she is reserved. In the drama, however she is very vocal. The drama is a process drama/mantle of the expert hybrid. (For more information see Weltsek, 2017) a pioneer journey where a caravan of White settlers confront the First Nations elders with a request to be allowed to settle. In the drama moment, with nothing more to go on than "you are an elder in the community and these people want to come into your people's land," Ciara leaps into the unknown and a dynamic, force filled and vocally present human emerges. Seconds later we see her in the institutionalized imposed role of submissive student, quiet and reserved. In the unknown of the creation of her role of elder Ciara is neither herself nor other. Rather she is in a state of emergence, experimentation and becoming. Based upon past, present and future understandings of how society works she steps back into a non-space to look at possibilities for action. She chooses what elements she wishes to employ, "puts them on" and engages. In this moment of stepping back into a non-space, a space where she divests herself of role as child, student, and gendered Ciara must take steps to create a reality a truth for the moment. It is in that moment of "piecing identities together," in reassociation and making sense of all that she has stepped back and dissociated from where learning takes place. It is in embracing that new role and taking action where we can see the learning. Learning/education/scholarship then is not the generation of facts or quantifiable testable skills or theories. Rather, through dissociation, individuals are in a state of constant becoming, data lives and knowledge breaths within a continuance of the exploration and not through a blind re-performance of archetypes or a detached telling of findings. We bring self, we bring research findings in the form of an evolving experience on an empty page and invite students/colleagues to share and wonder.



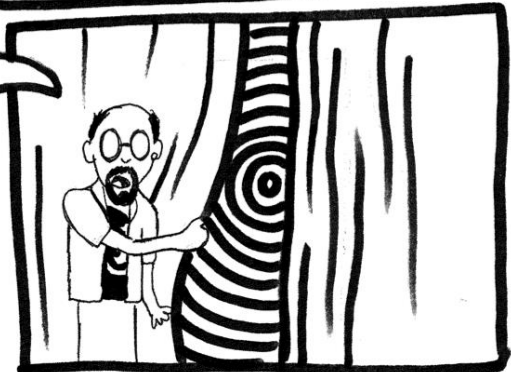
WE'RE OFTEN CHALLENGED TO SEE THE RESEARCH AS A RHIZOME. JUST THINK ABOUT DELEUZE AND GUATTARI. BUT WE'RE SUGGESTING A COMPLETE **BREAK** IN CONSCIOUSNESS AS THE SITE OF INVESTIGATION.

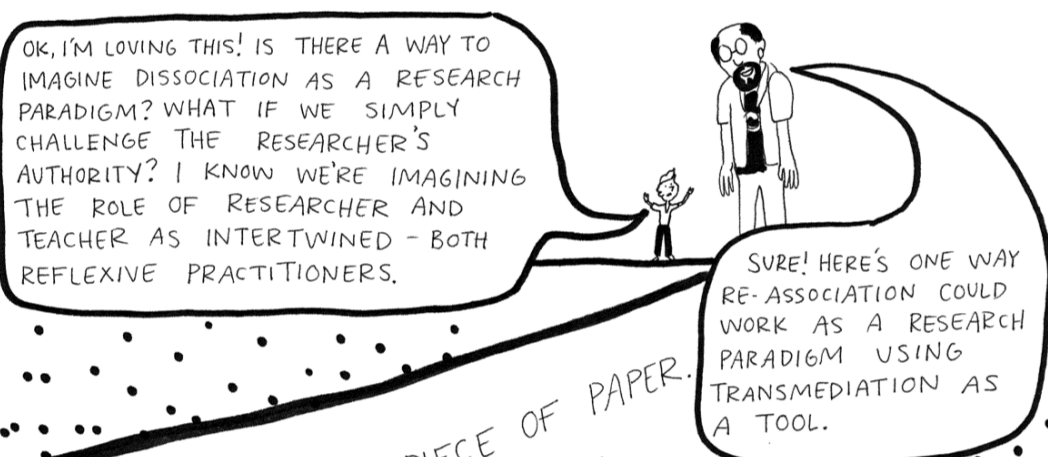


THERE IS A MANIC OBSESSION WITH CONNECTIONS ACROSS DISCIPLINES. THAT'S THE RHIZOME. BUT A CONNECTION TO WHAT? TO WHOSE NOTION OF REALITY? IT IS USUALLY A VERY BIASED, OPPRESSIVE, AND ELITIST NOTION OF WHAT IS REAL.

YES! EXACTLY AND OUR WORK IN DRAMA HELPS TO CREATE THESE MOMENTS OF RUPTURE AND DISSOCIATION WHERE STUDENTS DISCONNECT FROM EVEN THEIR EMBODIED SELVES.

DRAMA IS A GREAT WAY TO CREATE AN ENTRY INTO THE UNKNOWN. IT PROVIDES A LAUNCHING POINT AND RE-ENTRY SPACE (THAT HELPS INDIVIDUAL REALITY CREATION DISCONNECT WITH OTHER INDIVIDUAL CREATIONS).





OK, I'M LOVING THIS! IS THERE A WAY TO IMAGINE DISSOCIATION AS A RESEARCH PARADIGM? WHAT IF WE SIMPLY CHALLENGE THE RESEARCHER'S AUTHORITY? I KNOW WE'RE IMAGINING THE ROLE OF RESEARCHER AND TEACHER AS INTERTWINED - BOTH REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONERS.

SURE! HERE'S ONE WAY RE-ASSOCIATION COULD WORK AS A RESEARCH PARADIGM USING TRANSMEDIATION AS A TOOL.

- TAKE OUT A BLANK PIECE OF PAPER.
- RETURN TO THE ARTIFACT YOU CREATED A FEW PAGES BACK.
- TAKE A SECOND AND PULL OUT SOME OF THE IMAGES, WORDS, AND MOMENTS THAT STRIKE YOU NOW.
- ADD THEM TO YOUR BLANK PAGE.
- PLAY WITH THEIR ORDER AND POSITIONING ON THE PAGE.
- ADD COLORS AND TEXTURES.

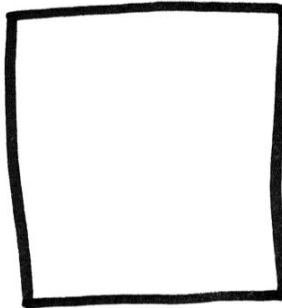
IT'S HERE THAT RESEARCHERS AND TEACHERS ALIKE CAN WATCH THE LEARNING PROCESS IN ACTION. WE, LIKE MANY POST STRUCTURAL EDUCATIONAL THEORISTS, KNOW THAT WE DRAW ON PAST LIVED EXPERIENCES, PRESENT NEEDS AND FUTURE EXPECTATIONS ALL IN RELATIONSHIPS TO SYSTEMS OF POWER, IN ORDER TO MAKE SENSE OF THAT MOMENT.



LOOKING AT YOUR NEW DRAWING, HOW DOES IT INTERACT WITH THE ARTIFACT YOU ORIGINALLY CREATED? HOW MIGHT DISCONNECTIONS TO THE NEW DRAWING INFLUENCE YOUR THOUGHTS ON **DISSOCIATED THEORY OF EDUCATION** AND THE WAY IN WHICH DRAMA MAY SUPPORT THE CREATION OF THESE SPACES?

NOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE IS REASSOCIATED IN THE REASSOCIATED SPACE. MEANING ON TOP OF AND INTERTWINED WITH MEANING! SEE, THE BIG THING FOR US IN EDUCATION IS THAT WE CAN NEVER KNOW WHERE A STUDENT, READER OR RESEARCHER WILL TAKE THE IDEA. SO THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA OR THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IS ALWAYS THE DIALOGUE.

**DIALECTICAL
PROCESSING**



This graphic and its underpinnings call for a reorganization of the theory and practice of drama in education that works toward social justice and equity. We advocate and argue for a radical leap into the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of ways on knowing. We incite resistance to any fixed or predetermined notions of truth, ethics, or political action and instead demand a critically emergent pedagogy, research and politics based within individual inquiry and collective dialogue. The possibilities of educators, researchers and practitioners relinquishing so much control of individual narratives and imaginings means being open to conflict and failure, with which our current political moment is already overwhelmed. Yet, it is in this space of unknowing that we know a richness of critical thought and self-discovery takes space. The dissociated space is a shift in temporality that can challenge teachers, researchers, and learners alike to dwell in a void from which they emerge renewed and ready to collectively fight and play and be in our socially constructed reality.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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