

## **Special Issue Editorial: Aesthetic Interventions: Implications for Social Justice Through Art and Performance**

**Spy Dénommé-Welch**

*Guest Editor*

*Brock University*

**Barbara McNeil**

*Guest Editor*

*University of Regina*

What precisely are the implications for education and social justice when examined through the lens of art and performance? What are potential impacts that may result from these artistic and aesthetic interventions within our contemporary society? This special issue investigates a variety of questions concerning this theme and presents a collection of voices from contributors who attempt to grapple with complex questions, theories, methods, and practices, all the while examining the intersections of art, performance, and the ways that these topics speak to aspects of our ever rapidly changing world. In this issue, we strived to highlight a diversity of thought, theory, and subject matter, especially given that notions of art, performance, and aesthetic intervention are effectively enlivened when examined from a position of pluralism and multiplicity. For this reason, we have included a breadth of works that investigate various forms of aesthetic interventions and the diverse ways which these ideas can disrupt and deconstruct (or reconstruct) notions of hegemony.

Further, this issue takes into account some of the pedagogical considerations for learning and investigating potential avenues for social justice through art, aesthetics, and culture, and ways to integrate more profound questions on current discourses around knowledge, education, and social responsibility in our ever-evolving world. Each contributor brings a unique approach to the theme of this issue, while endeavoring to address different aspects of these questions. The authors take into consideration the critical ways which art, education, and scholarship are contributing to a growing discourse on the implications of art and aesthetics. Also, the authors underscore the impacts of art, aesthetics, and culture on contemporary society and the world as a whole.

This special issue begins with G. H. Greer's article titled *Who Needs the Undercommons? Refuge and Resistance in Public Schools*. Greer's article brings to the fore important discourse and insights on notions of the undercommons in relation to studies, curriculum, and inclusion. Drawing on theoretical ruminations of the commons and undercommons, namely Harney and Moten's 2013 book entitled *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Greer teases out the nuance of concepts and terms such as inclusion and exclusion while investigating the impacts of these on space and resources. Unique to this argument, Greer posits that:

This paper is a theoretical discussion of *The Undercommons* as a contribution to critical education in public schools. The undercommons serves here as an epistemic device, or a way of seeing and knowing, in relation to public education. The function of this device is

to establish an appreciative view of student survival and activist behaviours and to center educational policy as a potential mechanism of student exclusion. (p. 6)

The second article, authored by Lana Parker, entitled *Pursuing Freedom, Making Strange: Pedagogical Considerations for Art as an Other* takes a closer look at the ways which arts-based pedagogy can help advance and promote more democratic and ethical spaces in the classroom. Specifically, Parker tackles philosophical questions of ethics and politics, drawing largely on theories by Levinas and Arendt, as a modality that disrupts dominant hegemonies, and how such interactions and ways of engaging through art can be employed as a means to create a more inclusive democracy. In the article, Parker explains that “in seeking to disrupt dominant hegemonies and in moving toward a more just and inclusive democracy, this work aims to establish an intersubjective relationship with the other as requisite to ethics and politics” (p. 20). Parker’s article brings to the forefront critical questions about the notion of how other-centered, arts-based pedagogy may be integrated in ways that “interrogate norms across curriculum” (p. 23).

The third article is titled *Resisting Indifference Through the Brooch of Bergen Belsen*. The author, Kate Greenway, explores a powerful aesthetic experience resulting from “an encounter with a small hand-made floral cloth brooch donated to the Holocaust Memorial Museum” (p. 32). Greenway examines complex ideas about what it means to create spaces of remembrance that responds to Simon’s (2004) “demand for non-indifference” (p. 32). Greenway’s article raises compelling questions about aesthetic interventions and questions the ways which people are able to connect to traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust without actually having any direct experience. Greenway examines these visceral questions through the applied lens of artist-scholar, using historiographic poesis and art-making as a form of aesthetic inquiry to reflect on the impacts of emotional response to seeing and perceiving objects and sites of remembrance.

The fourth and fifth articles in this issue engage in notions of aesthetic renditions in theatrical representations. The fourth article titled *Pig Girl: An Indigenous Woman’s Perspective Through “Scriptive Things”* is authored by Lyn Trudeau. In the article, Trudeau examines the history of colonialism and its impact on Indigenous women, focusing on the ideation of violence through theatrical representation in Colleen Murphy’s play titled *Pig Girl*. Trudeau applies Robin Bernstein’s (2011) theory of scriptive things to interrogate the notion of dehumanization. In the article, Trudeau reminds readers that her “paper draws explicitly from Bernstein’s (2011) theory of scriptive things—which offers a novel approach ‘to analyze items of material culture’ (p. 80)—and links this notion to how audiences interpret and make meaning of non-human entities” (p. 51). Trudeau’s paper examines the aesthetics and representations of Indigenous experience and identity in the theatre, and the implications of reexamining the impacts of colonialism and violence in contemporary performance.

The fifth article in the issue is Sky Gilbert’s paper entitled *Shakespearean Pedagogy and Copious Paradox*. Gilbert broadens the theme of aesthetic intervention to include “queering the classroom” (p. 64) in ways that honour the histories of LGBT people, as represented in English literature—especially in the work of one of its icons, Shakespeare. Gilbert’s much needed aesthetic intervention is aimed at queering “Shakespeare’s work for the classroom through the lens of New Historicism” and focuses on “*Venus and Adonis* as an exemplary Early Modern queer poem” (p. 64). Gilbert’s contestation of normative interpretations of Shakespeare is timely given the privileged place of Shakespeare in high school English literature.

For Gilbert, the paradoxes available in *Venus and Adonis* provide fertile and robust grounds to indicate that “Shakespeare’s rhetoric suggests the opposite. Sexual activities and loving relationships were copious – many and varied – during Shakespeare’s time” (p. 72), providing justification for multiple readings, new readings, including queer readings of Shakespeare that reject the occlusion of non-normative/dominant gender relations and sexualities. Thus, as Gilbert argues, in “*Venus and Adonis* –placing the woman in the position of relentless huntress, and the male in the position of passive object of a desiring gaze – exemplify the ‘queerness’ of Shakespeare’s poem” (p. 72). Oriented towards greater inclusion—honouring the histories of LGBTQ people and women’s sexuality, Gilbert’s paper offers a way for teachers to confidently queer Shakespeare in classrooms.

In the final article of the issue, John Hansen’s *Cree Elders’ Perspectives on Land-Based Education* presents a substantial, and much-needed contribution that defies normative colonial practices. Hansen centers the voiced insights of six Cree Elders of northern Manitoba about a topic bounded up with thousands of years of inherited knowledge on their lands. For these chiefs, education cannot be separated from the lands and people who give rise to it—hence the urgency to prioritize the articulation of a Cree Indigenous model of land-based education for the geographies of its provenance which may have powerful resonances with other Indigenous land-based education models in Canada and elsewhere.

Seeking to intervene and disrupt Western/European ideological hegemony over education, Hansen argues that in such an education system, “elders with [their] cultural knowledge do not have a primary role in educating students and consequently students are not taught to understand the land and its significance in Indigenous cultures” (p. 75). The author as well as the interviewed elders, are part of the burgeoning decolonial movement in elementary, secondary and tertiary education in Canada that seeks to “decenter Western interpretations of Indigenous education that often do not teach the values, culture, and language of Indigenous people” (p. 75). To interrupt this pattern, the Elders proposed land-based education—a reclamation perceived to be “crucial to Indigenous identity and culture” (p. 82). The interviewed Cree elders assigned high valence to a “spiritual connection to the land.” This is a compelling call to action during this time of truth-telling and reconciliation, and we are better off listening and responding to these Cree Elders because all that we are and can/will be is dependent on the land.

In conclusion, this special issue brings together a range of voices and authors who interrogate and reexamine complex concepts pertaining to aesthetic interventions, while bringing to the fore critical and meaningful ways to engage with education, performance, and art. Finally, we wish to recognize and thank Erika A. Iserhoff for allowing us to feature her art, entitled *Groundwater* (2018), on the cover of this issue.

### References

- Gilbert, S. (2018). Shakespearean pedagogy and copious paradox: How might we queer Shakespeare's work? *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 28(1), 63-73.
- Greenway, K. (2018). Resisting indifference through the brooch of Bergen Belsen. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 28(1), 32-48.
- Greer, G. H. (2018). Who needs the undercommons?: Refuge and resistance in public high schools. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 28(1), 5-18.
- Hansen, J. (2018). Cree elders' perspectives on land-based education: A case study. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 28(1), 74-91.
- Parker, L. (2018). Pursuing freedom, making strange: Pedagogical considerations for art as an other. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 28(1), 19-31.
- Trudeau, L. (2018). *Pig girl*: An indigenous woman's perspective through "scriptive things." *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 28(1), 49-62.