

# This Revolution Can Dance: Environmental Education through Community Arts

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## **Abstract**

*For a world catapulting towards the many environmental catastrophes that we each recognize and grasp at our own pace, every educational opportunity must transform us in deep, rich, and meaningful ways. The field of community arts has much to offer environmental education, including sets of questions to interrogate our practices regarding issues such as accountability and ownership. Borrowing from frameworks of decolonizing methodologies, I consider what the emerging field of community arts can offer to environmental education. To illustrate, I interrogate my own practice through one project in particular, the Black Creek Storytelling Parade.*

## **Résumé**

*De ce monde catapulté vers les nombreuses catastrophes naturelles que nous percevons et comprenons selon notre propre rythme, chaque possibilité d'instruction doit nous transformer de façon profonde, riche et pleine de sens. Le domaine de l'art communautaire a beaucoup à offrir à l'éducation écologique, y compris des séries de questions afin d'interroger nos pratiques sur des enjeux telles l'obligation de rendre des comptes et l'appropriation. En empruntant la méthodologie du processus de décolonisation, j'examine ce que le domaine émergent de l'art communautaire peut offrir à l'éducation écologique. À titre d'exemple, je m'interroge sur ma propre pratique à travers un projet en particulier, le « Black Creek Storytelling Parade. »*

**Keywords:** community arts, environmental education, decolonizing methodologies, arts-based learning

If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.

(Emma Goldman<sup>1</sup>)

Environmental education is a revolution. And if this isn't yet true, then we need to make it so. For a world catapulting towards the many environmental catastrophes that we each recognize and grasp at our own pace, every educational opportunity must transform us in deep, rich, and meaningful ways. As educators small but strong, our work must be colossal. Such a call to action asks us to reflect upon the many approaches we employ for our work, to take a moment and consider how each of us makes environmental education happen.

In this paper, I consider what the emerging field of community arts can offer. Making use of the arts disposes educators to a wide array of artistic mediums. In addition to this, the field that is becoming known as “community arts” brings its own values, principles, and approaches to the work. The conversations shared among community arts practitioners pose critical questions that I believe are very relevant to environmental educators. The *Black Creek Storytelling Parade* is an environmental education initiative that uses community arts as its medium, and is therefore a place where we can examine the confluence of these practices. This paper investigates how the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*—an initiative I co-developed—negotiates issues of accountability and ownership while suggesting decolonizing methodologies as a framework for such work.

### Community Arts: A New Name for Old Practices

The many diverse practices contained within community arts have recently begun to solidify as a field. The practices themselves, most of which are based on the principle of people coming together to make art, are not at all new. The *organizing* of these practices into its own field—in Canada, now generally called “community arts”—is, however, a recent strategy. In a variety of contexts, similar work can be found under different names, such as community cultural development (as is more common in the United States), *animation socio-culturelle*, and community-based arts. Many other practices lend themselves to the field and often overlap, including new genre public art, arts-informed research, place-based art, arts education, urban interventions, popular education, and art in the public interest.

As the field of community arts continues to define itself (e.g., in Canada at the growing number of conferences on the topic over the past few years), there is clearly something pulling this wide range of practices together. And yet it is difficult to pin that something down, despite the synergy present in these gatherings. Perhaps it rests in the disposition of the artist(s) or facilitator(s) involved, in a particular approach or intent. Perhaps it is in the qualities that drive the work, the values and beliefs. Perhaps it is the shared emphasis on both process and product. Perhaps it is a commitment to community—in something shared, collaborative, and aimed at public participation. Or perhaps the something that binds community arts is a commitment to social justice, activism, and cultural development.

From my exposure to the emerging field, I have gleaned a few thoughts on what drives the work. I offer the following points to organize the potential impacts of community arts practice:

### *Art-Making as Transformative Experience*

Engaging in a creative or artistic process has the potential to change or enhance participants' self-awareness, feelings of empowerment, and artistic validation. Access to art-making materials and demystifying artistic practices are significant in this regard.

### *Art as Catalyst for Community-Building*

The collaborative processes employed in a community arts setting have the potential to build relationships across divides and connect communities transversally. Many community arts practices involve individual, group, and public engagement opportunities to enhance the role of participants in community cohesion and public participation.

### *Collective Processes for Social Critical Analysis and Political Action*

Community arts practice engages art-making as a collaborative process, but it also has the potential to critically analyze the current political realities that participants are facing. Many community arts practices are undertaken with members of marginalized communities for this reason. Both the process and the product of the community arts practice can be platforms for analyzing and acting upon the community's urgencies, as defined by the participants. It is worth noting that popular education lends itself to this element of community arts practice.

Not every community arts initiative aims to achieve all three points I have outlined above, but I find that this combination delivers a measure of success in the field. How, then, does this apply to community arts for environmental education? Once we determine that a particular community arts process has environmental education as its desired impact, the first two points become catalysts for the third. By exploring and articulating our artistic abilities, and by developing group cohesion and a collaborative working process that is accountable to a wider public, we lay the foundation for critical social analysis that addresses environmental concerns. As environmental education, this learning process likely comprises a combination of sharing, research, exploration, expression, and action. Art-making can play a role at any of these levels, as a method for environmental education and as pedagogy itself.

## Community Arts and Environmental Education

The convergence of community arts and environmental education offers rich ground upon which many fruitful practices can grow. Stemming from critical concerns (e.g., as expressed in decolonizing methodologies), the possibilities

are endless and inviting. Indeed, community arts and environmental education have been successfully woven together in countless incarnations. Community arts practice is not the only way to enact environmental education, but it certainly offers enough hope and possibility for a revolution or two.

Here is a brief, yet rich, sampling that illustrates the potential of a variety of environmental education and community arts practices. Each of these examples offers a slightly different approach to environmental education and community arts. Each has its own recipe and its own result. The types of formal and non-formal education present in these examples encourage vibrant participation from various levels of community and governance. Overall, the effect is of creative engagement to inspire greater environmental awareness.

- *The Kuna Children's Art Project* employed a wide variety of art forms to creatively pass on knowledge of Kuna culture and ecology in Kuna Yala, an autonomous indigenous region of Panama. Lasting from 1994-1999, the project comprised regular art workshops in five communities across the region. Traditional Kuna art forms (e.g., dance, textile arts, and music) as well as non-traditional art forms (e.g., screenprinting, photography, and popular theatre) were to reawaken Kuna culture in the daily life of children, educators, and the wider Kuna society. As a small example of this huge undertaking, participants ventured into the forests upon which their parents and grandparents used to depend economically, and began to learn the traditional Kuna taxonomy for plants and animals through painting and drawing. Local community facilitators were trained in popular education methods at the outset of the project. All participants met up annually at a festival—one in each participating community—to share their work and celebrate their achievements (Reinsborough & Barndt, forthcoming).
- In 2005, Lauren Bon transformed a brownfield in downtown Los Angeles into a cornfield for one agricultural cycle. *Not a Cornfield* became a blend of land art, ecological remediation, and community cultural development. At the centre of the field, participants hand-planted a spiral pattern with traditional Indigenous varieties of corn and designated this a community space, complete with programming to unite the disparate communities living nearby. The legacy of the project, beyond the cornfield's single-season lifetime, is to distribute the corn seeds from the inner spiral through a city-wide seed-planting program called *The Community Seeds Project*.<sup>2</sup>
- *Eating in Public* is a guerrilla community gardening project by Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma near their home in Hawai'i. Rooted in notions of the commons, their artwork was to plant papaya seeds on a small strip of public land beside a chainlink fence, thereby calling into question public space and the commodification of food. As a result, a back-and-forth dialogue

with public works employees emerged, itself becoming a performance by-product of the initial papaya planting. Provocative documentation of this performance appears on the project web site.<sup>3</sup> To complement the project, gallery exhibits were installed in Hawai'i and Toronto, where free papaya and three sisters seeds (i.e., corn, beans, and squash) were distributed respectively.

- *The Beehive Collective* from Machias, Maine tours extensively with its collaboratively-illustrated, intricate panels detailing complex stories of globalization, militarization, and colonization from the Americas, using popular education as its starting point. This work illustrates an effective approach to youth-to-youth engagement about extremely political environmental topics. While challenging viewers to look hard at wide-scale issues, the *Beehive Collective's* poignant visual narratives render complex issues easier to understand.<sup>4</sup>
- On the western coast of North America, *Salmon Nation*<sup>5</sup> uses carnivalesque block parties and other community-oriented celebrations to promote bioregional citizenship. The nation they celebrate has been carved from the common connection of wherever Pacific salmon have run (Bensted, 2005), thereby challenging economic and political notions of community to re-imagine public participation.
- In the spring of 2004, Jennifer Monson led a team of experimental dancers from Texas to Minnesota, following the northern migration of ducks and geese. This was known as *BIRD BRAIN*,<sup>6</sup> one of several Navigational Dance tours that Monson has organized. The dancers stopped in 10 locations along the Mississippi migratory flyway. Each stop was comprised of a public outdoor performance, a panel focusing on local migration issues, and a dance workshop linking migration with how the body navigates. The tour lasted eight weeks, beginning as the first waterfowl began to migrate and ending as the last birds arrived at the northern tip of the country. For this tour, Monson and team developed a classroom resource guide to engage elementary schools in each community along the way.<sup>7</sup>
- My work as a community arts facilitator with ArtsAccess at the Art Gallery of Ontario has involved me in the Toronto District School Board's *This Is My Neighbourhood* project. Artists are hired to work with a family of schools in one area of the city, using any medium and exploring a theme relevant to the school's neighbourhood. In the spring of 2008 I worked with two Grade 3 and 4 classes at Millwood Junior School to knit tree cosies as a means of researching the trees in the area. The knitted cosies serve no practical purpose for the trees; rather, they drew the attention of passers-by and requested that the students/artists reflect upon their meaning as conceptual art. This project interrupted the chaotic pace set by curriculum requirements, roused an interest in an age-old craft, challenged the students to think deeply about the multi-fold importance of

trees, and provided an access point for us to enter into discussions about issues of environment (and, through stereotypes of who knits and who doesn't, gender). As one student put it, "Trees give us a present so we made them a gift."

While community arts is just one set of practices that can be applied to environmental education, it is a field that embodies much hope and possibility. Lucy Lippard (1995) has consistently asserted the value of using art for place-based learning and public engagement:

We need artists to guide us through the sensuous, kinaesthetic responses to topography, to lead us into multiple readings of places that mean different things to different people at different times. (p. 129)

Yet there is also need for caution; drawing on community arts does not guarantee a transformational educational experience. Nor does it guarantee a radically different approach. Just as "nature" and "wilderness" have sometimes been romanticized to the detriment of environmental concerns, art can also be problematic. Art brings baggage of who can and cannot participate in art-making. Learners often feel intimidated by art and dismiss their own potential to participate. There is much that needs to be questioned and demystified within artistic practice, including the perspectives that reinforce colonial notions of art and art-making.

dian marino (1998) has contemplated, "How do we know when we're producing truly emancipatory materials or when we're only reproducing colonial patterns?" (p. 6). This question has remained paramount in my search for a grounded and meaningful approach to community arts for environmental education. Community arts practitioners and educators need a way to keep assumptions and approaches in check, to ensure that the work remains grounded in critical concerns.

Personally, I came to community arts practice while seeking less conventional and more politicized means of enacting environmental education. I was frustrated with the nature interpretation monologues that I often found myself performing in classrooms, parks, and public sites. The forms that I called upon, such as nature walks and classroom lectures, provided little space for interactive engagement with the audience; indeed, the people with whom I carried out environmental education were *audience members* instead of *participants* and my role as educator was more to *recite* than to *engage*. In my role as nature interpreter, my training taught me very exclusionary language stemming from natural history's colonial desires to categorize, classify, and identify nature within very specific scientific parameters. As such, I found that the content inherent in many nature interpretation models obscured the social, cultural, and political messages that are integral to a holistic environmental education. Certainly, there are ways to address the dis-

comfort that I encountered in these forms, but for me, the most inviting solution was to alter the forms themselves by sliding them into the world of collaborative art-making for social change.

And so I came upon community arts, a practice that I had started enacting before knowing what to call it (as is often the case). While studying the field at the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, through a program where students decide how broadly they wish to define their area of study and how to go about studying it, I was assigned the task of creating an environmental education project. Along with classmates Liz Forsberg and Amy Hallman, we created the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*, a public performance that follows the route of stormwater from a permeable surface on campus all the way down to the banks of Black Creek. We employed costumes, fanfare, amplification, and percussion—performance tactics to rouse the crowd into an altogether different way of relating to the campus landscape. As organizers of the parade, we have sought out a variety of questions and frameworks to help locate our practice and apply a rigour of critical analysis. The following narrative includes a combination of description and interpretation relating to the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*, after which I more closely examine the questions and frameworks we found most relevant and useful.

### The Black Creek Storytelling Parade

Meandering adjacent to the campus along its western edge, Black Creek is an ecologically significant part of the campus landscape. Our parade followed the fluvial relationship between campus and creek, attempting to reveal the myriad stories of cultural, ecological, social, and political significance that may otherwise not be evident. In creating a parade that poked its curious nose into the creek parklands, our aim was to draw attention to the creek's presence, given that many York University staff, students, and faculty are not even aware of its existence. Most only know of Black Creek as the name of an expressway on their commute to campus, and so we used our own ignorance of the creek (and its namesake watershed) as a starting place to craft a creative performance that would surely attract attention. Despite all the fanfare, it was enough just to *go* to the creek in an act of celebration; I would say that the “witnessing”—to borrow a term from performance studies—of the creek was the point from which our project began.

After the initial performance, Liz Forsberg and I have continued as coordinators in response to five additional invitations to perform the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*. As we critically reflect upon our practices and build upon past experiences, each performance has taken on new qualities and become increasingly more community-based. Throughout the development of the project, we have also used a number of different methods to attract attention (e.g., sidewalk chalk, costumes, percussion instruments, and audi-

ence participation), and we have altered those methods to attract different *kinds* of attention (e.g., letting go of the costumes after some joking comments from passers-by). Thus, we made decisions about our methods for their potential to both engage and alienate. Critically questioning our methods has been a part of our work each step of the way, out of an interest to hone our practices and as a result of our academic location as graduate students.

Liz and I wanted to craft a multi-perspective view of Black Creek that would engage participants beyond a single, seemingly monolithic narrative. We invited storytellers and other keepers of knowledge to share their stories. The intent was to reach beyond the limits of our primary research, beyond the official stories proliferated by York University, and beyond the most common narratives told of nature and ecology. We hoped to inspire a social connection between parade-goers and place, to uncover the existing stories of the area and graft our own cultural meaning onto the campus landscape. While York seemingly displays a barren landscape that obscures any history other than the corporate and colonial names of its buildings, we heeded advice from *Planet U: Sustaining the World, Reinventing the University*: “Dig a little, and any suburban campus has remnant roots with stories to tell” (M’Gonigle & Starke, 2006, p. 47). And so we dug, using archival research and word of mouth to reveal the area’s unofficial stories: unsettled land claims, hidden community gardens, the historical presence of the passenger pigeon, ecological restoration initiatives, and land use planning.

The myriad stories that we had originally researched have since expanded to include a more diverse set of stories spoken from the lungs of those who keep them. For example, an arborist from an urban forestry organization addressed the colonial history of arboretums, an Anishnaabe woman shared songs and stories that animated the cultural importance of women as water keepers, the campus planner spoke about efforts to change the campus master plan in relation to Black Creek, and local ecologists made public their work to naturalize the creek’s floodplains. Throughout, Liz and I were searching for narratives to contextualize ecological stories within cultural and social perspectives.

Speaking from the perspective of community-based public art, Miwon Kwon (2004) tells the tale of a public art project that was “criticized by [some] for its exploitation of communities and/or reduction of art to a kind of inadequate and ineffectual social work” (p. 103). As organizers of the parade, Liz and I had to be cautious of this risk. By including multiple storytellers in the parade, we were expanding the palette of voices but also inviting potentially vulnerable perspectives into a space of art-making for which we had already established the boundaries.

Crossing the creek emerged as an important act in the development of the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*. I began to articulate this in our second performance by creating a story that referred to the creek as a “cultural divider” between the privileged academic community of York University and the stig-



matized and racialized collection of nearby communities known as Jane and Finch. I considered the potential for rivers and creeks to act as cultural meeting places and the thought given to “ecotones,” or highly productive biological edges, in permaculture philosophy. In my story, I go on to say:

But not all rivers are meeting places and not all boundaries are ecotones. Gloria Anzaldua writes in her book, *Borderlands = La Frontera*, “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (Anzaldua, 1999, p. 3).

Here we stand at the Black Creek, where stories of nature, culture, race, space, privilege, and identity play themselves out, where lines are formed by an even passage of people, feet carving out a space for themselves rather than waiting for poured concrete. I invite you now to cross the creek with me, to hop the stones that bridge its waters and to understand the creek as a boundary, as an edge, as an ecotone, and as a border.

Perhaps the parade’s most memorable storytellers were the schoolchildren from a nearby neighbourhood who spoke of the wide range of naturalization projects they initiated on their schoolyard during our third performance, thereby putting York University’s official campus efforts to shame. We met this group of students down by the creek then followed them as they led us to their schoolyard. This required us to cross the creek and venture entirely off-campus into the surrounding neighbourhoods—a rare act for many staff, students, and faculty. More significantly, the students put themselves in a vulnerable position to participate in an overwhelmingly adult and academic realm. Their courage was rewarded by the awe that parade-goers showed for their efforts.

To participate in one afternoon event and showcase their efforts was hopefully an important moment for these children, although an isolated event like this rarely nurtures a sense of ownership over the art project itself. By engaging multiple storytellers we were opening up the ownership of the creek in our art project, but the project itself did not become a shared endeavour. Without permanent local dwellers taking ownership of the project, it was at risk of ending when Liz and I were to graduate.

### Learners as Participants, Learners as Artists: Accountability and Ownership

Community arts has often been defined in contrast to other art forms by its accountability to a certain community, whether that be defined as a community of geography, interest, identity, etc. Deborah Barndt (2004) has raised issues

of accountability by gently demanding, “By whom? And for whom?” (p. 226). In so doing, she has put her finger on some of the field’s most difficult issues, and provided a mantra with which practitioners can guide their work. These questions were made more significant when we were approached by Allyson Adley, the Education Assistant with the Art Gallery of York University, with an offer to cultivate a new partnership between the art gallery and youth from Jane and Finch through the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*.

Inch by inch, we were crafting and curating a process that continuously challenged our own goals and approaches. In conversation with Allyson, Liz and I expressed our desires to “cross the creek” and open up the project’s process of creation. In the fall of 2007, we were hired by the Art Gallery of York University to work with youth from Jane and Finch to collaboratively adapt the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade* as it might begin from the western side of the creek. For two months, Liz and I met twice a week with eight participants—ranging in age from six to twenty-two—to facilitate the creation of the performance. We tried out a few different art forms that Liz and I had used previously (e.g., sound art, psychogeography, storytelling), and happily modified the work in response to participants’ talents and requests (e.g., poetry, media arts, and photography).

As a result of this change in direction for the project, Liz and I shifted roles from curators of a storytelling performance to facilitators of a process. With our new roles came new responsibilities. We became vulnerable to the decisions and desires of the group, thereby honing our accountability to the voices of the larger community as represented by this particular group of youth. While the word “vulnerability” often comes with negative connotations, the impacts of the project could not have been achieved without an offering from us as facilitators. We now had an immediate group of people—representing a much larger community—to guide us and to answer to. This was much different from the seemingly faceless and institutional “commuter campus” that had been the setting for our previous performances. Rather, we now had a living, breathing neighbourhood (complete with its own forms of vulnerability and resilience) as context for our collaboration.

As the process unfolded, the youth took the lead on the content, design, and tone of the event. The end performance was renamed *Black Creek United* to reflect this change in ownership. Those who had previously been participants in our workshops were now leaders of their own inspiring performance. As described by the Art Gallery of York University:

This art-based walk provided an occasion to celebrate the creek and share the ecological knowledge that youth had acquired over the course of the workshop about this unique habitat. Friends, family, and the general public were invited to walk and discover featured stops along the creek route which included an exhibition of photographs by participants installed on sumach trees, as well as an installation of papier maché sculptures of red winged black birds, kingfishers, and passenger pigeons, all of which are current or former inhabitants of the Black Creek.

Youth invited participants to create a series of outdoor art installations using found objects such as leaves, branches, and sumach berries, and also engaged people in outdoor experiential activities such as sound-mapping interventions using sidewalk chalk.

Through workshop activities and the production of new works, participants came to recognize the public role that contemporary art can play and the ways in which it can serve as a catalyst for community dialogue, collaboration, and pride. With time, the artworks produced increasingly reflected participants' growing connection to the creek and its habitat as well as an increasing sense of environmental awareness and responsibility. (Art Gallery of York University, press release, February 4, 2008)

Photographs of the workshops—all taken by the youth artists—began as a means to document the process but quickly became an integral part of the art-making itself. One of the participants requested that we put their photographs of the process on display at the art gallery, perhaps as a hint for us to further legitimize their work and invite them on to our turf. Allyson immediately coordinated an exhibit at the gallery. In addition, the photos were displayed on wall windows at the youth drop-in centre where we held the workshops, from sumach trees beside Black Creek for the performance itself, and at the local library for a one-month exhibition.

After the opening of the exhibit at the Art Gallery of York University, I experienced a unique moment while escorting some of the youth artists back to their apartment building at Jane and Finch. By listening in on their comments and conversations, I was able to see the neighbourhood through their eyes. They were shocked at the short distance we travelled by taxi, crossing the creek via a concrete bridge. Little had they known that a university of approximately 50,000 students was such a short distance from their home; indeed, we could have easily walked had it not been so late at night (and if public infrastructure better facilitated a safe crossing). On top of the ecological learning that had taken place during our bi-weekly trips to the banks of Black Creek, this taxi ride solidified the social justice foundation of our work: art-making could begin to actively bridge two neighbourhoods that are divided by one small creek but feel as though they are worlds apart, and empower the participants to articulate and remedy this.

## Decolonizing Methodologies

If there is a social justice foundation to community arts practices—whether defined as activism, collective critical analysis, or otherwise—then what measures can we take to ensure this part of the work rings true? If I return to the three points I outlined earlier, how do we check to see if our work has achieved all three points in its impact? The field of community arts has begun to articulate various ways to do so (such as Deborah Barndt's questions

“By whom? And for whom?”). In the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*, the critical questions that resonated with our work stemmed mostly from literature on “decolonizing methodologies.” I have borrowed this notion from researchers (e.g., Brown & Strega, 2005; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999) to frame the critical analysis of community arts practice.

Decolonizing methodologies ask researchers, artists, and educators to consider their approaches to the work in relation to colonial processes. “It can, at once, be understood as a process of *acknowledging* the history of colonialism; working to *undo* the effects of colonialism; striving to *unlearn* habits, attitudes, and behaviours that continue to perpetuate colonialism; and *challenging* and *transforming* institutional manifestations of colonialism” (Reinsborough & Barndt, forthcoming). These manifestations include the ongoing imposition of Western worldviews, in particular through the systemic erasure of Aboriginal peoples and practices, the separation of nature and culture, and the dismissal of holistic environmental perspectives.

Just as the term “community arts” has strategic capacity to seam together more contested terms, “decolonizing” has been carefully selected for its straightforward yet relatively tame framing of a word many often shy away from out of discomfort: “colonialism.” Failing to recognize the impacts of 500 years (and counting) of colonial hegemony can leave our analyses shallow and misleading, and so decolonizing methodologies offer frameworks for researchers (and educators) to contemplate their work. Leanne Simpson, an Anishnaabe woman in Ontario, explains the unfortunate reality of many Indigenous environmental education programs that fail to take decolonizing methodologies seriously:

[F]ew programs are designed to enable students to address the issues of colonization and colonialism in their communities, effect healing and decolonization at the individual, community and national levels, facilitate resistance strategies in response to current injustice, and promote the building of healthy, sustainable Aboriginal communities and Nations based on traditional cultural values and processes. (2002, p. 14)

To illustrate what a de-colonizing practice might look like, Russell Bishop (1996) offers a series of questions organized under five categories in his articulation of Maori research methodologies: initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation, and accountability. He is speaking directly about research, but the questions he poses are applicable to community arts practice as well:

What benefits will there be? Who gets the benefits? Who decides on the methods and procedures of assessment and evaluation? What constitutes an adequate depiction of social reality? Whose interests, needs and concerns does the text represent? How were the goals and major questions of the study established? How were the tasks allocated? What agency do individuals or groups have? Whose voice is heard? Who did the work? (p. 23)

These questions, among others, offer rich insight when considering how community arts and environmental education can be enacted in our time.

As Liz and I posed these questions of the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade*, we discovered an embarrassing blunder in one of the project's first stories: when speaking of First Nations in the area, the story was written only in the past tense, thereby suggesting an erasure of First Nations from the land today. In addition, it presented colonial settlers as the most significant historical figures. As coordinators of the storytelling parade, we were reproducing colonial patterns, failing to critically question the oppression of Aboriginal peoples. Well, this got us thinking! How could we take this mal-education and transform it through our use of community arts for environmental education?

In response to this call, Liz researched the ongoing land claims that affect York University's campus, collaborated with an Anishnaabe woman studying at the Faculty of Environmental Studies who ended up telling a story in the third performance, and contemplated the quietly defiant existence of old Haudonoshonee garden seeds likely still dormant under the soil of an archaeological site just off campus. This, we felt, was a start. The more I learned about decolonizing methodologies through my studies, the more we challenged ourselves to check our work against the critical questions it poses. While there remains much to be done, the experiences of the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade* show how small steps can not only change the content of the work, but they have forever altered the questions and issues we bring to the table when embarking upon a community arts or environmental education initiative.

Returning to dian marino (1998), I ask myself once again: "How do we know when we're producing truly emancipatory materials or when we're only reproducing colonial patterns?" (p. 6). For me, this question summarizes much of what the conversations on decolonizing teaching methodologies are trying to achieve. What a successfully decolonized approach might look like is still unclear, but asking this question reveals a powerful intent towards self-reflexivity. The question politely demands the critical questioning of one's location, methods, objectives, and approach in relation to colonialism and colonial subjects. It awakens us to the choice we have in the work that we pursue: to critically question our work and open ourselves up to the possibilities that then emerge, or to passively continue in default mode. Certainly, one begs a revolution more than the other.

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Notions of decolonizing methodologies comprise a set of conversations that ground community arts and environmental education practices, thereby helping artists and educators alike to navigate the rocky construction site that will build a more equitable world. In the fields of community arts and environmental education, where we often stumble over the romanticization of art and nature, we must continuously seek new ways to examine the

impact and meaning of our work. One way to do so is by regularly identifying the most pressing issues of our work (e.g., accountability and ownership), and then grounding those issues in existing critical conversations, such as those developed through decolonizing methodologies. Applied to environmental education, we translate these concerns as a way of envisioning decolonizing pedagogies.

Community arts practice is one way in which we can revolutionize our environmental education work. There is hope and excitement for the confluence of these fields. As Carol Becker (1999) offers, “if this movement [of community-based arts] has romance, it is a new kind of romance, a romance about being part of the solution” (p. 65).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While it has been debated whether Emma Goldman actually ever made this exact statement, the sentiment is clear in much of her writing. See < [http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Features/dances\\_shulman.html](http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Features/dances_shulman.html) > .
- <sup>2</sup> This project has been well documented at < [www.notacornfield.com/](http://www.notacornfield.com/) > .
- <sup>3</sup> See < [www.nomoola.com/diggers](http://www.nomoola.com/diggers) > for more details.
- <sup>4</sup> See < [www.beehivecollective.org](http://www.beehivecollective.org) > for more details.
- <sup>5</sup> See < [www.salmonnation.com](http://www.salmonnation.com) > for more details.
- <sup>6</sup> See < <http://birdbraindance.org> > for documentation of the work.
- <sup>7</sup> The guide can be found online at < [www.ilandart.org/BirdBrain\\_Resource\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.ilandart.org/BirdBrain_Resource_Guide.pdf) > .

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Liz Forsberg for giving me permission to tell the story of the *Black Creek Storytelling Parade* here, and together we would like to thank Allyson Adley of the Art Gallery of York University for giving the project room to grow.

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