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“Narrative is a powerful tool for art educators, but it is also a complex and unpredictable avenue for working through tensions and challenges around sociocultural difference.”

Troubling Sociocultural Narrative Pedagogy: Implications for Art Educators

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This article draws on a study with preservice art educators to offer theoretical perspectives on sociocultural narrative pedagogy. Informed by the work of Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, the authors identify three major phenomena that manifest within sociocultural narrative pedagogy: (1) disruptions, ruptures, and breakdowns, (2) silences, refusals, and resistances, and (3) paradoxes. The authors conclude that while narrative can be a powerful pedagogical tool for addressing sociocultural difference, it is also a troubling, often paradoxical, avenue for developing critical consciousness in preservice art educators.

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Narrative plays key methodological and pedagogical roles within the field of art education research, theory, and practice (Rolling, 2012). Narratives are stories that manifest in a multitude of forms—written, spoken and unspoken, expressed through art, and even lived through the body. Narratives are often told by individuals, yet they are also inherently social, cultural, and political. They influence notions of identity—of selves, of cultures, of places, and also inform thoughts and actions of individuals and collectives. Indeed, sociocultural narratives are inscribed into our notions of what it means to be an artist, an art teacher, and an art student (Acuff, Hirak, & Nangah, 2012; Efland, 1990; Stankiewicz, 2001) while counternarratives challenge dominant sociocultural perspectives about art education and highlight overlooked historical and contemporary voices in the field: particularly those of women, people of color, and persons of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community (Acuff, 2013; Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon, 2000).

Narrative has served as a strong methodological foundation for art educational research. Some art educators have used narrative inquiry as a research methodology, entreating research participants to engage in narrative production as a means of inquiry (Ballengee-Morris, 2010). Others have approached narrative as a means of arts-based autoethnography (Barrett, Smith-Shank, & Stuhr, 2008; Bey, 2012; Rolling,

2011). Additionally, ethnographic research within the field of art education gives prominence to narrative elements (Desai, 2002; Kraehe, 2015).

Pedagogically, narrative has been a key conduit for artmaking as well as art criticism (Barrett, 2002). Several art educators have advocated for the use of narrative methods in the interpretation of works of art and visual culture (Cosier, 2011; Evans, 2011). Others have encouraged the inclusion of digital visual narratives in transformative art education curriculum (Ivashkevich, 2013; Trafi-Prats, 2012). Arts integration pedagogy that combines the visual arts with language arts emphasizes the usefulness of the visual arts for improving literacy in students (Andrelchik, 2015).

In recent years, several art educators have advocated for narrative and arts-based pedagogy as a means by which to cultivate consciousness among preservice art teachers regarding the influence of sociocultural factors on art teaching and learning (Cosier, 2011; Ivashkevich, 2013; Knight, 2006; Kraehe & Brown, 2011; Shin, 2011). Narrative pedagogy has the potential to be both transformative and problematic when used as a means to explore the complexities of sociocultural difference for preservice art educators (Bell, 2002, 2010; Florio-Ruane & DeTar, 2001; Milam et al., 2014). Thus, even though many art educators have advocated for narrative methods within art education research and teaching, few have overtly acknowledged that engaging in sociocultural narrative pedagogy is a difficult, and often troubling, process. Hence, further examination of the complexities of sociocultural narratives within art education research and pedagogy is warranted.

In teaching elementary and secondary art education methods courses, we applied narrative pedagogical strategies in order to infuse

our courses with narrative reflections on sociocultural influences on art teaching and learning. Concurrent with teaching these courses, we conducted a study into how preservice art teachers make sense of sociocultural knowledge. We, the authors, are both White, middle-class, female doctoral students and teaching fellows in art education at a large public university in the Southwestern United States who have worked as K-12 public school art teachers. There were a total of 27 preservice art educators in the study, including 25 undergraduate students and 2 graduate students. Most of the student-participants identified as White females, but there were some male students and some students who identified as Black, Latino, and/or Asian. The research findings of this study have been formally reported in depth elsewhere (Kraehe, Hood, & Travis, 2015). Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in our analysis, we identified three ways in which preservice art educators engage with sociocultural knowledge: (1) through identity exploration and formation, (2) by questioning the knowledge needed for teaching art (pedagogical knowledge, art content knowledge, and sociocultural knowledge), and (3) through discourses of offense around topics of sociocultural difference.

With examples from this study, we identify three major phenomena that manifest within sociocultural narrative pedagogy: (1) disruptions, ruptures, and breakdowns, (2) silences, refusals, and resistances, and (3) paradoxes. Through these phenomena, we delve further into the outcomes of a narrative pedagogical approach to facilitating engagement with sociocultural knowledge and invoking critical consciousness in preservice art educators. We conclude that the outcomes of sociocultural narrative pedagogy are not easily explained because sociocultural narratives are messy, complicated, deeply embodied, and often pre-conscious.

In analyzing student responses to sociocultural narrative pedagogy, we apply theories

from the work of author, cultural theorist, and feminist philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa. These theories are intimately connected to our research intentions because Anzaldúa's theorizing is often expressed through narrative and is birthed from tangible experiences of her sensing body. We used Anzaldúa's concepts of "wounds," "borders," and "risking the personal" as components of an interpretive framework for analysis of the types of student responses to sociocultural narrative pedagogical interventions. Through this framework, we offer a practical critique of how sociocultural narrative pedagogy has been utilized in art education. We find narrative pedagogy to offer useful strategies for helping preservice art teachers make sense of sociocultural knowledge. Yet we also call for a more complex and reflexive pedagogical use of narrative in preservice art teacher education in which art teacher educators begin to engage more complexly with the embodied struggles around sociocultural difference.

Wounds, Borders, and Risking the Personal

Aspects of sociocultural difference such as race and gender are "visibly marked on the body itself" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 5) and bodies are complex, temporal, and subject to wounding. This wounding can be literal, like flesh wounds, or it can be symbolic like Anzaldúa's (1987) theorizing of the Mexico–United States border. Anzaldúa (1987) describes the border as "an open wound" (p. 25), a liminal space where inhabitants are in constant flux. This border space is unstable, and thus risky, but also fertile ground for creativity that allows one to see multiple perspectives simultaneously. Anzaldúa moves beyond an assumed victimization of those who are wounded by these borders to reconceptualize wounds and borders as metaphorical sites for personal and social transformation (Hurtado, 2003).

Anzaldúa was committed to exposing her own wounds and "risking the personal" (Keating,

2000), developing theoretical perspectives through narratives of her lived experiences. "Theory in the flesh" is a term coined by Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) in the foundational anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, a volume in which a group of women of color scholars shared their life experiences in various literary forms in order to bring awareness to methods of theorizing that had previously been excluded from dominant research paradigms. Throughout her writings and interviews, Anzaldúa spoke about very intimate topics including personal relationships, sexuality, spirituality, and other subjects that are often considered taboo. This raw telling of the self was a tactic that Anzaldúa used in an effort to transform the world by way of her own narratives. Art educator Dipti Desai (2002) describes the narrative work of Anzaldúa and other feminist women of color theorists as follows:

The narratives that speak about resistance and domination make visible the ways knowledge through experience can lead towards social change and these narratives therefore may be empowering. For many women of color in the United States and other countries, writing about their lived experience is a political act and therefore socio-economic and political analysis is an integral part of the narrative. Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) eloquently explains, "our survival depends on being creative" and moreover, "creativity is a coping strategy" (p. xxiv). (pp. 312–313)

Anzaldúa's theories are bound up in narrative—a telling of one's own story as well as collective stories (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). Through the channel of the narrative, wounds, borders, and risking the personal are ways to acknowledge the complexity and messiness of life and embodied knowing. These narratives are spaces in which wounds are inevitable yet productive personal and social transformation is possible. Narratives hold the potential for inflicting, reopening, or even deepening wounds, especially because of the historical wounding present within racist, classist, sexist, or homophobic narratives and imagery

(Solorzano, 1997). It is in this paradox, this fluctuating and unsafe space, where we find both potential and risk as stakeholders in the examination of narrative pedagogy as a strategy for engaging sociocultural difference in art education.

Theorizing Sociocultural Narrative Pedagogy

Sociocultural difference as marked by identity components such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class influences teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality are inherently tied to art teaching and learning through curriculum and pedagogy (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Desai, 2000, 2010; McFee & Degge, 1977). However, art educators often find themselves unprepared when sociocultural difference becomes a point of contention within their classrooms (Spillane, 2015). In our own experiences as K-12 art teachers, we frequently experienced pedagogical moments where sociocultural difference became a point of contention within our classrooms. Because sociocultural content has not traditionally been a standard component of elementary and secondary art education methods courses for preservice art educators, there is an urgent need for increased development of preservice educators' sociocultural knowledge (Kraehe, 2015; Lee, 2013). To address this, we sought strategies to incorporate sociocultural content within the curriculum for the preservice art teachers in our courses. We postulated that narrative pedagogy could serve as a useful means by which to explore the complexities of sociocultural difference in art teacher education methods courses. It is important to note that, while we acknowledge that identity formation is deeply embroiled with concepts of sociocultural difference, our research was not aimed at illuminating ways in which sociocultural identities are formed, but rather, raising consciousness about how sociocultural

difference as a phenomenon behaves in the practical context of preservice art teacher education.

The narrative strategies we employed within these methods courses included guest speakers, class discussions, written reflections, and video journals. Through these avenues, preservice educators reflected upon their own sociocultural identities and considered how sociocultural positioning impacts teaching and learning. Of these pedagogical strategies, the guest speakers acted as one of the most significant catalysts for discussion of sociocultural difference. One of our guest speakers was Lauren Cross, who discussed her experiences as a Black female artist, scholar, and owner of a gallery focused on the exhibition of the art of women of color. Our other guest speaker was Jason Kimbell,¹ a White male art educator, who discussed the educational consequences of poverty and abuse through examples from his childhood experiences. The guest speakers injected very specific, personal narratives into the course and invoked provocative responses from our students in the form of class discussions, writings, and video journals. The visceral, embodied presence of the speakers as they shared stories of the influence of aspects of their sociocultural identities upon their own teaching and learning experiences proved to be an impetus for generative classroom discourse and student self-reflection. In the following analysis, we focus on narratives that manifested in response to readings, lectures, and the guest speakers along these three streams: (1) ruptures, disruptions, and breakdowns, (2) silences, refusals, and resistances, and (3) paradoxes.

Ruptures, Disruptions, Breakdowns

Opening up wounds through vulnerable, open dialogues can break silences. We observed ruptures, disruptions, and breakdowns of the imagined safe space in our classrooms through narrative pedagogy. In response to the narratives of the guest speakers, our students experienced moments of

breakdown, frustration, and deep sadness. The disruptive potential of narrative pedagogy moves against the notion of the classroom as safe space where discussions around sociocultural difference can be shared freely and unproblematically. Several scholars have suggested that the classroom as a safe space is ultimately part of a pedagogical “imaginary” that is not fully realizable in actual classrooms (Fox, 2001; Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007; Kozol, 1999; Stengle & Weems, 2010). We contend that what unfolded in our classrooms can be understood through Anzaldúa’s theorizing of the wound. This metaphorical wounding functions as a starting point for disrupting the status quo. Such pedagogical moments of disruption can be generative sites of learning (Slattery, 2012). Here, we discuss a specific example of some of the tensions and disruptions, woundings, or re-opening of wounds that happened in our classrooms through an experience with narrative pedagogy.

One of our guest speakers, Jason, began his presentation with a projection of a child’s school picture. Jason asked the students to make inferences about the child based on the image, and several students commented that the child appeared to be well-groomed and happy. Jason then revealed that the child was in fact him—and that the assumptions they made based on his physical appearance could not have been further from the truth. Although this child appeared to be content and healthy, he was experiencing trauma at home in the form of poverty and abuse. Jason’s powerful use of imagery in his presentation served to disrupt the preservice educators’ assumptions about their future students based on physical appearances. This aspect of Jason’s narrative served to complicate our students’ assumptions about what child abuse and poverty look like in the classroom.

There were several students who had deeply emotional reactions to Jason’s narrative about poverty and abuse in his childhood. In response to Jason’s presentation, students in both of our

classes experienced embodied disruption, where crying became a release of the tension felt. For some students, the emotional reactions that they experienced in the face of Jason's narrative were reflective of their own experiences with poverty and abuse. In a video journal entry, Ashley,² a Latina student channeling emotions, past wounds, and struggles with identity, described her own experiences with confiding in an art teacher about being abused and how that experience influenced her desire to become a teacher. Ashley stated that when she becomes an art teacher she intends to structure parts of her art curriculum around the enduring idea (Stewart & Walker, 2005) of "identity" in part because of her own struggles with identity. She also stated that as an art educator, if she were to encounter a student whom she suspects is being abused: "I will try my hardest to make the child to feel safe and... I hope that I could handle it in a very professional and safe way." Thus, her personal experiences are deeply intertwined with her intentions as an art educator. In a sense, Jason was able to wound, or disrupt, the cultural narratives the students had constructed about the physical appearance of children who are experiencing abuse and poverty, and he provoked a discussion around how personal and sociocultural narratives impact art teaching and learning.

Silences, Refusals, Resistances

Anzaldúa's narrative work reflects a decision not to be silent because remaining silent is often a means by which oppression is maintained. However, accessing metaphorical wounds through narratives is not easily achieved and attempts to do so in a pedagogical setting are often met with silences, refusals, and resistances. Silences, though, are just as important as what is said in illuminating how teachers and students make sense of the tensions surrounding sociocultural difference in educational contexts (Miller, 2005). We began the semester with the hope that our narrative instructional interventions might manifest meaningful explorations of the influence of

sociocultural factors on art teaching and learning. However, working with the unwieldy entity of narratives often yields unexpected outcomes. We were often met with silences, refusals, or resistances when we prompted students to engage in the telling of sociocultural narratives.

Silences, refusals, and resistances often indicate a reluctance to engage in discussion. There might be numerous motivations for such reticence. As educators, we can only speculate on why these silences, refusals, and resistances occur within the classroom. Educators and students frequently engage in self-censorship when confronted with "difficult knowledge" (Britzman, 1998) in classroom settings. Both students and teachers often refuse to voice their real thoughts in favor of speaking on topics that are less controversial and more palatable as a means of self-silencing. Throughout the semester, we asked our students to respond to various prompts and questions through writing, class discussion, and video journals. The students themselves may not have been fully conscious of why they hesitated or refused to engage in extrapolations of their own embodied presence as raced, gendered, classed, and otherwise identified beings within a world in which such sociocultural factors have consequences. At times, our students seemed to be avoiding, silencing, or self-censoring more vulnerable aspects of their own sociocultural identities. Laura, a Latina with a physical disability, expressed a disinterest in being defined by these aspects of her identity, preferring to present herself as "White" and downplaying her disability. In a video journal, she stated:

I don't really identify with any one race because I am Mexican, but I was brought up in Anglo society. So, I recognize myself as White. But, not really, because I am Mexican. It's all very confusing. But, the thing that I've come down to is, 'Do I have to choose? Do I have to identify myself as a woman of color or a woman of not color

or a person with a disability?’ I really don’t feel like my personality really can be enveloped by one association. So, I try my best to work outside of any boundaries.

Joseph, a White male student, expressed a similar resistance to identifying aspects of his sociocultural identity:

I’ve personally never identified with any of those labels or categories because my identity is very much based on this idea of not knowing who I am and trying to stay open to opportunities and sort of other ways of figuring out who I am.... I’m only American because I was born here and I’m only White because my parents are White. I’m blind in one eye, but I don’t let that—I don’t like having that be part of my identity. I don’t want to like try to limit myself by sort of sticking to one label or category.

Another student, Veronica, spoke at length about dealing with ageism (being discriminated against because of her age as a young person) and avoided discussing any issues that she might have experienced due to her positionality as a Black woman or about any other sociocultural aspects that might inform her teaching. We considered the reasons behind this reluctance to “risk the personal” (Keating, 2000, p. 2) and inferred that in this refusal to claim “woundedness” and in seeking to downplay the significance of their race, gender, or disability, students may have cultivated a sense of empowerment or resistance to the status quo. These examples reinforce the agency of the students when constructing personal sociocultural narratives. Ultimately, each student chose to discuss the aspects of their own identities that most powerfully represented their embodied experiences of sociocultural difference. As instructors, narrative pedagogy fosters this enactment of student agency that can be used to construct

narratives that may or may not reinforce the status quo.

In using narrative pedagogy to help students develop critical consciousness, we hoped that students would be willing to “risk the personal” (Keating, 2000, p. 2) in discussing the role of sociocultural factors in teaching and learning. Although we sought to make our classrooms safe spaces where such openness could thrive, we ultimately failed to generate fully transformative narratives in students. When this vulnerability did not readily manifest or was met with silence, refusal, or resistance, we wondered if we should have done more to model this openness by describing our own failures when it came to confronting racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination in our roles as White middle-class female art educators. We questioned whether we were fully opening up our classroom spaces to honest conversations around sociocultural difference, and whether this was even possible within the confines of the university. With such constraints, it is no wonder that disruptions to the status quo are frequently silenced.

Paradoxes

We began our research with the hopeful expectation that the use of narrative pedagogy would bring about transformative change in our students and equip them with tools for competently addressing sociocultural difference in the context of art education. However, the road toward such transformation is, by nature, rather unpredictable, full of twists, turns, and paradoxes (Anzaldúa, 2002). At times, students made statements that seemed to be in great contrast to the way in which they lived their lives and seemed completely at odds with other aspects of their personae. The practice of narrative-making can be a useful liminal “border” space where such paradoxes can be assessed and plans reformulated on the journey toward becoming an art teacher, but it is not without woundings. These paradoxical expressions are indicative of the

complexity of confronting sociocultural difference in pedagogical settings.

Caroline, a White female who identifies as a lesbian, was an example of someone who was full of such paradoxes in her approach to sociocultural difference in art education. Caroline sparked a discussion that began with a declaration that she was “offended” by the artwork of one of the guest speakers, Lauren Cross, because her work directly addressed her experiences as a Black woman (Kraehe et al., 2015). Caroline was offended because Cross produced images of herself with a series of blonde hair styles. Caroline commented that if she, as a White person, depicted herself with an afro, her action would be viewed as racism. Caroline’s expression of offense was troubling, in part, because this perspective seemed out of synch with her positionality as a member of a marginalized group and her role as an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights. Later in the semester, in a video journal entry, Caroline expressed a desire to develop a teaching practice with an emphasis on a nuanced approach to diversity:

I believe that it’s important that my students learn about other cultures and we’ve been learning about how to teach it in a way that’s not heroes and holidays, African masks, and just, “On Kwanzaa, we’re going to talk about African Americans” and things like that. I think that my personal goal is to be able to comfortably talk about race and culture with my students in a way that I am knowledgeable and if I’m not that knowledgeable, then, maybe we can learn together.

This seemingly newfound enlightenment is in stark contrast to her earlier declaration of offense with relation to the racially charged artwork of our guest speaker. However, even as she attempts to describe a commitment toward progressive teaching practices with regard to race in her video journal, her

statements were incongruent with the perspectives she expressed earlier in the course.

As students worked through the sociocultural content of the course, some demonstrated perspective shifts within their narratives over time. These shifts never manifested as logical, smooth transformations, but were filled with paradoxes. Thus, although narratives of transformation are commonly viewed as evidence that students or research participants have altered their views in response to interventions on the part of an educator or researcher, such evidence does not always indicate true change. Students may make statements that are demonstrative of a change from racist beliefs to non-racist beliefs, but their embodied, pre-conscious racism may remain. Thus, pedagogical attempts to transform beliefs or attitudes through narratives alone may be less effective than embodied tactics such as those involving physical and emotional interactions with those who students understand as different from themselves (Al-Saji, 2014). In spite of the paradoxes that appear within a narrative approach, we argue that moments of inarticulation, insecurity, fear, mistakes, and saying the “wrong things” that occur through sociocultural narrative pedagogical interventions can be rich opportunities for addressing sociocultural difference in art teaching and learning.

Concluding Reflections

Narrative is a powerful tool for art educators, but it is also a complex and unpredictable avenue for working through tensions and challenges around sociocultural difference. When using narrative approaches in teacher education, stories can manifest in a number of ways. These narrative patterns indicate an often paradoxical struggle toward transformative knowledge applied to preservice educators’ understandings of the influences of sociocultural factors on teaching and learning. We argue that the silences, disruptions, and paradoxes that surface around sociocultural difference in responses to

narrative pedagogy can be the beginnings of a transformative learning as they provide avenues for constructing and deconstructing the complexities of sociocultural difference.

Narratives can also fail to yield transformative change when used as pedagogical tools for a number of reasons. Narratives are deeply limited by the contexts in which they appear. Teaching and learning within institutions can have an inhibiting influence upon expression, as it often did for us as educators as well as for our students. Students engaged in narrative pedagogy will not always “risk the personal” in a way that is truly risky. This was evident in our data of identity narratives in which students silenced aspects of their identities in favor of self-definitions that downplayed aspects of race, gender, or disability. Narrative pedagogy can often act as a platform for the (re)presentation of dominant cultural narratives. This occurred within our study when students utilized the opportunities for open discussions on sociocultural difference to espouse racist ideologies such as when the student described being “offended” by the artwork of one of our guest speakers. In spite of these difficulties, the wounds exposed through

pedagogical ruptures, disruptions, and breakdowns can open up spaces for addressing tensions around sociocultural difference in art teaching and learning.

Despite our own social justice–orientations, we struggled to successfully instill similar perspectives in our students through the use of narrative pedagogy. One key aspect of the open-endedness of narrative pedagogy is unbridled potential. But as educators, we must ask—potential for what? We are asking our students to “risk the personal,” but are we also committed to embracing the risk of such generative forms of learning? The wounds that emerge from our narratives do have generative and transformative potential, but the sociocultural structures that inform and build those narratives are many and complex. And so, narrative pedagogy is a risk. In it we risk losing comfort, control, safety, and certainty. But perhaps these are the risks that are required for engaging sociocultural difference in ways that prepare preservice art educators for the wounded world on the other side of graduation.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A pseudonym is used for this guest speaker.

² Pseudonyms are used for all students.