

CHAPTER 18.

TRANS/FEMINIST PRACTICE
OF COLLABORATION IN THE
ART ACTIVISM CLASSROOM

Ames Hawkins

Columbia College Chicago

Joan Giroux

Columbia College Chicago

In 2007, the authors of this article were inspired by an object—a “Call to Artists” postcard for The Cradle Project—to write a description for a class in art activism that eventually manifested as two cross-listed courses in Cultural Studies and Art+Design that we taught together in January 2008, and again in 2012. This chapter begins with conscious consideration of the object of inspiration in order to establish the disciplinary positions from which we eventually move as we engage in a transfeminist practice of collaboration. We explore how teaching this co-created and co-taught course led to shifts in modes of practice and the redefinition of disciplinary positions. We conclude with a recognition of how this transfeminist practice invited students to shift with us—and to shift us—performing activism and collaboration vis-à-vis social practice.

This essay has been collaboratively written, but our story here is not necessarily about the writing of this essay, even though it's never not about the writing of this essay.

Our story begins with an object, a postcard Joan Giroux handed to Ames Hawkins at a meeting in Fall 2006. On the front appears a photo of the interior of a large abandoned warehouse. Set in American Typewriter-like font, roughly 36 point, tracked out to occupy more horizontal space, the text “Call To Artists” is superimposed on the image. In smaller font below: “In Spring of 2008 one thousand cradles and cribs made by artists from around the world, will form an installation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. We call this vision The Cradle Project”.

This postcard was the catalyst for a nearly seven-year arts activist pedagogical collaboration, one that began with more than eight months of conversation that both prompted and compelled us to create the cross-listed courses 22-3254J *Special Topics in Studio Art: Art and Activism Studio Project* and 46-2505J *Art and Activism Studio Project*. Nearly eighteen months after Joan handed Ames the postcard, we co-taught this course in January 2008, during which, all told, 22 students collaboratively made eight cradles. With support of a Faculty Development Grant, Ames drove these eight cradles, and another seven made by faculty, staff, and community members, to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Eventually displayed in The Banque Building in downtown Albuquerque, during June 2008, over 6000 people came to see the exhibition of 555 cradles. Each cradle was sponsored for \$100 and eventually auctioned off, raising \$79,000. Another \$20,000 was raised through *The Cradle Project* book featuring a number of cradles and artist statements.

We taught the course together again in January 2012, this time inspired by Naomi Natale's second project, One Million Bones. As stated on the website, "One Million Bones is a large-scale social arts practice, which means we use education and hands-on art making to raise awareness of genocides and atrocities going on around the world, this very day." This time we also collaborated with the Arts, Entertainment, and Media Management Department to present One Million Bones as part of an exhibition, working with faculty member Bob Blandford and students in the *Decision Making: Visual Arts Management class to create Crafting Hope: An Arts Activism Project*, an interactive installation featuring art activism and One Million Bones in a student-run gallery, The Hokin Project, in April 2012. During the nine-day immersive course experience, students made 5500 bones, a portion of the almost 50,000 bones made and collected throughout Chicagoland and the Great Lakes area. Collaborators included student organizations, academic departments, faculty groups and student support services at our campus. In the community we worked with refugee groups, regional primary and secondary schools, a girl scout troop, crafts centers, and other universities.

Between 2009 and 2013, we were involved in hundreds of interactions with volunteers, were a part of a number of smaller bone installations and public performances in a variety of setting and public spaces, and found ourselves, in the final six months before the installation, working an average of ten hours a week on this project. As Ames wrote in an article for @LAS, the magazine of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Columbia College Chicago:

Together, Joan and I made bones, moved bones, counted bones, boxed bones, stacked bones, and engaged in all man-

ner of work—intellectual, emotional, pedagogical, physical—to support the larger vision of Naomi Natale, Founder and Director of One Million Bones. Joan and I created curricula, schlepped clay, talked to media, made college visits, negotiated with administration, encouraged students, and provided support to community groups. (p. 9)

Our work culminated in May 2013 when the bones we worked to make and collect were loaded onto a UPS truck bound for Washington, D.C., where we and more than twenty individuals comprising Team Great Lakes joined a thousand others laying out more than one million bones on the National Mall, June 8-10, 2013.

Even now, seeing in print all we accomplished astounds us. We are excited to list out the numbers: of bones, of community collaborators, of students we worked with, and so on. However, we are aware that when we focus on what happened in terms of data, we risk glossing over the complicated, relational, interdisciplinary nature of the work and boiling it all down to quantitative ways to evidence success. From the outset, we embraced and retained the complexity of this work—the ambiguity—of our collaboration through recognition of it as socially engaged practice. In an educational primer on the subject, Pablo Helguera (2011), asserts that:

Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines. (p. 5)

It is this space of ambiguity, a discursive realm within which we become less, rather than more, able to see our work as bound to any particular discipline. It is this space of ambiguity, a kind of betwixt and between wherein change can occur, that we believe to be one of the more powerful aspects of socially engaged practice. Socially engaged practice guides our teaching. It has allowed each of us to exist within this space of ambiguity, to see our way to different ways of making, writing, teaching, moving, living, breathing, experimenting.

The Cradle Project postcard was the catalyst for a nearly seven-year arts activist pedagogical collaboration. But it also marks the beginning of a deep friendship, one that moved from co-teaching to co-authoring, from a collaboration focused on making art and an incredible learning experience for

students, to the making of knowledge through the writing of this and other essays (Giroux & Hawkins, 2012). We know that we fall into a tradition of feminist research and writing partnerships collaborations that cite characteristics and qualities such as friendship (Kaplan & Rose, 1993), intimacy (Alm, 1998), support (Russell, Plotkin, & Bell, 1998), pleasure (Leonardi & Pope, 1994; Estes & Lant, 1998), and an alliance against academic anxiety (Singley & Sweeny, 1998), as locations of the feminist power of this sort of work. It is, perhaps, because of our move from the classroom to the page, from the space of co-teaching to co-authoring, that we have come to see the relevance of our work not just in terms of its connection to socially engaged practice, service learning, or art activism, but to the ways our collaboration is itself a form of activism. We want you to know: *This essay has been collaboratively written, but our story here is not necessarily about the writing of this essay, even though it's never not about the writing of this essay.*

In this essay, we argue that our collaboration prompted each of us to do more than share our perspectives and expertise for the good of the project. By engaging in our work as trans/feminist practice, we each moved across the space between our disciplines, translated our work and desires not only for each other, but also for ourselves. Through our collaboration on our co-developed class, our work on The Cradle Project and on One Million Bones, Ames became able to see herself as a maker as well as a writer, and Joan found new ways to reimagine the relevance of writing in the making classroom. In the end, we each literally moved our own classroom and scholarly practices into new, unknown-to-us disciplinary and practical realms. In doing so, each of us transformed.

This essay has been collaboratively written, but our story here is not necessarily about the writing of this essay, even though it's never not about the writing of this essay. In a first section, we return to the postcard, using it as a way to illustrate how we initially positioned ourselves within the academic fields of composition and rhetoric and art respectively, as a writer and a maker working toward the creation of one collaboratively created and co-taught course. We explain how, though an object-oriented approach to collaboration is useful, a trans/feminist understanding of our disciplinary positions allow for recognition of relationality and movement as the location of activism.

In a second section, we note that relevance of trans/feminist practice has less to do with the co-creation of the syllabus than it does with the teaching of the class. Or rather, that while we can argue that both co-creation of the syllabus and teaching of the class are dialogic collaborations, it's in the seams and gaps noted while teaching the course that inspired us to move from our clear disciplinary positions. It isn't simply that we can call our *work* interdisciplinary. Through

conscious practice and trans/feminist collaboration, we have become interdisciplinary artists and scholars.

Finally, in the last section, we discuss what happened when we co-taught the course in 2012, a full six years after the postcard moment. Confronted by unanticipated student complaints, we found that in order to address their resistance, we would have to move from our positions not only for each other and because of our own desires, but also in a larger context. In order to practice ethical trans/feminist collaboration, we would have to do so and thus recognize our students as collaborators, not only in the art activist projects, but in the making of our co-taught and co-developed class.

POSITIONING PERSPECTIVES: AS WRITER, AS MAKER, AS TRANS/FEMINIST COLLABORATORS

Joan and Ames often talk about our collaboration. Can say, are proud to say: We collaborated. And yet, the work of the collaboration, discussion of how collaboration works, seems less accessible, more difficult to articulate in any clear way. One possibility for our inability to talk about collaboration has to do with the ways that collaboration itself has been inextricably linked from what William Duffy notes as the conversational imperative. In “Collaboration (in) Theory: Reworking the Social Turn’s Conversational Imperative,” Duffy (2014) notes that while he’s to be credited for establishing the relevance of collaboration in the field of composition and rhetoric, Kenneth Bruffee inadvertently set up *conversation* as the “default metaphor scholars invoke to explain the nature of collaboration itself” (p. 417). Duffy asserts that the problem with such a metaphor is that we are led to assume that collaboration exists in any situation in which we note conversation—any exchange between two people. We’re left to recognize, and argue that any and all conversation indicates the presence of collaboration. He further argues that in the larger field of composition and rhetoric, we then extend this idea to mean that all collaboration is writing, from which follows the logical assumption that all writing is collaboration. Through this tautology, we construct a closed system of simplistic inevitable logic. Without any space for complexity and growth, we inadvertently render *collaboration* powerless as a scholarly term.

As a way of complicating our understanding of collaboration as connected to conversation, Duffy (2014) offers an object-oriented approach, one that is informed by Davidson’s notion of *triangulation*. The idea is that in order engage in conversation, collaborators enter into a relationship, one identified through a shared desire to speak together about something—an object, an idea, a problem. The triangle here is formed by two collaborators and the reason for the

relationship in the first place: the object/topic/issue concern, about which they talk, research, and write. Duffy (2014) explains the advantages of triangulation:

When we approach it from an object-oriented perspective, what collaboration makes possible is the ability to draw upon one another's positioning to recognize new connections between and among the various objects relevant to the work at hand. In short, collaboration has the potential to widen the scope of available discourse for its participants. (p. 425)

It is this idea of positioning that we believe becomes critical to investigations of collaboration. As anyone who has ever collaborated knows, each individual in the project will likely need—because of a perception of resistance, made manifest in the form of conflict—and have to work with and through their own desires, hopes and perspectives in order to keep the project moving. Understanding and reflecting upon one's position is, then, a first step in being able to trace the continually iterative, recursive process of collaboration.

An object enables positioning. Ames always thought about the postcard as an effective rhetorical composition, a multimodal text combining both image and print copy with particular affordances regarding circulation and design, recognizing in the postcard a Barthesian seam of pleasure created by juxtaposition of post-apocalyptic images, and the hope of activism, contextualized through imperfect images of modernity. She always saw in the image her connection with and to the city of Detroit and her emergence as an activist in her job as a soup kitchen manager. From the outset, Joan made concrete visual leaps to art works she knew: from studio and art history classes, exhibitions she had seen in the last twenty plus years, works she had become familiar with during artists' talks at residencies, or through contemporary art blogs and videos. In her own thinking about the construction of real objects as purveyors of meaning, she considered the power of the many as what would ultimately resonate in that empty warehouse.

This essay has been collaboratively written, but our story here is not necessarily about the writing of this essay, even though it's never not about the writing of this essay.

In "Screaming Divas: Collaboration as Feminist Practice," Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope (1994) are "trying to formulate an alternative to the mode of scholarly production that the dissertation epitomizes" (p. 259). They do so through an essay that is as much form as it is about content, as much about process as product. Written as a dialogue, the piece explores the possibility inherent in understanding collaboration via metaphors of desire and sexuality, most specifically through an exploration of the metaphor of the NAMES Project,

the AIDS quilt. Leonardi and Pope ultimately decide the quilt metaphor isn't completely useful because it "doesn't capture the changes that occur in the pieces we bring to the project as we talk and work things out" (p. 269). Though as art activists we fully appreciate the connection between the NAMES Project, desire and collaboration, we aren't here to pick up the thread of this argument whole cloth. Rather, we are interested in their observation that the quilt calls attention to seams, visibility of gaps (p. 264).

If focused only on the results and goals of the collaboration, an object-oriented approach can be problematic since it tends to flatten the plane of relations, even dismissing relationality. For us—Ames and Joan—the activism in our collaboration isn't simply a result of the content of the course and our shared desire to use art to make change in the world. It isn't just about us establishing expertise, in articulating what it was we achieved. Our activism also resides in the the recognition of gaps—between ideas, need, power dynamics—and a shared desire to constantly be ready and willing to move across and perhaps beyond them, to bridge, to translate, to transform.

Our collaboration is a trans/feminist practice; the site of our activism. Trans/feminism is a term we borrow from Marjory Pryse's 2000 *National Women's Studies Association Journal* article, "Trans/Feminist Methodology: Bridges to Interdisciplinary Thinking." Nearly a decade before the explosion of literature focusing on issues of performance and materiality with respect to transsexuality and transgender identity, Pryse makes a connection between the relevance of this queer subject position and the groundbreaking project by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983). Perhaps one of the most influential volumes with respect to the intersection of feminism and race, *Bridge* brings together indigenous, black, Asian and Latina voices, writing in a wide array of genres and forms. Pryse (2000) notes that *trans*, as is explored by Anzaldúa, Moraga and contributors, is connected to translation, to borderlands, to "a bridge, a span across a chasm or otherwise untraversable terrain" (p. 105). In doing so, Pryse offers *trans* not only as a metaphor, but as a theoretical and methodological "place from which we may embark, a site of trans/port and of trans/formation" (p. 105).

Pryse's piece may not even be the very first academic essay to do this work, but it is the first that we can find that emphasizes *trans* as connected to a scholarly practice, not simply scholarly content or subject position. Pryse (2000) argues, and we agree: "Trans perspectives offer new ways to think about interdisciplinarity" (p. 105). Or rather, in thinking about what it means to (be) trans—what it means to be engage in feminist practices as a bridge, as moving across a bridge, in motion spanning a space between—we may find ourselves with a better understanding of collaboration as a feminist practice. We do so thinking less about

how it is we need and desire positioning ourselves in relationship to or with any specific field, and more so with an eye toward how this work has invited us to move beyond and across discourse borders, to transform, translate, transcend disciplinary boundaries. We do so in order to better illustrate the power in this ambiguity.

To further explore this idea, we return to Marjorie Pryse and her observations about trans/feminist methodology. While Duffy's description pays close attention to the object and the position, Pryse offers for consideration the subsequent movement. Pryse (2000) explains:

A transversal interdisciplinarity requires feminist scholars to learn to “shift” and “pivot” as an ongoing aspect of our own methodological practice. It does not require us to become experts in all research methodologies and the creative arts, but rather to focus on the ways in which “rooting” makes “shifting” possible; and it is the “shifting” that is the “trans” in the movement in feminist thinking. It is learning to “shift” and “pivot” while remaining grounded in a lattice work of identities and research methodologies that I am proposing as the design for a transversal, trans/feminist methodology. (p. 110)

It is this ability to *both* root *and* position, to be *both* aware of an original identity/story/disciplinary expertise, *and* willing/able—desirous—of the work involved in making a shift, a pivot, in movement elsewhere that is relevant in our areas of focus of community-based research and art activism. A trans/feminist practice of collaboration involves moving from one position toward another perspective, across whatever it is that may be understood as the gap, the fissure, a divide. Here, we also note a clear connection with and to what Jaqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) refer to in their collaborative project *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Study* as the critical imagination, a method of inquiry that exposes the gaps left by white male-dominated research in rhetoric. Royster and Kirsch bring attention to the presence of the gap. Trans/feminist practices of collaboration provide a way of thinking about what it means not only to move across and bridge them, but to shift in ways that reposition and remake the work and space of the gap altogether.

This movement isn't necessarily linear; it isn't premeditated or predetermined. These moves are iterative and recursive, not in terms of content (i.e., how I changed my mind about something) but in terms of form: the movement itself is indicative of personal, pedagogical, professional and political evolution. One needs not know where they will move, only to understand that if the interaction

is trans/feminist collaboration, they will be moving. And it is the movement, as much as the eventual repositioning, that matters. The movement that may not be mediated by, but occurs because of, an object. The object—in this case the postcard—allowed us to locate ourselves in an area of expertise, to ready ourselves just before the music begins and we agree to dance.

It's about this dance. And as much as it may be a dance between two people, choreographed in terms of partnered dancing in which sometimes you lead, and sometimes I lead, sometimes the partners are of different genders/sexes and sometimes the same (Estes & Lant, 1998). Most often, we might assert, no one is leading. Sometimes this dance is less one imaged in terms of Western cultural formats of couples, and more closely connected to dance forms with any number of dancers moving in a space together, in rhythmic relationship with their bodies, shared energy, the space and the earth. Sometimes the dance begins with two, and more people join. Sometimes the music changes, and we drop the beat. Sometimes I write a paragraph and you write one. Sometimes you design the assignment, while I evaluate; sometimes it's the other way around. Sometimes I am the one who delivers the lectures, sometimes it's you. We move and/into position, and then reposition ourselves. In this movement, we transform ourselves as teachers, as makers, as artists, scholars and thinkers, exactly as who we are, finding it's possible to be more than we ever imagined we could become.

TRANSLATING THE INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECT INTO A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

In co-designing 22-3254J *Special Topics in Studio Art: Art and Activism Studio Project* and 46-2505J *Art and Activism Studio Project*, we experienced the kind of synergistic excitement that often accompanies collaborative work. We shared ideas, documents, and assignments, riffing off one another to design a course that sought to bring into conversation the history and theory of art activism with the social focus and practice of art making. Guided by a desire to provide a strong liberal arts foundation for their object making, students were required to read a wide range of articles, from the history of art activism to postcolonial theory, from first-person narrative to current events in, and the politics of, Africa.

Because of her experience in the writing classroom, Ames was largely responsible for the daily reflection essays that required students to analyze and synthesize the content of and connections between nightly readings, lectures, and class discussions. Joan took the lead in designing assignments that would scaffold toward the construction of cradles. What's most important to know is that though these were two courses offered in two different programs, we decided that *all* students would complete *all* the assignments. All students, regardless of major,

would engage with the course as one single curricular experience even though we had to design it as two courses in order to get departmental and school approval.

In their groundbreaking study on collaborative writing processes, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, Ede and Lunsford (1990) articulate two principal types of collaborations: hierarchical and dialogic. If we were to analyze our practices with respect to syllabus creation, we could most certainly characterize the process in terms of what Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1990) identified as a dialogic collaboration:

This dialogic mode is loosely structured and the roles enacted within it are fluid: one person may occupy multiple and shifting roles as the project progresses. In this mode, the process of articulating goals is often as important as the goals themselves and sometimes even more important. Furthermore, those participating in dialogic collaboration generally value creative tension inherent in multivoiced and multivalent ventures. What those involved in hierarchical collaboration see as a problem to be solved, these individuals view as a strength to capitalize on and to emphasize. In dialogic collaboration, this group effort is seen as an essential part of the production—rather than the recovery—of knowledge and as a means of individual satisfaction within the group. (p.133)

As far as making a syllabus goes, we occupied shifting roles between and among the duties of course design. We discussed all of the choices we made in terms of topics to cover, readings, writing prompts, organization of time, working to articulate rationales for our perspectives. We continually revisited the goals of the course—landing finally with a decision to have the larger question on the table be: Can art save lives? We each offered differing ideas, and negotiated through tensions that were often created because of our own disciplinary experiences, knowledge and perspectives. There were only two of us directly involved in the collaboration, but we often had to also think through how to achieve our goal when the larger institutional systems made such a collaboration appear to be impossible. To be sure, we were incredibly satisfied with the syllabus we produced.

The question then becomes, if we can identify our work as trans/feminist collaboration, as well as dialogic collaboration, is all dialogic collaboration trans/feminist? Or, was this dialogic collaboration also trans/feminist, and if so, why introduce the new term at all?

The issue here isn't one of inclusion, or exclusion, but of shifting focus from the quality of the collaboration to the reasons why a collaborator might en-

gage in such work in the first place. Even when there's a focus on process over product, and discussion regarding the means by which the collaboration occurs, most commentary is framed in terms of successes achieved rather than unforeseeable growth, to disciplinary knowledge-making as a gain for a singular field, rather than knowledge-making as an interdisciplinary venture. Trans/feminist practice has to do with moving from one perspective, one way of seeing, to *end up by project's end in a different place entirely*. In other words, the individual will, through this interaction—this dance—have transitioned. The transition isn't simply actions intended to change the world, or society. Trans/feminist practice means that the practitioner moves in order to change themselves, not just because they want to succeed, but because there's an awareness that the shift itself will, by virtue of an expansion in the way they understand their own abilities and efficacy, enable them to effect greater change.

In our first teaching of the course in 2008, we began the course clearly situated in our own disciplinary realms, interacting with students from comfortable positions of expertise. Each morning, for three weeks, we gathered in a classroom where Joan and Ames would alternate presenting lectures and providing students with different information for inquiry and discussion. In the afternoons, Joan took the lead in the studio, while Ames met with students independently to discuss response essays and writing. In many ways, one might have been able to recognize cooperative, rather than collaborative elements of classroom management and curriculum delivery.

But then, something interesting began to happen. As we worked with the students, encouraging them to push themselves, each recognized a desire to move from their positions of expertise to try something new, to shift into the unfamiliar territory of the other, to risk exposure of what each did not know, rather than remaining in the safer territory of disciplinary expertise. Inspired by watching Joan talk to the students about the nesting projects, Ames decided she would make her own cradle. Though she did not at the time consider herself to be an artist, Ames decided to repurpose some four inch vinyl squares left over from a reiterative art activist project paying homage to the AIDS quilt. Each afternoon, when she wasn't working with students on their writing, she was hunched over the squares, popping small holes around the perimeter using a hand-punch awl so that she could sew the squares together using "thread" made from plastic grocery bags. As she made this cradle, she saw her writing in direct relationship to making; she realized that if she could say "I am a multimodal composer," then she realized she could claim and begin to explore the subject-position of the artist as well.

Since seeing her piece in *The Banque Building* in Albuquerque on June 8, 2007, as a part of *The Cradle Project* exhibition, Ames has continued to explore

an understanding of self as an artist. She has engaged in performance, created visual/print text installations, published video essays, and is currently co-hosted of a scholarly podcast focusing on alt-alphabetic texts and creative-critical scholarship. This is not to say that she claims the same kind of expertise that Joan might, but that she has become better able to both understand and include art and making-practices in her classroom, and consider the disciplinary perspectives of artists in her teaching and creative-critical scholarly work.

While Ames—the writer—ultimately responded to the postcard, the project's call to construct a cradle and to being physically present in the making studio, Joan—the maker of objects—ultimately did not construct a cradle during that first class. She pivoted off Ames's writing prompts in that class to consider models of how to engage as a teacher-reader in the studio making classroom. Asking students to address particular and specific, yet highly open-ended prompts delving into theoretical aspects of readings and class discussions presented an approach she would adopt in a semester long section of Art and Activism Studio Project with a focus on the environment and ecological art. As a teacher-reader she reflected on methods of eliciting critical thought and analysis, and the development of each student's individual voice in textual image alongside concrete objects. Subsequently, as co-author with Ames, Joan moved into making and shaping through language and writing in academic texts such as this, and other essays.

We entered a collaboration with each other and developed as interdisciplinary scholars because of our own desire to move between gaps between our own disciplinary positions. Our trans/feminist collaboration invited us to not only rely upon each other to lead in their areas of expertise, but to both recognize and attempt to bridge the gaps we saw in the ways we did not know. We each made space for the other, honored and delighted in the risk-taking, the uneasy experience of moving into uncharted territory, into a different disciplinary space. Because of this move, we recognize an increase in our willingness to listen to others, to engage in dialogic collaboration because of the ways trans/feminist practice has transformed our lives. And as much as we acknowledge each other as crucial to this process, to our own transformation, we are also clear about the ways that our students have assisted us in articulating an ethics of trans/feminist collaboration as well.

TRANSFORMING STUDENT DISSENT THROUGH TRANS/FEMINIST MOVES

The second time we taught the course, in January 2012, we required students to read and engage with Terry Tempest Williams' 2004 commencement speech at The University of Utah, a post-9/11 call to "protect and preserve" the integrity

and possibility what she identifies as “the open space of democracy”:

In the open space of democracy there is room for dissent.

In the open space of democracy there is room for differences.

In the open space of democracy, the health of the environment is seen as the wealth of our communities. We remember that our character has been shaped by the diversity of America’s landscapes and it is precisely that character that will protect it. Cooperation is valued more than competition; prosperity becomes the caretaker of poverty. The humanities are not peripheral, but the very art of what it means to be human. In the open space of democracy, beauty is not optional, but essential to our survival as a species. And technology is not rendered at the expense of life, but developed out of a reverence for life. (pp. 9-10)

Williams’ text reveals both her facility with language—her identity as an artist/writer—and her conviction as an art activist. Joan and Ames offered the text as a way for students to consider whether the installation of *One Million Bones* on the National Mall could create this open space. We talked about their collaborative groups as these open spaces, sites where every day for nine days they would come together to work on behalf of an art activist project and speak freely with one another about issues surrounding genocide. We discussed the importance of beauty to this open space, the relevance of art to our lives and how they, as emerging artists already understood the resistance to the arts that exists in American culture. We believed, as we provide an opportunity for students to reflect, to agree, and even to dissent, that we offered our class as an open space of democracy.

We have no way of knowing whether these discussions are what empowered a few students to speak up and relay their displeasure with the course, but the fact is that near the end of the first week a few people were incredibly upset because they felt and expressed that they had somehow been tricked, duped into working on something in which they had no interest. They expected to be able to work on their own art, not, as one person said during class, “be slaves to Joan and Ames’s project.” A similar percentage and disenchantment was voiced in 2008, but it was muted, we now believe, by the fact that students were, even if they were in small groups, at least working on *their own* cradles. They may not have wanted to work together, but they could at least hold onto the idea that the art was, as they saw it, theirs. Bone making, a few had decided, had nothing to do with their art, their vision, and their ideas. They had no interest in being a part of our collaboration.

Given their reasoning, it seems to us that the student resistance is in large part a result of their understanding of our requirements as what Beth Godbee (Chapter 17, this collection), identifies as the “too-muchness” of our course. In the same way an educator might challenge or reject an arts activist, social justice, socially engaged practice curriculum on the basis of it being, “on top of other educational demands,” so might a student reject course work they identify as requiring more of them. In the case of our students, we also noted that their resistance was coming from a place of privilege. They believed that being “slaves to Ames and Joan’s project” ought not have been required of them. They were artists wanting to make their art, unwilling to move from their own disciplinary notions of the *auteur*, and engage in socially engaged practice.

Initially, we wanted to ignore the dissenters, focus upon students who were telling us things like, “this is the best class I ever had at Columbia,” and, “I wish every class could be like this one.” But if this were to truly be an open space of democracy, we needed to quit trying to explain to the dissenters why they should make bones, or convince them they would and could get something valuable out of the experience if they’d simply open themselves to it. We weren’t going to be able to, nor would it be ethical to, shove our students from their positions and make them move. In order to continue collaboration as trans/feminist practice, we would have to move from ours. We had to see the *class*—not simply the project—as the site of collaboration. We’d need to hear and honor the student positions and create an opportunity that would enable all of us to move together.

Toward that end, we revised the prompt for one of the response essays to offer students an opportunity to write about a project they may have wanted to work on, to imagine a social arts practice that speaks about and for an issue of their own choosing. We repositioned One Million Bones more as *one particular example of* social arts practice so as to open a space for their political concerns. We emphasized that Naomi had only been twenty-six when she founded The Cradle Project and that there was no reason they couldn’t begin a project if they wanted. We asserted that a first step would have to be presentation of their idea in writing—alphabetic text. In this way, they had to practice what many artists, designers, filmmakers, and other creative producers practice on a regular basis in seeking support for their work: they had to craft a verbal pitch, not unlike what grant applications, or other applications for support, would require of them in the future.

Unless students are invited to reimagine and recreate the artistic vision of a particular art activist project from their own perspective, or be guided in socially engaged practice of their own choosing, they are not actually *collaborating* with us on the art activist project at hand. They are not being asked to move from their own personal positions, but are *being positioned by us* in order to experience

and take part in a particular kind of art from a hands-on perspective, whether they like it or not. In short, they are serving the project because we are requiring it of them. We have heard the critique that it's wrong to require students to make bones, to work on a project if they don't agree. Again, we believe these critiques to be emanating from a general distaste for the "too-muchness" of our course and agree with Godbee that such changes to a curriculum "can help us shake up and shake off normalized actions, dominant beliefs, and damaging discourses."

When we taught these courses, we had not yet developed an understanding of collaboration as a trans/feminist practice. We didn't specifically invite students to articulate their initial positions, or examine how and where they subsequently moved. Even so, in the final paragraphs of the final essays written by two different students from two different J-Session classes, one focused on The Cradle Project, the other on One Million Bones, we see clear evidence that the course transmogrified their perspectives and practices. As a recursive move that both brings you back to the beginning and the creation of a class, we choose to end with these two short passages of student writing about their experiences of making.

This essay has been collaboratively written, but our story here is not necessarily about the writing of this essay, even though it's never not about the writing of this essay.

In the spirit of collaboration, let them, by name, be the ones to help you better understand the ways they also appear to have shifted their perspectives, moved and bridged gaps they seemed to notice for themselves. Let them show you what we recognize as the beauty of this work:

As there are six billion other people in the world, conflict is inevitable, as is collaboration. All we can do is try to make the most of our circumstances and maybe learn something about ourselves. Over the past three weeks I have learned that I am still a control freak. I have also learned that it is hard to change other people. It is best to accept them as they are and lead by example. I still prefer to work individually, but I know that there is no way I could have created and completed the same cradle by myself. Incompatible as we were, I needed my group to be successful. I could not have done it alone.

- Jaime Rovenstine, reflecting on her work with
The Cradle Project, January 22, 2008.

Personally, I am very thankful I was able to be involved in this project. Not only did I work with my peers to reach a common goal, I learned valuable information on how to design an exhibit. Before this, I would have never know how much time it takes to plan an exhibition, let alone the materials and directions required to create it. The information I

learned is invaluable. The skepticism I started this class with has been completely erased, and replaced with hope. Hope that our vision for the One Million Bones Project is carried out, and that it makes a true difference. I'm now a part of the voice that OMB has created, and I hope that my voice, as well as everyone else's in my group, and this class, is able to be heard.

- Matt Schieren, reflecting on his work with
One Million Bones, January 12, 2012.

REFERENCES

- Alm, M. (1998). The role of talk in the writing process of intimate collaboration. In E. G. Peck & J. S. Mink (Eds.), *Common ground: Feminist collaboration in the academy* (pp. 123-140). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Anzaldúa, G., & Moraga, C. (Eds.). (1981). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. New York, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.
- Duffy, W. (2014, May). Collaboration (in) theory: Reworking the social turn's conversational imperative. *College English*, 76(5), 416-435.
- Ede, L., & Lundsford, A. (1990). *Singular texts/plural authors: Perspectives on collaborative writing*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Estes, A., & Lant, K. M. (1998). Lesbian collaboration and the choreography of desire. In E. G. Peck & J. S. Mink (Eds.), *Common ground: Feminist collaboration in the academy* (pp. 155-171). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Giroux, J., & Hawkins, A. (2012). Art activism in the classroom: One imagined future for service-learning. *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 29(3), 88-101.
- Godbee, B. Pedagogical "too-muchness": A feminist approach to community-based learning, multi-modal composition, social justice education, and more.
- Hawkins, A. (2014, Spring). One million bones: Collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and art activism. @LAS Magazine. Retrieved from <http://www.colum.edu/atlas/volumes/fall2013-spring2014/stories/one-million-bones-.php>
- Helguera, P. (2011). *Education for socially engaged art: A materials and techniques handbook*. New York, NY: Jorge Pinto Books.
- Kaplan, C., & Rose, E. C. (1993, Spring). Strange bedfellows: Feminist collaboration. *Signs*, 18(3), 547-561.
- Leonardi, S. J., & Pope, R. A. (1994, Autumn). Screaming divas: Collaboration as feminist practice. *Studies in Women's Literature*, 13(2), 259-270.
- Peck, E. G., & Mink, J. S. (Eds.). (1998). *Common ground: Feminist collaboration in the academy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Pryse, M. (2000, Summer). Trans/feminist methodology: Bridges to interdisciplinary thinking. *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, 12(2), 105-118.
- Reagan, S. B., Fox, T., & Bleich, D. (Eds.). (1994). *Writing with: new directions in collaborative teaching, learning and research*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Rovenstine, J. (2008, January 22). Collaboration response (Unpublished essay).

- Royster, J. J., & Kersch, G. (2012). *Feminist rhetorical practices: New horizons for rhetoric, composition and literacy study*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Russell, C. L., Plotkin, R., & Bell, A. C. (1998). Merge/emerge: Collaboration in graduate school. In E. G. Peck & J. S. Mink (Eds.), *Common ground: Feminist collaboration in the academy* (pp. 141-154). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Singley, C. J., & Sweeny, S. E. (1998). In league with each other: The theory and practice of feminist collaboration. In E. G. Peck & J. S. Mink (Eds.), *Common ground: Feminist collaboration in the academy* (pp. 63-79). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Schieren, M. (2012, May 31). Personal reflection (Unpublished essay).
- Williams, T. T. (2004). *The open space of democracy*. Barrington, MA: The Orion Society.