

**Making Educational History:
How Arts-Based Research Can Change Minds**

Tom Barone
Professor of Education
College of Education
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287
barone@asu.edu

Tom Barone is Professor of Education in the College of Education at Arizona State University where he teaches courses in curriculum studies and qualitative research methods. He is the author of *Touching Eternity: The Enduring Consequences of Teaching* (Teachers College Press, 2001) and *Aesthetics, Politics, and Educational Inquiry* (Peter Lang, 2000).

PLEASE DO NOT CITE OR QUOTE

Introduction

Most of us for whom educational studies is our chosen field see ourselves as engaged in an ongoing quest to make the world of schooling a better place. Our efforts, simultaneously personal and professional, are fueled by hopes for an educational enterprise guided by our moral compasses, a felt need to realign its policy and practice, and therefore its outcomes, with our own sense of educational virtue.

I cannot more aptly describe the nature of my own quest than did Maxine Greene (1988, p. xi) in articulating hers. Greene characterized her own lifelong struggle as one of "connect[ing] the undertaking of education. . .to the making and remaking of a public space."

But in recent times those with opposing interests, most from outside of the field of education, have made the pursuit of that quest more problematic. Working diligently toward the downsizing of that public space, they have, from my point of view, moved to denigrate the public schools and to castigate those who live and work within them, in favor of a less expansive vision, one guided by a narrow, private, corporatist ideology. Little I have seen and heard over the last few years leads me to believe that these forces are in descent.

As academic professionals one of the most important outlets for pursuing our quest is our scholarship. And for some educational researchers, quantitative and qualitative alike, it is there more than anywhere, that frustration and even futility reign, with a sense that the realm of schooling has been largely untouched by our painstaking efforts to study that world and to reveal what we have found. Indeed, since the November, 2004, elections, a few colleagues, in personal conversations, have expressed to me their doubts doubts that progressive educational researchers, even in collaboration with like-minded academic colleagues and public school educators, can ever effect

the realignment of schooling in America with their aspirations for it.

Still, despite the ongoing trials and recent disappointments, my quest, and hopefully yours, is not easily retired. But as we witness the educational landscapes of the public school and the academy devolving around us, I feel the need to support our longings, to revive our yearnings, for making a positive difference through our scholarly research. And to that end I quote the following words of Jean Paul Sartre (1988):

“The world and man reveal themselves,” wrote Sartre, “by undertakings. And all the undertakings we might speak of reduce themselves to a single one, making history” (p. 104).

Sartre was not, of course directly addressing the world of educational research, but from those pithy words I extrapolate the following: As educational inquirers parts of our professional selves are indeed defined by our notions of the educationally true, good, and beautiful. We do indeed reveal these parts of our selves within, among other locations, our research projects. And it is through those undertakings that we must continue to strive to make educational history.

To that end, this essay represents a tentative foray into a realm of possibilities. In it I explore merely one avenue for redressing the dire state of education through our work as educational scholars and researchers. It is divided into two parts. In the first I attempt to more fully articulate the nature of the obstacles that we face as educational researchers in our efforts at making educational history. In the second I suggest some features of qualitative research, especially arts-based research, that might serve us in our quest.

The Problem

In the last few years we have witnessed the greatest intervention of the federal government into the field of education in the history of the United States, a deep intrusion into the once public space of the classroom

for the purpose of managing the transactions between those who live and work there. The consequences of this intervention, intended and otherwise -- but largely, I believe, pernicious -- are too varied and widespread to catalogue here. But among them has been the reinforcement of frame factors that have serve to diminish the professional autonomy of teachers and administrators, deskilling them, as Michael Apple would say, and severely hampering them from engaging in history-making practice, which is to say, praxis.

Among the available forms of resistance to this institutional oppression of educators is a quiet subversion of these externally generated policy mandates from behind the closed classroom door. But while some degrees of professional freedom surely remain for educational practitioners, the omnipresent standardized exam, like Foucault's panopticon, renders subterfuge more problematical. Subterfuge, moreover, does little to alert non-educators to the extent of the damage currently being inflicted on the educational process. While signs of discontent with practices such as high stakes testing have emerged among scattered clusters of laypeople, conventional suppositions upon which harmful policy mandates are based go largely unchallenged; within the general public the confusion remains widespread.

Writing in the 1920s John Dewey (1927/1954) observed that a "public that is organized in and through those officers who act in behalf of its interests," including policymakers, is critical to the health of a democracy. He further noticed that the public of the time "is in eclipse, unsure and uncertain. . . The public seems to be lost; it certainly is bewildered" (pp. 15-16). With other social and educational progressives, I detect nowadays a similar "eclipse of the public." The populace seems lost, distracted, largely unconcerned as one of the last bastions of hope for what Dewey called the Great Community -- the public school -- is betrayed by policymakers who are failing to act in the public's interests in ways that most do not fully comprehend.

Schneider and Ingram (1997) have identified the kind of politics that operates when the public is bewildered, lost, befuddled, betrayed. They call it degenerative politics (pp. 2-3). Degenerative politics depends and feeds an organized, usually public, display of entertainment. This theatrical display, designed to manipulate social reality toward a desired end, constitutes what Edelman (1988) calls the political spectacle. Of the several elements identifiable within spectacle, I will mention three here.

The first significant element in this public pageant is that of skewed imagery, a series of distorting pictures lodged in the public consciousness. The second is a symbolic language, a set of abstract words, devoid of concrete referents, to which meanings are nevertheless assigned. Third, the words and images live in a mutually supportive relationship within an overarching story line, similar to what the postmodernist social critic Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) would call a master narrative.

Master narratives are meta-stories that aim to bring final meaning to cultural phenomena. These are stories that we cling to for a comfort and familiarity otherwise denied us in an increasingly jarring and bewildering world. A narrative provides a kind of coherence to the symbolic language and images, just as the words and images drive and illuminate the story, free to operate within the political spectacle, to pervade public awareness.

The words, images, and meta-story that are serving to confuse the public about educational matters are, of course, part of a more inclusive cultural narrative about issues of childhood, race, gender, social class, intellectualism, and private initiative versus public good. In teasing out the ways in which this vocabulary, imagery, and narrative pertain to education, I blend my own ideas with those of Mary Lee Smith (2004) who has transported some of Edelman's (1985, 1988) notions about the political spectacle into the educational arena.

The public has been bombarded with images of indolent and insolent

school children, especially children of color; of disinterested, incompetent, mostly female teachers who are responsible for those children's purported deficiencies; or of the rare, isolated hero-teacher who, on behalf of their students, combats, without a posse of colleagues, a corrupt and stifling school bureaucracy; and finally there are the manufactured images of the aloof, impractical, theory-obsessed teacher educator, portrayed as the ultimate apologist for the self-serving educational establishment.

Meanwhile, conversations about education these days are riddled with words such as "accountability," "high standards," and "freedom of choice." Who, asks Smith (2004, 12-13), could disagree with these words? And yet, she notes, the meaning of each term can vary within alternative contexts. For example, "accountability" suggests something quite different to accountants, to educators, and to testing experts. But those who use the term within the political spectacle "gloss over real differences in definitions and values" in favor of a privileged meaning that serves the narrow interests who seek to maintain the political spectacle.

Within the meta-story that flows from and through these words and images, children, public school teachers, administrators, and professors of education are stereotyped and scapegoated. Members of the educational establishment are portrayed as not responsible to the motivational forces of the free market. Because they have placed our nation's social, cultural, and economic well-being in jeopardy, they themselves are in constant need of surveillance, or "accountability". Most importantly the public (a.k.a. "government") schools in which they work require a dose of private sector competition to cure what ails them.

Because this master narrative is an artifact crafted within a degenerative politics it is not, ultimately, a useful one. This is because it draws its breath from within an air of unreality. Edelman (1985, 5) suggests that the pictures within the political spectacle "create a moving panorama

taking place in a world the public never quite touches," its members never actually experiencing it for themselves. The images associated with words such as "accountability," and the meta-story they support, lack concrete referents and so "float free of specific meaning" (Smith, 2004, 13). No tether ties these words [and images]. . . to the world of experience and intractable concrete details." Nor are the meanings of the words, images, and story within the meta-narrative tied to debilitating cultural forces, details of which might reveal teachers and students as the victims rather than the perpetrators of social crimes. Instead, unwarranted meaning is arrogated to these words and images by those in a position to do so. The result is a public that is "held in a kind of thrall" (Smith, 2004, 13).

My favorite evidence of the extent of this psychological bondage continues to be the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools (Rose & Gallup, 2004). Year after year, the poll has demonstrated a sizable gap between the views held about the quality of schools with which respondents are directly familiar, and their views of those with which they are not. In the 2004 poll, 70% of parents from across the nation awarded an A or a B to the school attended by their oldest child. Asked to grade all public schools nationally, only 26% of the same parents chose an A or B (p. 44).

How to account for this paradox? Between the parents' direct experiences of the nearby schoolhouse and their impressions of the distant classrooms inhabited by other people's children, there toils the political spectacle churning out distorted language and cliched imagery. These words and images are rife within the products of the commodified and banalized mass media, especially the electronic visual media (Males, 1999) such as film, TV sitcoms, and newsmagazines, the commercial aims of which are, paraphrasing Abbs (2003, 19), "as far removed from actual experience as an amusement arcade is from teaching philosophy."

Those aims are indeed to bewilder and befuddle, to mystify and indoctrinate. The evidence from that Gallup poll (and elsewhere) suggests that while the flow from the popular media may be limited in its capacity to affect profoundly the meanings we derive from "actual" experiences, it remains sufficiently powerful to transform the benignly distant and unfamiliar into the fearfully strange and exotic. Unfortunately, however, it is within this anxiety manufactured within the political spectacle that much of today's educational policy is being fashioned.

The difficulties of removing the blindfolds should not be minimized. The political spectacle has allowed the seeds of misperception to be planted deep within the collective subconscious. Indeed, discussions in the media about educational matters almost inevitably betray assumptions built on the imagery within the master narrative. When even the National Federation of Teachers condescends to the language of educational standards and teacher accountability, the extent of the problem is more clearly registered.

The seeds are certainly buried below the cultural topsoil of political partisanship. While the platforms of last year's two major parties surely reflected, to some degree, the interests of different constituencies, the rhetoric on both sides floated above the meaning of terms such as accountability, educational standards, and even the ways in which a child may be left behind.

Of course, in a political campaign the spectacle reaches its height; indeed, dueling pageants vie for center stage. A campaign hardly represents an opportune moment for educating an electorate. Perhaps, in the wake of that campaign, with the spectacle malingering but its fever diminished, the time is right to intensify our efforts at intervening in history through our scholarship, even as we refuse to create a spectacle of our own.

What to Do?

So what are the various research approaches available to us for the kind of intervention of which I speak? The list of qualitative inquiry strategies has grown more extensive in recent decades, to include the various forms of case studies, participatory action research, phenomenological research, hermeneutical research, cultural studies, critical ethnography, postmodernist, post-structuralist, and post-colonialist approaches, autoethnography, narrative research, life history, performative ethnography, and so on.

Only to be recast, as we know, as a kind of black list of research methodologies (indeed, one that disparages all non-experimental forms of educational research). But recast by whom? Are the proponents of a new, aggressively retrogressive research orthodoxy, the same policymakers and politicians who benefit from a degenerative politics? If so, does their disdain for these research approaches reflect a concern that the methodologies might facilitate a remaking of the history that they feel they own? The presence of such a fear would support my own beliefs about the potential of these alternative research genres, and so offer hope.

In addressing the possibilities of making educational history through alternative genres of educational research, I focus primarily on the kind known as arts-based. I am wondering about the potential of a research approach that, boldly but not rudely, humbly and not arrogantly, intervenes in the current state of educational affairs, one that expands the reach of our scholarship because of (and not despite) the fact that it is profoundly aesthetic, one that both finds its inspiration in the arts and leads to progressive forms of social awareness. I am thinking of an approach to research on educational phenomena that alters the world by raising questions, one that makes history by providing a catalyst for the changing of minds. And among the candidates whose minds might be changed are the members of the

general public currently under the sway of the political spectacle.

This is, as we know, not the usual audience for educational researchers of any stripe. Instead, career success for members of the professoriate has largely depended on the degree to which our texts inform and persuade professional colleagues within our circumscribed discursive subcommunities. But some cultural observers have reinforced our discomforts with this narrow audience, expressing concerns about the tendency of academic writing to alienate readers unprepared to penetrate the opaque prose of disciplinary specialization. Russell Jacoby (1987), in particular, has insisted that even writings by academics with emancipatory intentions have not to resist, but contribute to, a general decline in public discourse.

In the last few decades, some educational researchers have abandoned the traditional premises, procedures, protocols, and modes of representation of the quantitative and qualitative social sciences for those of the arts. But arts-based researchers have thus far only rarely abandoned the traditional conception of research audience. For those who have, the alternative audiences have included, among others, educational practitioners and policymakers, the informants whose experiences have been represented in the research text, those who commission evaluations of educational programs, and the researcher herself.

I am -- emphatically -- not suggesting that arts-based researchers cease addressing any audience we desire to address. But I am imagining research projects that reach out to an audience that transcends one consisting only of colleagues and those alternative readers and viewers. Such an audience might include laypeople of all social categories, privileged and otherwise, those who may be identified as members of an intelligentsia or literati, and those who do not know the meaning of those words, residents of the many red states and inhabitants of the slightly fewer blue states. All of us who are, or should be, active participants in the larger civic culture,

and all of us who have been, in varying degrees, captivated by the spectacle.

I am envisioning educational inquirers who undertake the reclaiming and redirecting of history by communicating directly with the general public through research that is based in the arts. But what characteristics of art and arts-based research hold promise in this regard? Two will be highlighted here. First, I am recommending research that is socially engaged, and second, research that is epistemologically humble. I begin with the notion of social or political commitment in art and arts-based research.

Socially engaged arts-based research

We have learned from various postmodernist theorists that power relationships inevitably inhabit every human activity and cultural artifact. All science is, therefore, inherently political, as is all art. But like some science, art can be emancipatory, and in more than one sense. For Nelson Goodman (1968), art can free us from entrenched, commonsensical ways of viewing the world. By calling for and yet resisting "a usual kind of picture," writes Goodman, "it may bring out neglected likenesses and differences. . . and in some measure, remake our world" (p.33).

Goodman sees the emancipatory potential of art in its capacity to obviate and undercut facets of a prevailing worldview. Other definitions of art seem to emerge out of a more specific concern for inequities within the sociopolitical relationships in a culture. Art of this sort, more directly focused on the effects of social practices and institutions on human beings, operates out of what bell hooks calls (1994) an *outlaw culture*, one that promotes "engagements with. . .practices and. . .icons that are defined as on the edge, as pushing the limits, disturbing the conventional, acceptable politics of representation" (pp. 4-5).

Outlaw art represents a kind of assertively political project similar to what Sartre called socially engaged literature. Sartre (1988) also viewed

the primary aim of art as a challenge to the established interests within society, seeing the artist as "in a state of perpetual antagonism toward the conservative forces which are maintaining the balance he needs to upset" (p. 81).

Both hooks and Sartre are recommending artistic projects that move to shape and influence the public consciousness by critiquing the politically conventional and the socially orthodox. And artists throughout the ages have succeeded in doing so. From Sophocles to Bertoldt Brecht, from Victor Hugo to Richard Wright, from Pablo Picasso to Judy Chicago, from Spike Lee to Gregory Nava, from photographer Lewis W. Hine to Dorothea Lange, to name but a few is to omit untold numbers of others.

Their work reflects the spirit of more recent activist art, which, as Nina Felshin (1995) put it, has attempted to "change the conversation" by "exposing issues to a public view as a means of sparking public debate" (p. 37), and ultimately to stimulate social change. That is the sort of artistic stimulus that stands tall against the Zeitgeist maintained through the political spectacle, one that offers hope that history can indeed be made through the personal quest of the artist.

I am obliged to report that I have, up to this point in the relatively short history of the genre, not been privy to a completely unblemished work of arts-based research, one sufficiently powerful, by itself, to redirect the educational conversation in the manner suggested by Felshin. But some, in their closely observed, imaginatively crafted renderings of the struggles of teachers and young people, have confirmed my beliefs about the potential of alternative research genres to upset the balance maintained within the spectacle.

Take, for example, the ethnodrama "Street Rat" (Saldana, Finley, & Finley, 2005), a piece of arts-based research that focuses on the lives of some homeless youths in New Orleans. The play was adapted by Johnny Saldana,

Susan Finley and her son Macklin from a research story composed by the Finleys (Finley & Finley, 1998) and from poetry written By Macklin (Finley, 2000). In April 2004, I attended a production of this ethnodrama directed by Saldana.

The script, based on participant-observer Macklin's experiences with his informants, moved briskly from an introduction of the two main characters, Roach and Tigger, to complications arising partly from their relationships with each other and their homeless friends, to a dramatic climax as violence nearly erupts, and finally a touching denouement, a scene in which Tigger and Roach, obviously filling a void in each other's lives left there by others, declared in their garbage-strewn living quarters, that they were, at least for the time being, home. The narrative drive of the story was punctuated by the recitation of poems of various lengths, composed by Macklin, who thereby became, himself, a character in the play.

Other touches added to the production's effective mise en scene. Absent a proscenium arch, audience members were seated in a black draped, rectangular room, its floor shared with the actors. The minimal props, authentic costuming, and background music were all carefully designed and selected to advance the vision of the director and his collaborators.

The formal attributes of "Street Rat" were matched by its content. The telling details in the lives of Roach, Tigger, and their comrades enabled me to dwell within an otherwise, largely unavailable world of homeless young people. Through an array of concrete images, particular forms of intelligence were revealed to me, the structure of moral codes laid bare. Through a cascade of specific utterances and gestures I was granted access to their personal hopes, dreams, and motivations.

As an example of socially engaged research this play addressed sociopolitical phenomena that remain hazy within the spectacle. Indeed, it

was willing to refocus on – that is re-search – a part of what the postmodern theorist Nelson (1987) lists as

the neglected. . .the forgotten, the irrational, the insignificant, the repressed, the borderline, the eccentric, the sublimated, the rejected, the nonessential, the marginal, the peripheral, the excluded, the tenuous, the silenced, the accidental, the dispersed, the disqualified, the deferred, the disjointed . . . [all that which] the modern age has never cared to understand in any particular detail, with any sort of specificity. (p. 217)

But the glimpse that this play affords us of a hidden or unfamiliar world is not an act of mere voyeurism. It is, rather, a work of what Stone (1988, 160) calls moral fiction, one that aims to “establish the connections between [debilitating] social forces and individual lives.” The socially committed play accomplishes what good outlaw art can: it “open[s] up institutions and their practices for critical inspection and evaluation” (Lincoln and Denzin, 2003, 377). The play’s carefully embodied observations, the results of the researcher’s scrutiny and artistry, challenge the arrogation of meanings within the political spectacle. It is indeed potentially emancipating in the strong sense advocated by hooks and Sartre.

Epistemologically humble arts-based research

Still, an arts-based research project geared to subvert the master narrative and confound the political spectacle must be more than socially committed. It must also be epistemologically humble.

Of course, the master narrative that serves the political spectacle, operating within a modernist epistemology that gravitates toward final knowledge, lacks all humility. Master narratives possess a totalizing character as they aim to impose order on the world from a distinct, if often

hidden, ideological point of view, one that appears to be authoritative, final, exclusionary of alternative viewpoints, all-knowing.

A disposition of this sort in the social researcher represents the attitude of an epistemological bully. (Note that I have dampened down Lyotard's (1979) over-heated epithet of epistemological terrorist). "Arrogant bully" is, I think, an appropriate term for an epistemological stance that attempts to impose its own singular view of the world on its audience. But adopting a stance of epistemological modesty in projects of social inquiry entails more than the exchange of a social science methodology for an arts-based approach. Artists, and arts-based researchers, however high-minded their emancipatory intentions, may produce works as exclusionary, monologic, and hegemonic as other sorts of projects. This happens whenever, to paraphrase Sartre, the would-be artist, eager to change minds, zealous to make history, forgets to make art.

Image, language, and story are indeed the tools and the products of artists. But socially committed research that evidences an interrogatory rather than an authoritative attitude must not resemble, on the one hand, the self-abnegation of political eunuchs, nor, on the other, the ersatz artistry of dogmatists, propagandists, ideologues, and rigid partisans. My hope is for a politically vital arts-based research, the kind that challenges the comfortable, familiar, dominant master narrative, not by proffering a new totalizing counter-narrative, but by luring an audience into an appreciation of an array of diverse, complex, nuanced images and partial, local portraits of human growth and possibility.

This implies arts-based research with the power to involve members of the public in history-making dialogue, or in what I call conspiratorial conversations. A conspiracy suggests a communion of agents engaged in exploratory discussions about possible and desirable worlds. When an arts-based work engenders an aesthetic experience in its readers or viewers,

empathy may be established, connections made, perceptions altered, emotions touched, equilibria disturbed, the status quo rendered questionable. Individual voices of audience members may be raised in common concern – either within the artistic textual engagement itself (between reader and text), and/or afterwards, among members of an audience of readers or viewers. In these conversations, ideas and ideals may be shared for the purposes of an improved reality. Plots may be hatched against inadequate present conditions in favor of more emancipatory social arrangements in the future.

How can a piece of arts-based research effectively engender conspiratorial moments? To create the possibility of conspiracy the artist must first imagine what Wolfgang Iser (1974) calls an implied readership. Implied readers are those who actively participate in the composition of textual meaning” (p.xii). But this term “incorporates both the pre-structuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualization of this potential by the reading process” (p. xii).

“Street Rat” was pre-structured by the Finleys and Saldana in a manner that pulled me, implied viewer, member of the public, into the world of the play, enticing me to reconstruct the illusion first imagined by the playwrights. In such a textual re-creation, wrote Dewey (1934/1958), “there is an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. . . Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art” (p. 307).

In this process of formal reconstruction, the viewer lives momentarily in a virtual world, bracketed off from the world of experience external to the work. Phenomenologist aestheticians would argue that the viewer thereby experiences a piece of subjective life, partakes of the vision of the artist as embodied in the pre-structured work. But some works may not allow for an easy return from that vision into the world outside. Indeed, a

work that is only technically accomplished can have an effect opposite to that of promoting conspiracy. While beguiling formal qualities can lure an audience into imagining another world, this hypothetical space is a realm of fantasy, an aesthetic remove. Like the educational spectacle, a formal masterwork may create its own detachment as it bedazzles its viewers into acquiescence with its vision, offering a sublime illusion, never really, as Edelman would say, "touching the world."

Some works of propaganda are like this -- technically marvelous, formally beautiful. But they do not emancipate. Lacking nuance, closed to disconfirming evidence, they seek only to indoctrinate, to lull into quietude. This kind of propaganda is, in fact, akin to kitsch, a debased kind of art that sentimentalizes everyday experiences.

Works of kitsch can evoke emotions that are based on nostalgia, or they may construct imaginary enemies. These elements of kitsch are found in the popular media's characterizations of teachers as either singularly heroic or collectively incompetent, their tales in which the intelligence and moral fiber of today's youth compare poorly to those of yesteryear, their images of public schools as out of control (Edelman, 1995, 31). In kitsch, as in propaganda, a clear, controlled, unsentimental rethinking of mainstream truths and realities is sacrificed on the altar of the meta-narrative. But in their privileging of form over substance, their refusal to attend to the blemishes on the face of the prevailing master narrative both propaganda and kitsch are disqualified as art, as re-search, and as catalysts for conspiracy.

Conspiracy is more likely to result from engagements in which aesthetic content grounds a work of art in the closely observed particulars of experience. The merely beautiful, or otherwise kitschy, work is thereby conditioned, planted in virtual space and time. A work that is closed in on itself is opened up to previously unimagined meanings.

The particulars that constituted the aesthetic content of "Street Rat" are what a traditional social scientist would call data. But here those data were carefully selected, edited, shaped, fashioned, dramatized, with an artistic end in mind. The aesthetic content of the play, in close relationship to its theatrical qualities, advanced in a credible fashion an understanding of these troubled youngsters, kids who, throughout their lives at home and in school, and later on the streets, were rarely either seen or heard. And now, along with the previously transparent forces that served to deform their lives, they were.

But just as form can become an imperial presence in the arts-based text, so can substance. Indeed, in many of the pieces of socially committed educational research to which I have been privy, aesthetic substance has hardly been the victim of an aesthetic sin. It has been the sinner. In that sort of work a regard for bombast over seductiveness can mean that formal qualities are casualties of the unrestrained political outrage of the socially committed researcher.

Now, minor imbalances of substance over form can be found in even the best socially committed arts-based research, including "Street Rat." In that work, the sources of the street kids' alienation from their families, schools, and society in general, suggested within the more prosaic dialogue of the script, were successfully reinforced and amplified by the vivid imagery and driving rhythms of the poems interspersed throughout the text. Occasionally, however, anger overtook artistry, and stridency and shrillness prevailed. The poetry, hovering above the dramatized display of particular, contextualized injustices, seemed too obviously designed for the speedy delivery of a facile social message.

Considering the other attributes of this ethnodrama, those unfortunate lapses are easily forgiven. But in encounters with other emancipatory-minded arts-based projects, I have sometimes found myself cringing at a heavy-

handedness in pursuit of noble goals. And even those who enjoy being preached to in a choir should remember that sermonizing the likeminded does not a conspiracy make. At their best socially engaged arts-based research projects aim to entice into meaningful dialogue those whom Narayam (1997) calls sympathetic outsiders. Sympathetic outsiders are not merely the progressivist faithful, nor are they politically entrenched neo-conservative ideologues. They are, instead, all those potential allies who have been temporarily mesmerized by the spectacle.

A successful enticement of sympathetic outsiders requires more than mere emotional discharge, which as Dewey (1934/1958, 61) reminds us, "is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of expression." Emotion that is effectively expressed through art is the result of a thoughtful composition of significant subject matter into an aesthetic form in which that emotion is embodied. Absent the artistic expression to which Dewey has alluded, there looms a reduced capacity to persuade profoundly, to move viewers affectively and cognitively into a skepticism regarding social pieties and platitudes.

Instead there is the kind of alienation that Carol Becker (1994) suggests is the product of some activist art:

Art may be focused directly on the issues of daily life, but, because it seeks to reveal contradictions and not obfuscate them, art works which should spark a shock of recognition and effect catharsis actually appear alien and deliberately difficult. Art easily becomes the object of rage and confrontation. [And artists], frustrated by the illusion of order and well-being posited by society, . . . [may] choose rebellion as a method of retaliation. . . [I]n so doing, they separate themselves from those with whom they may actually long to interact.

(1994, xiii)

This alienation may in fact be seen as the mirror image of that produced by either the beautiful-but-clueless, or the kitschy. Again there

are totalitarian tendencies, a disinterest in or failure to facilitate democratic engagements with viewers. While "Street Rat" is a largely effective, socially engaged work that managed not to alienate, but to compel the attention of a limited, localized public audience, a second politically committed work has managed to secure a wider audience, although not as a full-fledged work of art. Indeed, it may offer hope regarding the degree of artistry necessary for a piece of qualitative research to promote conspiracy.

The book is Doing School by Denise Clark Pope (2001). Its subtitle reveals its political interests: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students. The book explores the culture of competition in a comprehensive California high school as it traces the tensions between the felt needs of students and the materialistic brand of success expected of them. And at least at its narrative center, it avoids an authoritative stance, striking an effective balance between aesthetic form and substance. The author maintains an eye for telling detail, even as she wisely avoids the off-putting stridency of which Becker speaks. She transforms her informants into quasi-literary characters, transmuting her own concerns into the form of biographical portraits of five ethnically diverse students, fashioning for inspection the idiosyncratic life worlds of these students and the common social forces that operate to diminish them.

Still, in its student portraits, Doing School never really achieves the formal power of great literature. In reading the student stories, there is little danger of entrapment in sublime illusion. And in an analytical chapter entitled "The Predicament of Doing School" one finds a text even more traditionally ethnographic than artistic. The text becomes more expository and didactic, less concerned with representing individual lives than with explaining, analyzing, comparing and generalizing. Finally, in its last two pages, the format of the book shifts dramatically as appendices in the form

of charts neatly condense into rows and columns general information about its central characters and the behaviors they exhibited in pursuit of success.

Doing School is, therefore, unlike Street Rat, hardly activist art. In fact, its author makes no artistic claims for it at all. Instead, the book defies labels, serving, I suggest, as an example of the kind of genre blurring that, so prevalent nowadays, first emerged in social research in the 1970s, during Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) so-called "third moment" in the history of qualitative research. Still, if its quasi-literary center is seen as a core out of which the analytical content is extrapolated, then the project might indeed be identified, if not as artistic, then as arts-based.

The limited formal attributes of Doing School, like those of many qualitative research texts, certainly seem sufficient for facilitating readers' reconstruction of the text. Without feeling bullied by either textual form or content, this reader accepted the invitation to dwell vicariously in the lives of these young people. So it was that, through these portraits, I came to regard these students, not as "other people's children" who populate a vague and distant campus, but as specific human beings who harbor recognizable dreams in the face of debilitating circumstances.

Indeed, Denise Clark Pope (personal conversation) has suggested that, more than any other aspect of the book, the student stories account for its surprisingly positive reception among the lay public. A significantly better "seller" than most books about educational issues, Doing School has received much publicity, from interviews of the author on CNN, public television stations, national radio shows, and local news media, to the creation of a conference at Stanford investigating the possibilities of school change. During that time, Pope has addressed approximately 12,000 people who are primarily attracted, she says, to both the substantive topic and topic and the readable style of the book. When it comes to hatching conspiracies, Doing School seems good enough.

Pope, and in a different way, Saldana, have been able to entice members of the public into dialogues about meaning, about the nature of educational virtue, connecting that philosophical concern to features of the debilitating sociopolitical matrix in which young people live their lives. Appealing to a wide audience that includes, I believe, sympathetic outsiders, they seem to have generated the kind of public discussion that cuts through the miasma of the political spectacle.

They have accomplished this, I believe, by effectively calling into form the particulars of human life, thereby opening up their readers and viewers to the multiplicities of experience in the lives of young people. But, to return to Iser's (1974) notion of the implied reader, there is always the corresponding responsibility of the percipient of the work to assert herself in the actualization of its potential. Conspiracy is – to repeat -- a dialogue, not a monologue.

Again, when particulars are called into form by an artist, they can come to mean more than they originally meant in the so-called "real world" outside the work of art. But after reconstructing the meaning contained in the personal vision of the artist, the vigilant percipient may assert her own influence over the work. Sensing a pull toward a closed, formal meaning may produce a healthy skepticism of the work, and a desire to dismantle it. Finding her own voice as interpreter and critic, the percipient may, I mean, interrupt the illusion of the work. Becoming what Belsey (1980) would call a revolutionary reader, she moves beyond the role of textual consumer to speak back to the work, to assign her own meanings to it. No longer is it just "reality" that means more than it originally meant. By dismantling the work, and transporting it into her own experiential landscape, the percipient makes it mean something different than it meant to the artist.

This means, of course, that the artist has lost a degree of control over the work. Sometimes the loss is complete, the artist's original vision

vandalized. Indeed, Marcuse (1964), Said (1993), and others remind us that, throughout history, once radical artworks have been co-opted and tamed by conservative cultural forces for their own purposes. All texts are, of course, vulnerable to an audience free to engage in that which Stuart Hall characterizes as an oppositional reading, one that rejects what a preferred reading accepts. In this kind of reading from an oppositional ideological ground, hopes for a spectacle-confounding, conspiratorial engagement are dashed.

Because an artistic engagement depends on the twin responsibilities of the artist and the viewer, no matter how potent the pre-structuring of the artwork, the artist's reach is limited. Or as Herbert Read (1966) wrote:

The eye is thoroughly corrupted by our knowledge of traditional modes of representation, and all the artist can do is to struggle against the schema and bring it a little nearer to the eye's experience.

(1966, 71).

I hope that arts-based researchers will never abandon that struggle. Nor, having produced our broadly accessible work, should we fear relinquishing control of it to the public. For this is, I believe, a profound and necessary gesture of epistemological generosity wherein a deeply committed arts-based educational researcher, abandoning the monovocal text out of faith in the social imagination, invites others to engage in a truly dialogical conversation about educational possibilities.

This invitation represents a refusal to reach toward indoctrination, and is born of an understanding that as artists and arts-based researchers we can never, strictly speaking, change minds. We must believe that people, within genuine dialogue, change their own minds. So instead we move to artfully coax them into collaborative interrogations of stale, tired, taken-for granted facets of the educational scene.

It is, I believe, precisely our humble stance, our speaking in tentative tones, our refusing to parade around in the uniform of a master narrator, that justifies our projects of arts-based research. Wayne Booth (1961) made the point in writing about the rhetoric of fiction. "I am not," he wrote, "primarily interested in didactic fiction, fiction used for propaganda or instruction. My subject is the technique of non-didactic fiction, viewed as the art of communicating with readers" (p. 1). And we too refuse to advance our small, inviting, carefully observed portraits of school people from a stance of omniscience. Nor do we, in self-defeat, attempt to erase ourselves from our works, refuse to inscribe in them our educational visions, abandon our quests.

In our efforts to create history-making works of arts-based research, we continue to work toward a public expression of a personal point of view, even as we remain observers who, while committed, are open to the world. Convinced that a conspiracy must play itself out in its own dialogical space, may we arts-based researchers ask the trenchant questions rather than provide the easy answers, with no desire to replace a master narrative with a totalizing alternative. Let alone one that is preconceived.

Challenges and Possibilities

Of course, there are considerable challenges to what may seem like a grandiose, even quixotic, vision of arts-based educational research community that has succeeded in cutting through the educational spectacle on behalf of genuine educational reform. Engaged in research that is not only (a) arts-based or (b) emancipatory-minded, but (a) plus (b), we are swimming against the current of traditional methodological orthodoxy now reinforced, in a fit of political nostalgia, by federal policymakers. We are also working under the increasing weight of the corporate university, wherein those members of the professoriate who secure extramural grant monies to replace dwindling public revenues for higher education are rewarded with enhanced professional

status. We are pushing against our own perceived lack of talent for crafting meaningful works of arts-based research, and against an academic culture that refuses to support the fostering of those talents in the next generation of educational researchers. We are choosing to ignore those, often otherwise enlightened, members of our own educational community who would suggest that we leave the generation of conspiracies to professional artists who are not educationists. And, perhaps most difficult, we are attempting to cut through a seemingly impenetrable, commodified popular culture that is antagonist toward the thoughtful, challenging, non-kitschy, inexpensively produced artifacts, whether as films, novels, short stories, poems, television programs, or theatre.

How can we keep hope alive in the midst of these challenges?

In his book, Changing Minds, Howard Gardner (2004) posits a spectrum of mind-altering creativity with two poles. Located at one end, Capital C change is the result of the capital C creativity of capital C change agents. Gardner's examples from the arts and sciences, and fields of public policy, include historical figures such as Einstein, Picasso, de Gaulle, Freud, and the like. At the other pole are the "teachers, parents, and storekeepers who are satisfied with 'lowercase mind change,' changing the mental representations of those for whom they have [direct] responsibility" (Gardner, 2004, 132). But Gardner credits his colleague Csikszentmihaly with suggesting (in Feldman, Csikszentmihaly, and Gardner, 1994) that while "most of us cannot hope to effect big C creativity, we might at least expect to be 'middle C' creators" (Gardner, 2004, 132). Understanding that we need not necessarily match the high art of the masters in order to make history might reduce the levels of performance anxiety of some arts-based researchers.

We might also eschew the "Great Man" model of capital C change in order to avoid the isolation of those geniuses who single-handedly turn history on its head, in favor of mutual support afforded within a

collectivity of artists. Recall, for example, the politically committed American artists of the 1930s, the novelists, playwrights, cartoonists, photographers, and painters whose work, as Edelman (1995, 108) points out, "made poverty vivid for Americans and made them feel its miseries, so that public welfare came to be categorized by most of the public as a justifiable aid to the needy rather than a drain on the treasury."

The work of these artists served to question the prevailing cultural narrative and helped make possible the policy initiatives of the New Deal. Might individual arts-based researchers, each pursuing her own personal desires for the expansion of the public space through her own chosen art form, coalesce to interrogate the entrenched master narrative of our own era? And might we be joined by qualitative researchers of other genres, even social scientists, whose work, now similarly disparaged, has included, ever since its inception, elements of artistry?

Collaborative and group efforts have also been, since the 1980s, the modus operandi of many activist artists. And for those of us without sizable grant funds, the history of activist art may offer clues for feasibly penetrating the popular culture. While sometimes prone to sensationalistic excesses, these artists have nevertheless moved their work, including applied theater, exhibitions, installations, and media events, onto public sites (Felshin, 1995, 10). Some activist artists have focused on the creating of visual images designed for consumption by the mass media. More successful, in my estimation, have been those who have targeted specific constituencies within the public, often collaborating with members of marginalized communities. Most recently, activist artists have exploited the possibilities within the electronic media.

Finally, most encouraging is surely the knowledge that our work has, indeed, already begun. Let those apologists for the master narrative feel the need to clutch their tightly sealed version of educational history closer to

their bosoms. For there are now in the once politically subdued and artistically disinclined academic research community those who would challenge their history. They include Pope, Saldana, and a growing number of other socially engaged and epistemologically humble qualitative researchers. The aim of their -- of our -- continuing quest is to, politely but powerfully, that is to say, artfully, change the conversation, to persuade those to whom history and public policy rightfully belong to resist the "usual kind of picture" in favor of one that, in touching the world of education as it is, makes one wonder about what it should and can become.

References

- Abbs, P. (2003). *Against the flow: Education, the arts, and postmodern culture*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Becker, C. (1994). Introduction: Presenting the problem. In Becker, C. (ed.), *The subversive imagination: Artists, society, and social responsibility*. New York: Routledge.
- Belsey, C. (1980). *Critical practice*. London: Methuen.
- Booth, W. (1961). *The rhetoric of fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, Second edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dewey, J. (1927/1954). *The public and its problems*. Athens, OH: Swallow Press/ Ohio University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1934/1958). *Art as experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.
- Edelman, M. (1985). *The symbolic uses of politics*. Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press.
- Edelman, M. (1988). *Constructing the political spectacle*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Edelman, M. (1995). *From art to politics: How artistic creations shape political conceptions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Feldman, D., Csikszentmihaly, M. & Gardner, H. (1994). *Changing the world*. Greenwood, CT: Praeger.
- Felshin, N. (1995). *But is it art? The spirit of art as activism*. Seattle: Bay Press.
- Finley, M. (2000). *Street rat*. Detroit: Greenroom Press, University of Detroit Mercy.
- Finley, S. & Finley, M. (1999). Sp'ange: A research story. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9 (2), 254-267.
- Gardner, H. (2004). *Changing minds*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Goodman, N. (1968). *Languages of art*. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Green, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Outlaw culture: Resisting representations*. New York: Routledge.
- Iser, W. (1974). *The implied reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jacoby, R. (1987). *The last intellectuals: American culture in the age of academe*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Denzin, N.K. (2003). The revolution in presentation. In Lincoln, Y. S. & Denzin, N. (eds.), *Turning points in qualitative research*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1979). *The postmodern condition*. Trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Males, M. (1999). *Framing youth*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1964/1991). *One dimensional man*. New York: Beacon Press.
- Narayam, U. (1997).

- Nelson, J. (1987). Postmodern meaning of politics. Paper presented at American Political Science Association, annual meeting. Chicago, IL, September 3-6.
- Pope, D.C. (2001). *Doing school: How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and miseducated students*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Read, H. (1966). *Art and alienation*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Rose, L. C. & Gallup, A. M. (2004). The 36th annual Phi delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86 (1), 41-58.
- Said, E. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Knopf.
- Saldana, J. (2005). *Ethnodrama*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Saldana, J., Finley, S., & Finley, M. (2005). Street rat. In Saldana, J. *Ethnodrama*. Walnut Creek, CA. AltaMira Press.
- Sartre, J-P. (1988). *What is literature? and other essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University press.
- Schneider, A. & Ingram, H. (1997). *Policy design for democracy*. Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press.
- Smith, M.L. (2004). *Political spectacle and the fate of American schools*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Ston, R. (1988). The reason for stories: toward a moral fiction. *Harper's* 276 (1657), 71-78.

