

“My work with the refugee girls challenges the notion of the body as confined and passive, and positions the body as an active force...”

Corporeal Pedagogy: Transforming Café and Refugee Girls’ Post-Agency

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I explore a spontaneous community art event involving pre-teen and teen refugee girls and their embodied experiences at a local café located in a Northeastern U.S. city. Their bodily encounters involved incipient actions—drifting, knitting, and wrist-tying performances—in the creation of a new space within the space of the café. Drawing on posthumanists’ and new materialists’ works, I engage the lived body as foci of understanding, necessitating an understanding of the body as “liberating to” rather than “liberating from.” A central consideration of thing-power rather than human-power advances a framework of corporeal spatial/temporality for understanding curriculum and pedagogy. Understanding of the real, lived body informs a new direction for an art educational approach, one that offers a new materialistic agency that goes beyond the strictures of the humanist mindset. It opens up new ways of thinking about community art practice, as it organizes and reorganizes the senses.

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Attending to the body as focus of knowledge production rejects the emphasis on and pursuit of the rationalistic mind that has dominated knowledge production in education. The mind has been associated with the rational and austere—a bedrock of mainstream educational values—while the body has been associated with the irrational and superficial (Owens, 1983; Powell, 2007). Feminist philosopher Genevieve Lloyd (1984) alerts that the binary association of body/mind maps overlaying that of male/female indicates hierarchical modes of knowledge. The dualistic thinking thus constructs a “disciplined” and “proper” body through mending, healing, and controlling (Springgay, 2008). Furthermore, recent feminist educators view privileging the Cartesian mind as a fundamental problem for liberatory education (Davies & Gannon, 2009; Ellsworth, 2005; Luke & Gore, 1992; St. Pierre, 2000). Interrogating how the transcendent absolute model of reason governs the agenda of modernist critical pedagogy, they refuse the rational mind’s ability to generate a consciously empowered being capable of articulating an ideology and critique and resisting dominant power structures. This critique includes the transcendent critical agency’s oversimplified dichotomies between the empowered and the unempowered, such as between the White Western

mainstream and ethnic/racialized minorities, men and women, teacher and students, or adult and youth. The contradictions in this dichotomy therefore become apparent, once “others” are expected to be transformed into empowered beings while maintaining fixed positions.

In the humanist dichotomy, refugee youth are viewed as vulnerable victims in need of White Western adult education to achieve empowerment (Luke, 1997). To make the oversimplification worse, some advocates justify Western education by sensationalizing the political violence among uneducated refugee youths (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). These presumptions are based on deficit ideology, and obfuscate the strengths of refugee youth (Gorski, 2010). As Gorski stresses, this derisive gaze emerges from our “mistake [of] difference—difference from ourselves” (2010, p. 2). Such an essentializing approach to difference immensely limits understanding of the refugee youths, thus drawing me to this inquiry.

How might bodily movement/space paradigms inform alternative ways of knowing and shatter the understanding of refugee girls as powerless? This article theorizes an art event, collaboratively created by Burmese-Karen tribe refugee girls and me, in which drifting, knitting, and tying actions were engaged in a public café. Their event, which stimulated materiality and spatiality in relation to their bodies, created an alternative pedagogical space, highlighted affect, invited risk, and questioned human subjectivity. Drawing upon posthumanists/new materialists’ insight, I consider how the body in relation to space and materiality, affect, community, senses, and movement, replaces the essentialized categories of refugee youth with a complex subject position. The article also disrupts

prevailing rational knowledge as transcendence, as it is based on dialectical thinking that falsely determines the racial and gendered subject. The following section renders how the girls' incipient art event evolved.

The Drift Project

As an art/media instructor, I got to know six Karen refugee preteen and teen girls through several youth media workshops that I offered at a local community center during 2012. They created movies and music videos involving their own performances and narratives with imagination, playfulness, and parody. The workshop allowed us to establish rapport through K-pop culture, which they loved, once they identified me as a Korean descendent. While sharing popular cultural space, we shared our different immigrant experiences associated with political, social, and economic situations, which made us feel distant to each other to some extent. They initially viewed me as a privileged other. Realizing the irresolvable division caused by our differences, I sought to overcome the distance by focusing on our communal desire of getting to know the city, since we all felt as strangers.

According to the Karen girls, the U.S. government relocated them from Mae La refugee camp at the border of Burma-Thailand to the west side of Buffalo in 2009, which changed their lives dramatically. The girls described that their lives in a jungle allowed them to freely roam around, even in the life-threatening danger of Burmese military attack. Ironically, they felt their new lives in the United States (US) locked them inside because of the "danger" of the urban city. Unlike their strong anticipation for freedom and independence, their relocation does not allow them to freely roam the city. They questioned what freedom means in the US compared to the refugee camp.

In 2013, all the limitations mentioned above became a driving force for us to design and

engage in the Drift project, a series of ongoing community-based art/media workshops, aiming at our exploration and understanding of the urban environment through walks. We met once a week for 6 weeks in each summer of 2013 and 2014, and the girls initiated the walks and pathways to satisfy their choices. Places we encountered inspired the resulting art and media actions, which bring our own awareness and awareness of others to the urban landscape, art and technology, and embodiment. Among them, this article introduces a participant-driven art event as a part of the Drift project, spontaneously taking place at a local café during the walk in the summer of 2014. In this event, I followed their lead and facilitated the collective thinking through questions and dialogue. Each meeting, I abandoned rigid lesson plans and intentionally left space for the emergent and the transformative experience. As Ellsworth (2005) highlights, such room can "hold a potential to [allow for the] surprise of a transitional experience" (p. 61), which would invite us to traverse the porous boundaries between self and others, past and present, inside and outside, private and public, as well as inner and outer realities. The emergent approach in the following section allowed for encounters and serendipity, with unpredictable actions continuously in the making.

A Scene of Girls' Bodily Felt Thought in Motion at a Café

Movement I

One of the particular incipient actions in which the girls and I engaged occurred at a local café on the west side of the city. Many people, apparently middle class and predominantly White, hang out at this well-known establishment, even though it is located in an economically depressed area of the city, populated by Latino, African, and South Asian immigrants. As the neighborhood is currently undergoing dramatic gentrification processes, the café has become a focus for artists, architects,

urban planners, developers, and various speculators, creating a mix of competing economic, social, and political interests. Some of the girls passed by it on the way to school, yet they said that they had never been inside of it and did not know about it. One day when we were close by, their habitual memory of it, as merely an overlooked point in their daily trajectory, provoked conversation. The girls asked about the place, pointing to images of women in a large photo-

print across the entire wall. I intentionally did not explain about it, but rather encouraged them to experience it. Their curiosity about these women and the place then led to a spontaneous visit (Figure 1). The girls paused at the door, staring at the panoramic scene of the café, and started stepping slowly into the dark space as if they faced a different world. According to them, their first impression of the café was “chaotic” because they perceived so many unfamiliar objects,



Figure 1. Karen girls' urban and café exploration by walk, 2014.

people, and sounds, all together in disarray. They described a kind of sensory overload, as in, "Too many 'things' happen here. All sorts of old and odd things. My eyes are busy. It is chaotic but interesting." Arresting, the dim light of the space seemed to invite them inside, and they slowly entered with awe and surprise. The tightly arranged mismatched tables prompted the girls to pass through quietly and cautiously twisting and turning, yet some of the girls bumped into them. Their choice of paths varied, directed by the vitality of the interior objects. Their movement as they walked through this field of sensation seemed to carve out a place within the chaos. They said that all sorts of vintage gadgets and ornaments in the darkness drew their eyes and bodies to various corners of the café. Their eyes and bodies were drawn to an old street phone booth standing at the entrance door, and the girls guessed what it was. Blatsay (all of the girls' names are pseudonyms), an 11-year-old girl, quickly entered the booth, saying loudly, "It has phone here." She gauged the tiny space of the phone booth in relation to her body by slowly turning her body around in the space and held the dialed phone as if she called someone. She then squeezed her body with her arms, pleasantly saying, "This place is so cozy and tight that my body can touch the wall." AyeBay dragged Blatsay out and she entered. Each girl then took a turn exploring the phone booth in the same way. Their way of knowing it was not limited to just observing; rather, they used their bodies to experience the space. Their bodily knowing took place by integrating with the objects and the space through such corporeal activities. The mixture of musty and savory smells, from brewing coffee, baking, and cooking, filled the vintage space and stimulated the girls to sniff around; they expressed that the smells were delicious and asked what they were. The low hum of talk woven into the sentimental, medium-toned, jazz melody in the background added to the vitality of all the various inorganic matter in the café. The girls briefly shared that the café was artsy and interesting

with various collections of antique objects that they viewed as strange and intriguing. They examined and tested out the materiality with their bodies. They said they were limited in their words to speak about their feelings, yet experienced the space and materiality as body-felt. The spontaneous bodily encounter with the café was, to them, unpredictable and sensational as well as indescribable.

Later, I asked them about their impression of the place. The girls shared, "The café is unhappy! People were sitting at the computer and kept working quietly. No one was smiling. The place was serious, dark, and gloomy. Their eyes and faces are gloomy and stressed. The place does not seem fun and happy at all." While all the smells, sounds, and visuals of the inorganic matter intrigued them, their general impression of the place was uninviting and cheerless. The girls perceived people's heavily work-driven lifestyle and impersonalized spirit deeply saturated in the cheerless space.

Movement II

Their first visit led to casual conversation on what they wanted to do in the café during the next visit, and this tumbled into their spontaneous thoughts about crochet-knitting for fun. They expressed that crochet is their daily leisure and they were keen to do it. I was enthralled by their idea of knitting and excited to carry it out. We went to the café on a Saturday afternoon and the girls dashed inside. They scattered and meandered gently through the busy tables and chairs to reach an empty seat in the corner, which allowed us to sit around and knit (Figure 2). Once they sat down, their material engagement with colorful yarns led them to the creation of various objects during their soft chit-chatting. When I asked them what would allow this café to become a happy place, their dialogue was redirected. Mookoo, knitting a rope, suggested that we could make and share crochet bracelets with people, as she formed a rope circle like a bracelet. This emergent and



Figure 2. Karen girls' knitting at a café, 2014.

affective flow, from the process and materiality of knitting, is a sensation which is not merely dependent on perception. This unexpected spirit of offering sprung from their affect, provoking a continued exploration and creation of ways to orchestrate a participatory event. This affect challenged the gap between thinking and doing, and speaking and creating. The girls' suggestion of offering as "preacceleration, rather than prearticulation," as Manning (2009) wrote, brought the everyday leisurely ritualistic practice

of crochet to the café, in which their "body-felt" was "incipient potential to move-with the intensity of extension" rather than "the extensity of its displacement" (p. 6). Thus, the incipient dynamic form of bodily movement was not yet defined and articulated, yet it became directed toward another event—their knitting bracelets made of colorful yarn at the café.

Imagining the effect of the proposed happy event of gifting their bracelets to café-goers, their hands moved skillfully

along the sequence of steps of a stitch, threading yarn and repeating the hand movements until a dozen bracelets appeared. Suizen, a 13-year-old girl, said, "I'll try this yarn that makes me feel doing triple crochet. I enjoy looking at a shape coming out of the yarn while my hands keep moving." I asked the group, "Do you have any specific design in your mind?" Lydia, a 12-year-old girl, said, "I don't. I am just occupied in doing and see what [it] would be like." In her quick-moving hands, the material kept growing to be like a cape. She pointed out that, although her original intention was to make a bracelet, it somehow transformed into a cape (Figure 3). Their laughter erupted when they saw it. With her overly long, thin bracelet beside her, Blatsay laughed at it and named it earthworm; she kept pulling the yarn out to retry various crochet stitches, producing thin, thick, flat, wiggly, and waffle shapes. She seemed to enjoy the various shapes from yarn's transformative quality. The girls' body-felt sense of the material allowed for their interactions with the yarn to be malleable and unexpected. The girls' knitting demonstrated an "active process of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which human subjects are a part" (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 8). The yarn is not a mere matter upon which the girls only act with an external force; rather, it is matter reconfigured by "intersubjective interventions that have their own quotient of materiality" (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 7). The process of body-felt-material turned the bracelets into various forms and shapes (Figure 4). The materials' productive, inventive capacities allowed the girls to inscribe, through bodily actions, a constructive and positive, rather than critical or negative, relation to the collective energy of the café. As Deleuze and Guattari (1994) address, this is "not the idea[s] that we contemplate through concepts yet (are) the elements of

matter that we contemplate through sensation" (p. 212).

Movement III

An hour later, the girls completed their bracelets and walked through the narrow aisles among tables in search of a possible recipient for the bracelets. Navigating among the tables and weaving the bracelets into the social fabric of the environment, the girls became absorbed into the atmosphere of the café, becoming a part of it. Without knowing where they situated themselves, their bodies roamed around the space and became part of the bustle of the café. Their bodies randomly approached people without bashfulness and smoothly intervened in the space in a way in which the girls seemed not to look at themselves from the point of view of others, but rather looked at themselves "from any point in space" (Grosz, 2001, p. 38). Spatiality itself seemed to induce their collective "depersonalization by assimilation to space" (Grosz, 2001, p. 39). That is, they become part of the collective forces of the environment where sounds, smells, tastes, and touch form a transversal plane of materiality. The girls approached people studying and in conversation. The girls tentatively interrupted the space and moments of hesitancy and contingency followed. When being closer to another body, the girls offered a bodily act by tying the bracelet to others' wrists (Figure 5). Some encounters were awkward because people got up and left when they saw the girls approach. In some cases, their approach seemed disruptive during people's work or conversation with others. Some encounters were affirming, warm, and friendly; some people conversed with the girls when the girls sweetly offered the bracelets. They held up their newly received bracelets with praise, even taking photo "selfies" of themselves and the girls. Most who received bracelets were ultimately touched by the gesture and thanked the girls. The space was transformed, even if only momentarily.

These blissful touches, while also disrupting, yielded a moment of emotionally charged bodily



Figure 3. Transforming to cape-like crochet bracelets, 2014.

sensation. Initially not being able to locate themselves in the café led them to see themselves “from any point in space” (p. 5); it facilitated their bodily intervention in the space that functioned as embodied social encounters and interactions with others. It was a subtle presentation of bold yet sweet, disrupting yet harmonizing, and depersonalizing yet personalizing moments. The girls’

bodily offering yielded a materialization that created a moment of corporeal connection to unknown “each-Others” (Springgay, 2008), which was sensational, spiritual, and lively. Simultaneously, its emergent and generative body-material created the space of the café as vital and indeterminate. This blissful moment of incarnation diluted the clear boundaries between



Figure 4. Various designs of crochet bracelets created by Karen girls, 2014.

the girls and the mainstream city dwellers, body and mind/thought/spirituality, material/object and human/subject, spectator and producer, thinker and creator, as well as body and space. Accordingly, it signifies a possibility of recovery from separateness, isolation, and indifference as the girls assimilated into the mainstream adults' space through bodily movements and

interactions with both other human and non-human bodies. In many ways, the girls' intervention is already theoretical; they were deliberate about their bringing together of space, materials, bodies, sensation, and affect to intervene on a space that they saw as unhappy. Now I clarify connections to posthumanist/new materialist theories.



Figure 5. Karen girls tying the bracelets to people in the café, 2014.

Post-Humanist/New Materialist Vision

With distrust in the humanist rhetoric that never overcomes dialectical oppositional tensions of power relations between humans (the mainstream and the marginalized, or the colonizer and the colonized),

feminist philosopher Rosie Braidotti (2013) proposes an alternative approach that rests on matter for a more inclusive and divergent perspective on the notion of human. Matter's immanent vitality, which Bennett (2010) calls "Thing-Power," is highlighted to

address its being constitutive of human embodiment, rather than opposition to or separate from human or culture. The new approach envisions the potentiality of overcoming the binary that can be found in “a shared partnership between human and non-human forms that in the process of this engagement challenges the boundaries between the two” (Hayles, 1999, pp. 286-291). The girls’ knitting is a good example. Particularly, Lydia was fully occupied with her repetitive hand movement inspired by the yarn (material) itself, which made the bracelet grow into a cape-shaped one. The entanglement of her body-yarn (material) brought the unexpected form of the bracelet. The vitality of yarns also moved Blatsay to experiment with the transformation of forms using various kinds of stitches. The girls’ touches and bodily acts were responses to the materials’ evocative invitation. Therefore, materials cannot be merely perceived as being in human control, or in a subordinated position to human control. Bolin and Blandy (2011) encourage us to take the material-oriented rather than human-oriented of material culture, which treats matter as much more than an object of study. We can understand matter that is not merely waiting for a human’s initiation to act upon it; rather matter acts upon us (Richardson, 2011).

These insights yield a new mode of agency, which recognizes matter’s vitality in transforming and influencing human action (again, in materiality). According to Braidotti (2013), this new agency as a hybridized human–nonhuman composition establishes another version of subjectivity, which is rather a “process of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values” (p. 35). This process-oriented and relational ontological view invites understanding of the art event in ways in which the girls’ bodies come to matter through intra-activity “becoming.” The material

of yarn provoked movements toward redefining and transforming space, even if only in this temporality. Their entanglement with matter as non-dualistic agency was not expressed in an oppositional or counterhegemonic way, yet it was critical (not in a negative sense).

Thinking Corporeally in Relation to Space

Thinking corporeally in art curriculum and pedagogy necessitates thinking of bodies in terms of spatial–temporal frameworks. In the Drift Project as a whole, I question how refugee youths experience space–time through their bodies interacting with space materiality, rather than investigating how visual/material cultural space shapes their bodies through discourse.

Extending the critique, feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s (2001) proposal of spatiotemporal frameworks as “*a priori* corporeal categories” (p. 31) gives significance to affective experiential bodily understanding that necessitates interaction with space–time. Grosz explains the “body’s infinite pliability is a measure of the infinite plasticity of the spatiotemporal universe in which it is housed and through which bodies become real, lived, and have effects” (p. 32). The refugee girls’ bodies became the barometer to measure, understand, and reflect time and space as constantly changeable by their bodily movement in relation to materiality in the café. (Think of their movement when entering the café and in the phone booth.) A body–space paradigm is constitutive with each other in an ongoing mobile process of merge and split of “both the static material aspects of an object and the spontaneous, idiosyncratic, mutable effects of an agent (subject)” (Richardson, 2011, p. 5). The pedagogy of corporeality adopted in this art project acknowledges the girls’ bodily act in relation to space, refusing to view the space as merely a background or context to reveal and house the body or as an effect of the body’s design. Their art event challenged and

transformed the notion of a predefined body referent to identity. The refugee girls' sympathetic impression on the mainstream adult cultural space, which sprung from their proactive offering acts on the mainstream adults, shatters the U.S. mainstream's socially expected image and bodily behavior of the girls as weak, hyper-feminine, and culturally in deficit. Ironically, their knitting and offering acts are presumed to be highly feminine and maternal services; yet flipping these nurturing acts to the powerful giving/helping performance seems an escape from the limits of their position. More importantly, their feminine yet privileging act does not tie the girls' subjectivity to static binary identities; rather the act negates any inferiority or any hierarchical relationship to the (rational) mind or White Western mainstream adults. This act suggests an alternative knowledge construction and opens up the space where creative energies are mobilized through ongoing relations within the drift in this café.

Problematizing Community: Art and the Partitioning of the Sensible

The refugee girls' community project further allows us to rethink community in a way that acknowledges "a recognition of a sensible mode of being that gives art its specificity" (Hinderliter, Kaizen, Maimon, Mansoor, & McCormick, 2009, p. 5). This redirection toward the importance of sense and sensory experience through the body—in understanding of community/community art—is a recent reaction to a distrust of the focus of art and art education as identification based on hierarchy of genre, subjects, and medium, in which aesthetics is tightly associated with reason and is separated from other ways of doing and making. As the philosopher Rancière (2010) argues, this is a narrow model of aesthetics and art education that ideologically views community as consensus, based on common values, ironically perpetuating inequality and domination, and the erroneous notion that aesthetics are independent from politics.

Instead, this project of the girls' bodily interaction with space and matter highlights the autonomy of the aesthetic that accompanies an inherently heterogeneous sensory experience. The sensory free-play helps to revise the notion of aesthetics and art education by suspending hierarchal "oppositions between sensation and meaning, form and matter, activity and passivity" (Hinderliter et al., 2009, p. 6). This revision of the notion and experience of aesthetics, for Rancière (2010), emphasizes its inseparable conjunction with politics and acknowledges a paradox, a politically effective negotiation of opposites. From his perspective, the art events can be viewed as the girls' engagement in the historical configuration of social and perceptual experience. While the event does not simply reflect political systems of power, it can reconfigure them in ways that suggest a different division of social roles and forms of subjectivization. The girls' act of offering the bracelet in the café seems to reverse order as the Karen tribe refugee girls walked around, occupied, and intervened in the White middle-class adults' occupied space. Additionally, they offered "giving" acts, which are more typically associated with the mainstream "helping" the refugee, or those who have-not, out of a humanitarian spirit. The humanitarian order is disrupted by the girls who take no part in this in the café. The girls' offering is eventually "an act of repartitioning defined parts and assigned roles, disrupting the inscription of equality within a space that is defined as common" (Hinderliter et al., 2009, p. 7). During the event, the girls and the other mainstream café goers are both present and absent and appear as divided, where politics is staged as Rancière (2010) stresses. In sum, the conjuncture of aesthetics and politics is saturated in this community event, which uses a different set of artistic strategies in the non-aggressive disruption of public space. This event helps to recognize the problem of the consensus model of community that requires us to dismantle all idealized

grounds, forms, or values of its consistent, collective belonging. It creates a place of “dissensual” politics that highlights community as contingent and non-essential, in which temporary solidarities are accepted and “coherence is no more than a fiction or potentiality” (Ranci re, 2010, p. 2).

Epilogue

Art curriculum and pedagogy that has centered on the refined/critical mind has recently been challenged by a potential knowledge production in and through the often-neglected body. My work with the refugee girls challenges the notion of the body as confined and passive, and positions the body as an active force to integrate with heterogeneity of materials and space–time, including other bodies. It informs me that young students’ experiential and experimental flow of movement is pedagogical, for which they direct what and how to do so that they become the primary curriculum designers and instructors, rather than art educators. This approach envisions students’ ownership of their own learning and their participation in co-designing a curriculum, while art educators facilitate a dialogue among students to encourage their actions and to provide ample space for

their experiments and experience. Trust in students’ ability, respect for their desire, situational understanding, and positive responses and openness to unpredictable actions are essential for art educators.

The corporeal learning further endorses art curriculum’s possible “rotation of impossible shapes in illegible space” (Grosz, 2001, p. 32), embracing partiality and incommensurability, the rational and irrational, and sense and non-sense. These changes might disrupt existing curriculum space, yet have the potential to transform to a new desirable art curriculum space. The becoming-space helps us to rethink this space as other than pre-determined for young participants to merely submit to, as in Foucault’s (1995) docile body. Rather it opens young students to organically create and extend their creation of art space and time, through which “malleable, transposable, and mobile” (Grosz, 2001, p. 35) bodily capacities are encouraged to integrate with various objects and matters. This is a “freedom-to-live” bodied curriculum instead “freedom-from-docile” bodied one. This “freedom-to” opens up the possibility of a community rooted in the reorganization of the sensible that is always in the making.

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