



## Attuning to the Interstices of Arts-Based Research and the Expressive Arts: An Experiment in Expanding the Possibilities for Creative Approaches to Inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors<sup>2</sup> examine the generative, yet heretofore under-articulated convergences and divergences between the field of expressive arts (EXA) and the sub-genre of arts-based research known as a/r/tography. Experimenting with the discursive and practical terrain between the two fields, the authors discuss what they see and sense as the potentiality for an EXA-informed variant of a/r/tographic research informed by new materialist theoretical perspectives. Overall, the work aims to contribute to the expanding dialogue among arts-based researchers who are reaching across diverse discursive and disciplinary boundaries, mining relevant conceptual and practical linkages for thinking the role of creative making practices in social and educational inquiry anew.

*What leads some researchers to want to take up the arts as an avenue for exploring social and educational phenomena? What is, for some, the physical and emotional terrain that compel their turn to the arts, making it difficult, or even impossible, to examine the complexity of the world otherwise? And what possibilities exist for bridging ideas in the fields of arts-based research and the expressive arts, where both uphold, albeit differently, habits of the human penchant for poesis, or to create, as a fundamental point of embodied inquiry?*

As educational arts-based researchers trained in the professional field of expressive arts (EXA), we offer a beginning set of responses to these and related questions,

doing so by examining the generative, yet heretofore under-articulated similarities between the two fields of EXA and the sub-genre of arts-based research known as a/r/tography. Partly due to the inherently process-oriented nature of both fields, a new path of interest emerged, causing us to recalibrate our initial examination to also consider some of the productive divergences between the two fields. We became curious about the ways in which certain concepts show up for us in an embodied, habitual way as EXA-trained practitioners and how these ways of thinking and being participate in shaping our understandings and practices as a/r/tographically informed researchers. The writing picks up this thread of divergence, placing emphasis on the particular influence of one key concept in EXA, that of *presence*. Experimenting with what happens to our thinking under the influence of exploring the concept of presence across both EXA and a/r/tography, we discovered the possibilities for taking this experiment still further, putting the concept of presence into contact with our own and other social scientists' turn to new materialist perspectives. Overall, our aim in this writing is to contribute to the expanding dialogue among arts-based researchers who are reaching across diverse discursive and disciplinary boundaries, mining relevant conceptual and practical linkages for thinking the role of creative making practices in social and educational inquiry anew.

As a way into the discussion outlined above, we begin on a personal note, introducing readers to some of the individual pathways taken to our current provocations and practices as arts-informed educational researchers. These brief autobiographical "herstories" will then converge, positioning us on a mutually constitutive plateau—an *ourstory*<sup>3</sup>—where we work (albeit swiftly) to make clear the primary disciplinary lines of interest taken up in the work: arts-based research, a/r/tography, and the field of expressive arts respectively. The work then turns to considerations of where ideas and practices across these domains intersect, briefly pointing to what we experience as points of divergence with a close-in look at the function of the concept *presence*. Finally, we close by opening a new line of intrigue: one that starts to suggest the potentiality for an expressive arts-informed variant of a/r/tographic research through especially the lens of new materialism.

### **Kelly's Herstory of Becoming Arts-Informed Inquirer**

I first learned about qualitative research during my doctoral studies at the University of Vermont in the mid 1990s. Dr. Corrine Glesne, author of the well-known text, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* (2016), was my major advisor. Under her tutelage, I mastered the variety of techniques that qualitative researchers deploy in their interpretivist ethnographic fieldwork and ...

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Wait. That's not it. I mean, that is it, in the sense that what I wrote is accurate. But accuracy has little to do with my becoming so deeply indebted to art-making practices as a form of embodied inquiry in education. If this is, as promised at the outset of this article, to be a pathway toward introducing you to the provocations that came to matter to me as a researcher and the inquiry practices that continue to materialize in artful form, then I need to forego the habit of trusting my tale to accuracy. After all, terms that connote precision, information, and the truth, while long-trusted linguistic containers for conveying how and what we claim to know are, like all words, always already accumulating different meanings and significances depending on their disciplinary, cultural, or methodological lineage. As Bakhtin (1981) has taught us, "All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party... Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (pp. 293–294). Accuracy, in this instance, simply won't do.

I will begin again, this time yielding to sensation and imagination—leaning into Wallin's (2011) rallying cry "to mobilize the powers of the false" (p. 105). The importance of doing so, in Wallin's words, lies in the potential for a breed of inquiry and expression that not only asks "how things are machined," or put differently, how people and meaning are made, "but further, must actively compose circuit-breaking machines against the very models and images meant to think *on our behalf*" (p. 110). Wallin extends this thought:

This entails that the creation of concepts, images, and affects produced by arts-based researchers be understood not simply in terms of their accumulative or additive power ( $n + 1$ ), but rather, in relation to the kinds of forces they modify and unleash from material repetition ( $n-1$ ). (pp. 110–111)

**The land, language, and art's release.** I am young, sixteen and three-quarters, and I am walking in the woods behind my childhood home. It seems I've been walking for hours. I am alone, as I most often am. But it is not because I don't have friends or enjoy the company of others. I just like not having to talk. As I walk, I imagine someday expressing to others my antagonistic relationship to words (Clark/Keefe, 2009). The ultimate irony, I think to myself, would be growing up and choosing a profession that values me on the basis of the volume and quality of my speech and text acts. If that were to happen, I am not at all sure how, but I would need to help those I am working with understand how language feels like a second language to me. Growing up in my family, where no one went to college, and attending my vocational high school, where me and my friends' moms and dads work in the local leather tanning factory or do construction jobs, talking just means trouble. If you're talking, you're not working.

If you are not working then you are not making what your shop teacher told you to. Talking means you are suspect and complacent in terms of your labor-capable value in my high school. Still, I get that people *get* language, meaning they both get how it works either for or against you and they get *it*—a lot of it, growing up. This seems to help them go places, get things, and worry a lot less about most things (Lareau, 2011). Walking, I can't help but miss my friend Sarah, who used to walk, quietly, in the woods with me. She stayed at the regular high school. Her family talks a lot about a lot of things, including talking; what to say, when to say it, and why. I listen. I want to be like Sarah. She's going to college. I'm just afraid of how much I'll need to know about talking, and how much I'll need to talk about what I know.

When I walk like this, in the forest, it is the smells and sounds that release me from the want and the worry of making sense to others (or of the world around me) through the logics of language. The woods make their own sense. I just come into contact with what they have to say; the bark(ing) against my hand, the wind(ing) between the boughs. All percept, and affect, the land moves me, and makes me, without claiming to know me or insisting I know myself in advance of our encounter. Knowing I need to go home, I sit for a moment, turning to my small visual journal and begin a variation of the same drawing I've been doing for as long as I can remember. Working with my right hand, I draw my left in relation to any nearby branch that seems to be reaching out. In the drawing, my fingers take on qualities of the branches and my skin becomes bark-like. Sketching these hand-branches somehow lets me extend the sensation of me in relation with the trees—a small, intimate hinge between the quiet companionship of the forest and my human need to make meaning of my experience and to communicate.

### **Jessica's Herstory of Becoming Arts-Informed Inquirer**

I begin with a subjective side note. I cannot speak about my process of becoming a researcher without first acknowledging that I am a maker, the daughter of a skilled craftsman. I was an artist first, long before I became a researcher. As an artist and arts-informed inquirer, I turn to my body first as I filter and process the world through my eyes and my hands. It all starts for me from a place of mindful observation. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of light or color, the diffractive rays of sunlight illuminate and cast into shadow many different lines of interest and insight. Put simply, my body sees and senses something, then my bodymind takes a picture of it, and finally, as the sensations and affects of initial experience wash over me, I enter into what I refer to, in my dissertation (Gilway, 2015), as a "transpositional space" (Braidotti, 2006) where I create/craft/make something in response to what I see, feel, and experience in the world and in myself. This is my process—one that I find myself battling with,

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and even actively resisting on a daily basis. Yet in the end, I almost always quietly sneak away from the seductive institutional pull of enacting more traditional forms of qualitative research, allowing art to seep through the cracks in my resistance, as I think about, then enact inquiry differently. Art becomes, for me, a translation—my own liminal version of plugging a foreign language into an Internet translator, and watching an entirely different language appear before your eyes, words transformed, and the unspeakable is rendered perceptible. Therefore, it is here, in this intentional space of examining my own journey toward becoming artful inquirer, that rather than picking up a smart device to help me translate words linguistically, I defer to my artistic, transpositional (Braidotti, 2006), intermodal (Knill, Levine, & Levine, 2005) traveling companions of painting, collaging, poetry, journal-making, jewelry-making, pottery, and dance (movement) to help me navigate and negotiate life and research.

However, before I venture more deeply into how I navigated the precarious ground of producing a heavily arts-informed dissertation inquiry in a time when reproducing “science as usual” (Clark/Keefe, Gilway, & Miller, 2013) tends to be more and more heavily valued, I need to trace my journey a few steps further sideways, following the winding road of a maker’s path toward enacting an embodied, or somatically-informed/-infused, inquiry. Now, why sideways, rather than backward, you may ask? Just as the roots of a tree emerge as a grounding force both beneath and beside the solid trunk of the tree, my art-making practices are always already with me, both rooting and grounding me, journeying beside me as my constant companion, pushing and challenging me every step of the way, becoming neither something that I can put behind me or move beyond, but rather something that I work everyday to acknowledge and embrace as an inextricable part of me.

**Tracing my artistic roots sideways.** As a child, I watched my father’s skilled hands magically craft something from “nothing”—enchanted extensions of his body transforming scraps of leftover metal from a roofing job into a bouquet of coppery gilded lilies; or shards of splintered slate into meandering garden walkways. Like my father, my never idle hands found a home through craft—in the doing and making. In my high school years, I found solace from a docket of cognitively oriented academic classes in the art room—a transpositional space where I could explore the borderlands of the affective and academic as I was soldering jewelry, hand-coiling pots, and weaving wall hangings, instead of attending to the socially awkward spaces of study hall and lunch. Equally as proud of having passed my Advanced Placement (AP) art portfolio as my AP Calculus test, I left high school confident in my ability to balance both an academically rigorous and artistically enriched educational experience, only to have the realities of college smack me in the face. Advised that pre-med science

majors could not, should not, dare not minor in ceramics, or 3D art—“it just won’t work,” I was told. So, I set myself adrift, abandoning my beloved, daily, artful inquiries with clay, jewelry making, and fiber arts, and donning the white lab coat.

Living in my body in the absence of art became an estranged and strangling experience punctuated by a deep sense of loss, vacancy, and longing. In my mid-20s, art-starved and creativity bereft, I stumbled into the field of education in search of a different, more sustainable way to live and work. As I simultaneously studied elementary education and second language acquisition, I felt the cold, icy fingers of artistic starvation loosen their grip, thawing each frozen extremity slowly, as the arts gradually and quietly crept back into my life. I began slowly and unsteadily to experience myself as an artist again, first through jewelry making, then pottery, and finally my broken body and starving soul began to move again as I found my way back to healing forms of dance. I found in the arts, as I literally used them to map myself, my body, anew, a way to reroot myself like a tangled piece of ivy climbing up and down a wall at the same time, shooting out multiple anchors, extending in many different directions all at the same time.

Becoming a K-8 educator afforded me the opportunity to joyfully and creatively infuse the arts into my pedagogical practices. When I began in education (over 15 years ago), no one looked suspect upon the act of making, crafting, or dancing with the young. Unfortunately, today, instead of the arts being offered as a counterbalance to our accountability-driven, standards-based curriculum movement (Davis, 2007; Fowler, 2001; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006), children in schools are instead being systematically deprived of the creative outlets and educational opportunities that classes like art, music, dance, physical education, and the magical freeplay space of recess, offer children of all ages. Having witnessed firsthand the encroaching onset of the performance-driven push to maximize teaching time and literally starve the creativity out of learning in the formal setting of public schooling, I found myself driven to re-envision schooling by engaging in the study of educational leadership at the doctoral level. This is where I met Dr. Kelly Clark/Keefe.

I wish I could recount for you the romantic story of how I embraced arts-informed inquiry and arts-based research practices like old friends, with open arms and a warm heart. But I did not. Having been heavily schooled in the sciences, statistics, and data-driven instruction, I arrived in my doctoral program exhausted from the daily effort of trying to maintain balance between academic rigor and creativity as an educator, ready to settle into the systematic, heavily data-driven process of learning how to do quantitative research in the field of education. Shortly after I enrolled in my doctoral

program, I found myself pushed into a leadership role as the principal of a charter school, where I, unknowingly, situated myself in a desolate and isolating field of artistic starvation all over again. Only when Kelly, my professor at the time, dangled the tempestuous opportunity to engage in some serious play with artful inquiry as an alternative assignment format, did I recognize myself as a half-starved professional educator languishing from creative deprivation.

Throughout my first arts-informed pilot inquiry, where I intermodally integrated and layered dance and photography on top of and throughout each other as modes of inquiry, I found my way back into the arts and became aware once again that as I engaged in the bodily act of “doing” art and enacting qualitative inquiry simultaneously. It felt like home. As Wilshire (2006) validates, “Artistic creation, in its many forms, is an indispensable mode of being aware and knowing. The impetus to create artistically holds an immense moment of dilation of awareness and receptivity” (p. 110). My expanding space of awareness and receptivity, where inquiry and the arts intertwine, became a sanctuary, a transpositional space (Braidotti, 2006), where I decided to reside for the rest of my doctoral journey and now, beyond.

## An Ourstory of Becoming Artful Inquirers

Several recent practical and two conceptual lines of interest act as undercurrents to our herstories. These flight lines, when brought together in the moment of this writing, form an ourstory: a productive convergence of energies and inspiration that, in the case of this writing, compel our desires toward expanding our instincts and ideas as arts-based researchers in ways that are that foreground materiality and bodily creativity as a source for examining the personal and the social.

**Practical lines of interest.** We have both recently been trained in the field of expressive arts (the principles and practices of which are discussed in the section, *Conceptual Line of Intrigue II.*). Specifically, both of us recently completed an 18-credit graduate certificate program in Expressive Arts at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, in the southeastern United States. Jessica did so over the course of a two-year period, during which she left her position as a public charter school principal and became a mother. Kelly completed her graduate certificate at a time when she and her family were facing the likely prospect of moving from their home in the southeastern United States back to New England to care for aging parents. This meant Kelly leaving her post as a recently promoted full professor, with (then) no formal prospect for an academic post elsewhere.

Holding true to its mission of cultivating a creative, therapeutic community of educators and practitioners who engage in interdisciplinary, intermodal creative practices for personal and professional growth, Appalachian's program in Expressive Arts became a holding space for the precarity that defined both of our daily lives at the time. We lived (and loved) the ways that art-making was skillfully used as the curricular tool for inquiring into the emotional precarity of our circumstances. We grew to understand the power of engaging in the embodied experience of intermodal (Knill, Barba, & Fuchs, 2004; Knill et al., 2005) expressive arts theory and practices as we used the therapeutic modalities of movement, visual arts, ceramics, and creative writing (just to name a few) to hold open and inquire into our professional and personal lives. While never in the same classes together, we could and did meet on the same grounds, figuratively and as often as possible, literally. These grounds were where art-making was the foundation for expressing how it was to be and become in the undertow of our mutual transpositions, our socially, emotionally, professionally transcendent locations, as educators, artists, and researchers.

A second significant practical dimension of ourstory was the merging of our teaching/learning arrangement, specifically with respect to developing arts-based research practices and our emergent interests in theorizing these practices through material feminist perspectives (a perspective that we elaborate below). As members of this journal's audience can likely attest, the most generative experience we can have as educators is when the epistemic lines of authority in our classrooms become so blurred as to be almost indistinguishable. While lines can be firmly drawn between Kelly beginning as Jessica's teacher during her doctoral program, these lines swiftly became punctuated and eventually completely porous as time ticked on. Qualitative methodology courses first taught to, then taught with, became the breeding ground for experimenting with art-making as a medium for analysis and expression. Questions about Kelly's assignment of readings in arts-based research and feminist and poststructural thought became the basis for more cups of tea than we could count, walks where we got lost, and eventually co-presentations at professional conference venues. Ourstory of becoming artful inquirers took shape through our mutual encounters with ideas, practices, and the eventual commitment to lean deeply into the heretofore undone; the exploration of how it is to be in the process of engaging in a form of artful inquiry that foregrounds the body's relationship with the material world, including art materials, putting to work habits of making, or poesis, while exploring the entanglements of the personal, social, and natural worlds.

**Conceptual line of intrigue I. Arts-based research.** Picking up on the threads of the practicalities of ourstory, we continue here by briefly tracing some historical



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and definitional grounding for the two most significant and shared conceptual lines of intrigue influencing this writing: first, arts-based research (and the sub-genre of a/r/tography), followed by expressive arts.

Elliot Eisner (1995, 2005; Eisner & Powell, 2002) and his former student Tom Barone (2000, 2001) are credited in the United States with having ignited a set of debates about the role of the arts, especially in qualitative research in education. We draw attention here to the central dilemma of Eisner's argument in favor of arts-informed inquiry, noting that he believes "the arts are largely forms that generate emotion," (Eisner, 2008, p. 3) but in academic research, "emotion is not always considered a way of knowing, and is often pushed out of the research process in the name of scientific objectivity" (p. 4). This consideration of emotion in the research process is a crucial point, and one we return to later in our discussion of intersections and divergences. In the wake of age-old dilemmas and debates about what sorts of knowledges "count" in the research enterprise, several pioneering researchers in education and other social fields have taken to demonstrating and theorizing the arts as a mode of scholarly inquiry and as a method of representation, finding ample opportunities for engaging audiences (see especially, Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Finley, 2003; and Knowles, & Cole, 2008).

While still considered "alternative" to many mainstream forms of qualitative and social science research traditions and techniques, momentum around expanding what it means to engage the arts as a form of inquiry shows no signs of abating. In 2008, Canadian-based researchers Gary Knowles and Ardra Cole produced the first edited volume of the *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*. Researchers describe engaging arts-based methods of research as a means of forwarding social justice aims (Foster, 2015). Rich texts explaining the "how-to's" and "why's" of arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2011) continue to emerge, as do texts from feminist and other critical theory perspectives (Leavy, 2015). Resources have also surfaced that assist researchers in understanding and exploring the ways that arts-based techniques can inform analysis practices (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Also available are contemporary debates about everything from criteria for judging arts-based research (Faulkner, 2007) to questioning the epistemological and philosophical grounds upon which the arts can illuminate empirically generated phenomena (Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013).

If the past two decades of arts-based research's steadily climbing presence in the scholarly discourses surrounding methodological principles, practices, and quandaries can be the basis for evidence, then the interest and the influence of the arts in relation to social inquiry is undeniable. With sensibilities informed by our mutual interests

in following this genre of qualitative research as well as our personal herstories, where creative making practices serve central, we have been particularly drawn to the special breed of arts-based research known as *a/r/tography*. *A/r/tography* is a term arrived at by Rita Irwin and Alex de Cosson (2004) and their colleagues through their deep critique of certain theories and practices that link artist, researcher, and teacher. According to Irwin and de Cosson, *a/r/tography* centers “theorizing or explaining phenomena through aesthetic experiences that integrate knowing, doing, and making: experiences that simultaneously value technique and content through acts of inquiry” (p. 31).

Stephanie Springgay (2003, 2004, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005) develops especially the poststructural dimensions of *a/r/tography*, which hold particular meaning in relation to the theory and practice of expressive arts, a point we return to in the next section. Infused in our appeal to readers regarding especially intersections with the expressive arts are Springgay’s (2008) important correctives to the ideals or even possibility of transparency in research accounts, as well as claims to the separation between artistic subjectivity and art:

In *a/r/tography* the representation of research cannot be seen as the translation of experience. Instead *a/r/tographical* research as living inquiry<sup>4</sup> constructs the very materiality it attempts to represent. In other words, engaging in *a/r/tographical* research constructs the very “thing” one is attempting to make sense of. (pp. 37–38)

The idea that the medium, the very materials engaged and the modes for these engagements, are, in themselves, productive of what we come to know is something that those trained in the expressive arts come to know well.

**Conceptual line of intrigue II. The field of expressive arts.** Practitioners in the field of expressive arts (EXA) identify that the development of EXA theories and practices can trace their roots back to a few programs and their associated founders and/or faculty/staff members. Historically, the Expressive Therapies program at Lesley University (2016) was founded in 1973 with a focus on helping students develop their identities as artists and clinical mental health providers through the integration of multiple art modalities (McNiff, 1998, 2013). Expressive Arts Therapy at Appalachian State University began in 1985 by offering a course called Therapy and Expressive Arts. In 1997, both an Expressive Arts Therapy concentration and certificate emerged at Appalachian from the work of an interdisciplinary group of faculty members, who met regularly to build a creative, therapeutic community of practice. These intermodal, interdisciplinarians called themselves the Appalachian Expressive Arts Collective (Atkins, 2002, 2007).

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The European Graduate School (EGS) Expressive Arts programs (2016), located in Switzerland, were founded in 1994 and continue to offer an interdisciplinary, intermodal approach to utilizing the arts towards healing and peace building. In addition to the influential roles they played in these EXA programs, some individuals also emerged as strong leaders in the field of EXA, as they explored art-making in the spirit of self-discovery—a way to reclaim ourselves as actively playful, spirited, and conscious individuals (Allen, 1995; Rogers, 1993). While each expressive arts program and practitioner has its own unique qualities, they also share many of the same core values, which we will take a moment to explore further below.

According to the Expressive Art Therapy program at Appalachian State University, where we both received our training, the expressive arts are defined as the practice of using the multiple modalities of music, drama, dance, poetry, imagery, movement, dreamwork, and the visual arts altogether in an intermodal way in order to “foster human growth, development, and healing” (Appalachian State University, 2016). As participants in the Expressive Arts program, Kelly and Jessica experienced how the expressive arts could work to help us unearth, cultivate, and reclaim our inherent and natural capacity for the creative expression of our individual and collective human experiences.

Knill and colleagues (2005) establish that the principles and practices of the expressive arts have emerged out of the intentional cultivation of a “therapeutic aesthetics” (p. 9), with a firm foundation in the practice of the arts. Expressive arts practices are a set of intermodal (Knill et al., 2004; Knill et al., 2005), therapeutic tools used by helping professionals (counselors, psychologists, teachers, social workers, etc.), with a focus on trusting the process (McNiff, 1998), and cultivating presence (Atkins & Eberhart, 2014). The notion of letting the creation of artful expressions be the avenue for being and becoming in the complexity of the world is captured in the concept of *poesis*. Levine (1997) writes of *poesis* as a way of enacting a *shaping of the world*, where art originates not through or from carefully crafted moments of reason, but rather within a field of play and exploration that embraces the notion of the creative chaos that one feels when engaging in the act of art-making (Knill et al., 2005).

*Poesis*, as Levine conceptualizes it, is a much needed response to the fast-paced, unsustainable state of post-modern times and lives, in that it presents a critique of Cartesian dualism’s and/or modernism’s mind-body split (Knill et al., 2005), arguing instead for a therapeutic aesthetic that works toward the re-integration of mind and body through the intermodal expressive arts. As we mentioned before, *poesis* in Greek specifically refers to art-making, but for our purposes here, in thinking with

Levine (1997), it refers, in a more general sense, to any activity that brings something new into the work (Knill et al., 2005). For Kelly and Jessica, and for Levine, what emerges for the maker, or artist, (in the process of art-making) from within the liminal space that poeisis cultivates, is in-depth transformation; emerging as a cultivation of presence in the world, in our work, and in our lives. In other words, poeisis offers both expressive artists and practitioners the opportunity to engage in both individual and collective somatically oriented inquiry in action, with a focus on how our habits of “doing with” bodies, art, affect, and movement in the expressive arts becomes both ground and force for transformation.

Participants and practitioners alike engaged in the expressive arts experience its emergent nature as they discover that what they uncover in the process is often very different from what they originally sought. This is also true of the field of arts-based research, and the artful inquiries that are enacted within this field. The field of EXA could even go so far as to argue that artists need to get out of the way of what is happening in the art-making process, or engage in *auto-poeisis*. Auto-poeisis, or self-organization, is defined in EXA as surrendering to what is taking place in the process of art-making which requires the embodied presence of the artist (Knill et al., 2004). Furthermore, Knill and colleagues (2005) explain that inquiry, therapeutic or otherwise, taken-up via art-making becomes “a time out of time, a pause in everyday life in which habitual behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs can be examined and transformed” (p. 45). As our herstories merge into and emerge as an ourstory, Kelly and Jessica see and sense their engagement in a form of *co-poeisis*, where a new energy and curiosity forms compelling us to consider how it is to be between the two fields of EXA and a/r/tography, and what expanded possibilities take flight along the way.

### **Cultivating the In-Between of Expressive Arts Inquiry and Arts-Based Research: Presence and Process**

For both authors, learning about and encountering the rich examples of a/r/tographic inquiry simultaneous with studying and training in the expressive arts has allowed us to see several productive parallels. As foreshadowed above, the distinct fields of expressive arts and a/r/tographic research share some important territory. For example, both the expressive arts (Atkins, 2002; Knill et al., 2005; McNiff, 1998, 2013) and poststructurally informed arts-based research practices such as a/r/tography (Irwin, 2004; Springgay, 2008) draw on the body-centered, artistic modalities of dance, music, embodied writing, drama, visual art, and many other mediums. In both fields, it is the creative process, rather than the end products, that are attuned to and followed for their sensorial provocations into what is unknown, where things open up,

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becoming uncertain pathways for previously unimagined scenarios or futures.

Divergences across the two fields exist as well, with the perhaps most obvious being the purpose toward which active engagement with art-making during inquiry is aimed. The field of expressive arts engages multiple mediums and modalities with the goal of inquiring into the personal for the purposes of change, growth, and/or healing. Arts-based research, including a/r/tography, is fundamentally a social science, with its creative practices aimed at exploring relationships and opening new questions and possible explanations for complex phenomena related to individuals and groups within the social realm.

Disciplinary objectives aside, we believe something important happens to our ability to gain insights and to make novel connections across our individual arts-based research projects when we engage arts-based research as expressive artists. With this belief, we have begun wondering what would happen to our understandings of both arts-based research and the expressive arts if they were intentionally brought into contact with one another. We are also curious about the possibilities for expanding our relationship to especially a/r/tography by recalibrating certain principles and shifting our inquiry practices to align more with the expressive arts. It is in the spirit of this curiosity that we begin an experimentation guided by the question: *How is it to be in the interstices of a/r/tography and EXA especially under the influence of one of the key concepts underwriting EXA: presence?*

**Presence.** Imagine if you will, entering a classroom where, every time you do so, the immediate expectation is that you remove your shoes and without talking, find your way to one of the cushions carefully placed in a circle. At the center of the circle you will encounter a simple, attractive artifact, sometimes a small vase with a flower or a bright scarf surrounding a hand-made pottery bowl. A shared responsibility across the semester, this day's facilitator will engage the class in a three-four minute low-skill activity such as an awareness of breath meditation or a round-robin of all who desire to answer the question: *How are you arriving today?* Class ends as it begins, always, with a practice—a *ritual*—that affords students the opportunity to arrive and be as present as possible in mind, body, and community.

As authors entering into dialogue about how it is to be at the interstices of EXA and a/r/tography for this present article, we are both immediately brought to the embodied idea of *presence* that the above vignette reflects. Our training in the expressive arts has conditioned us to begin any process of opening ourselves to connections—especially to connections that are uncertain or do not yield well to language—by attuning to our

bodies, to each other, and to our immediate environment. In other words, we have developed a habit of becoming present. Because these ritualistic encounters with presencing are always, in an expressive arts session, followed by studio-length (2.5 hour) sessions with art-making inquiry practices, creative processes quickly become coupled with thought and talk. The herstories that opened this writing are an example of what happens when our questions about arts-based method, about education, or about life come under the influence of EXA. Does the guiding principle of presence as articulated in the field of EXA do something to the rich methodological arena of arts-based research and a/r/tography? We believe it does.

When we come to our respective fieldwork projects with both a) the conceptual strength and nimbleness related to researchers' subjective presence and the disposition toward living inquiry that a/r/tography promotes and b) the experiential and embodied sensitivities to presence as a multilevel personal quality and interpersonal process with EXA, our sense is that something different and, for us, deeper, happens in the field and during analysis. We feel more adept at doing fieldwork observations with an embodied sensitivity toward, for example, the buzz of high energy and other emotional contagion sweeping between students just before they get released for outdoor recess. We feel freer to explore through line, shade, and form, the sensorium of a classroom or campus atmosphere; to its rhythms of compliance or its felt register of fear.

This makes us wonder, then, about what possibilities exist for further opening the notion of presence in arts-based methodologies to argue the type of "multileveled awareness" and "multifold openness" that EXA promotes (Atkins & Eberhart, 2014). As Atkins and Eberhart (2014) help us understand, presence is not simply a matter of showing up (i.e., in the field, or to an interview, or during analysis, or a therapy session) and giving our work our undivided attention (if that were even possible). Cultivating presence in EXA includes a multilevel awareness, whereby "to be fully present means to focus attention on the other person, on oneself, on the atmosphere *in between*, and on the ongoing process that is emerging in the moment" (p. 70).

When we encounter descriptive accounts by a/r/tographers of how they are in the field, we can see and sense that they are likely engaging in a type of multilevel awareness. Indeed, Irwin, de Cosson, and Pinar (2004) acknowledge presence as an important "thematic element" in at least one of their contributor's essays in the edited collection titled *A/r/tography: Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living Inquiry*. Consider Atkins and Eberhart's (2014) description of the type of awareness and presence necessary in a given expressive arts encounter: "the change agent is attentive and sensitive toward everything that shows up, not only in the spoken words,

but also in the facial expression, the tone of voice, body stance and gestures” (p. 70) ... “At the same time, she is offering attention to what is happening within herself in the present moment, to feelings, inner sensations and images, associations, imaginations, emotions and bodily experience” (pp. 70–71). The material environ becomes another level at which the therapist (and we would argue, researcher) attends personally and interpersonally “to sense the tone and rhythm of the changing atmosphere of the session” (p. 71).

Another level of presence articulated across the EXA literature, which we feel shares significant territory with a/r/tography—though again, differently—is the nature of the human-art material relationship. Here, presence shifts from being something considered only as a quality held by individual humans, to also being about the presence that materials themselves offer and to which we can respond. Both fields theorize the importance of the maker-making relationship and the special role that materials, including visual art media, fabric, instruments, text, technologies, and so forth have in mediating experience and meaning. In the expressive arts, art and art-making are conceived as fundamental elements of what it means to be alive, as a human or nonhuman. Beliefs about art and aesthetics in EXA are rooted in ancient and indigenous ontologies. In their articulation of the way that EXA frames an understanding of the human behavior of art, Atkins and Eberhart (2014) note

that in ancient cultures and in all indigenous cultures today there is no word for art. While all of these peoples engaged in art-making activities, these art behaviors were so integral and integrated into daily life, that there was no designation of these behaviors as something separate and apart. (p. 38)

Disanayake’s (2000) work that frames art-making as a biological necessity connected to human (and nonhuman) survival also holds importance in EXA.

Similarly for a/r/tographers, compelling questions orient the material as a relational hinge to what it means to do the work of inquiring. In her article, *Becoming A/r/tography*, Irwin (2013) and her teacher-candidate participants pose the question, “What is the relationship between material practices, processes of engagement, and aesthetic products?” (p. 204). As they explore how “artists, researchers, teachers engaged in a/r/tography are living lives of inquiry: Lives full of curiosity punctuated by questions searching for deeper understandings while interrogating assumptions” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 901), Springgay and colleagues (2005) describe the liminal space of living inquiry, where materiality and making practices intersect and provoke deep questions, such as the one presented above by Irwin (and/or the ones we have presented in this

article). Furthermore, a/r/tographers explore how it is to be present with an aesthetic form of inquiry that:

engages with a continual process of not-knowing, of searching for meaning that is difficult and in tension. Tension that is nervous, agitated, and un/predictable. When fabric is distressed it is said to be 'marked' or 'treated.' Examples are staining with tea, washing with stones, more difficult distressing using substances such as bleach and acid, and even cutting. Thus, nervousness as living inquiry distresses art and text, calling forth new meanings and knowledges. Nervousness is also relational, reverberating between art and text, a living inquiry that is in continuous movement. (p. 902)

Here Springgay et al. acknowledge the tension that occurs when one engages in a living inquiry. They personify this embodied sensation of tension through their art-making examples of distressing fabric, metaphorically extrapolating that which emerges from such tension, amplifying the nervousness that is both physical and relational in nature.

**Opened endings: Presence in a/r/tography and EXA meet new materialist thought.** The second level of presence described above that discusses the nature of the human-art material relationship, and where materials themselves come into presence on their own accord and conceivably outside of or at least in addition to human will, is where we sense an emergence of ideas and practices that remain connected to, yet diverge from, both EXA and a/r/tography. While beyond the scope of this current writing to fully articulate its form, we have begun to imagine the possibilities that exist for a variation of an expressive arts-infused a/r/tographic methodology that upholds the proprioceptive knowing of materials themselves; that is, their relay of and reception to other energetic presences, and the penchant for humans as well as other living creatures to be drawn to and directed by them. Kelly is drawn to the forest's invitation, its quality of presence, and its way of provoking a register that compels her to ritualistically create hand-branches. Jessica is enticed by the sensorial image of her own never-idle hands, working alongside her father's hands, enchanted extensions of intertwined and entangled bodies using art and craft to translate the world anew, over and over again. The wind, the bark, the skin-covered flexion of bones and muscles that respond to material energies, signal for us the earthly body's (including but not exclusively, the human body) agency in the meaning-making matrix—something we are keen to experiment with following, rather than repeat our tendency to treat agency as flowing from, in a retrograde fashion, human thought.



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It is to this radical foregrounding of the *material*, to the objects of our aesthetic attraction as well as the immaterial yet nonetheless potent energies circulating among and between objects, that our attention as arts-based researchers has begun to turn in earnest. At the interstices of our experience and sensibilities as expressive artists and arts-based researchers is a desire to give materials their due. With other social scientists, we are keen to decenter our preoccupation with human meaning and agency and sidle closer to a set of beliefs and practices that, as Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuck (2011) explain, help us “move away from analysing ... objects as simply traces of something assumed to be culture, as we might see in conventional anthropological accounts” (p. vi). The move is instead toward a set of inter- and intra-actions, where again Fenwick and colleagues note, “the material world is treated as continuous with, and in fact embedded in, immaterial energies, such as certain social relations and human intensities” (p. vi).

As we continue this living inquiry into *how it is to be in the interstices of EXA and a/r/tography*, our still-emerging sensibilities about methodologies that honor indigenous wisdom about a relational aesthetic necessary for human growth and survival, as well as our increasing insights about the biology of affect and creative practice, compel us to continue considering an arts-informed somatographic<sup>5</sup> approach as a variant of other arts-based methodologies, including a/r/tography. Trusting what we often experience as the productive yet murky theoretical and practical middle ground between a/r/tography and the expressive arts, we have begun to envision additional contour lines, ones taking shape as a type of “circuit-breaking machine” (Wallin, 2011, p. 110) that we believe helps us modify our habits of a social science that repeats models and modes that are all too human, where it is language systems that claim to *think on our behalf*.

Making increasingly productive use of the affective forces cultivated by the special breed of *presence* that EXA promotes, and that a/r/tographic method tends to produce, we feel the edges of what is already known and then lean, thoughtfully and creatively, into bewilderment. We can feel our relationship with a/r/tography expanding under the conditioning that is the expressive arts, where our cue to seek open-ended understanding via *poiesis* promotes making practices that insist on actively re-integrating the body with mind and re-discovering the fundamentally and productively habitual ways in which this entwinement has always already been the way we humans, like all forms of life, have survived. In this way, a new materialist orientation to what could be called expressive arts-based research (EXABR) takes up in theory and practice a Deleuzian definition of art: the belief that “art is the practice of creating sensations (percepts and affects)” and the attendant belief that “individual

works of art are blocs or compounds of such sensations” (Conway, 2014, p. 13). Ontologically, then, an expanded derivation of expressive arts-based research sidles closely to what Barad (2007) refers to as an “agential realist” accounting of existence and causality. Barad’s is an ontology of *entanglements*, where individuals, things, and meanings all emerge through and as part of an unbounded, ceaselessly processual set of *intra-actions* and relations. In Barad’s view, these entanglements that give rise to meaning and to matter are not intertwinings per se (i.e., not the joining of separate “things” or entities). Here, for example, paintings are not the product of a bounded individual artist, intertwined with their separate materials and the ideas or the natural landscape of inspiration. Paintings instead come through “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (p. 33), that is, through the intra-actions of discursive practices that *come to mean* artist, researcher, tree, paint, and so forth, and the material participation of bodies holding brushes, mountains, pigment.

We are keen to join other social scientists, arts-based researchers, and expressive arts practitioners interested in foregrounding the body’s relationship with the material world, including art materials, putting habits of making, or *poesis*, to work in combining embodied exploration and analytical insight. In so doing, we desire to work relationally, deepening habits of “thinking about” social and educational phenomena alongside habits of “doing with” bodies, art, affect, and movement. In this way, it is our collective habits that could themselves become the stabilizing ground and imaginative force for transforming what can be known about each other, our work as arts-based researchers, and our relationship with the material world, calling us, when are willing and able to listen, into a special breed of *presence* where the wind meets our hands’ ancient capacity for making *with*, rather than about, our experience in advance of the encounter.

## Notes

1. Equal authorship, alphabetical by surname.
2. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and generous comments on an earlier draft of this work. Their efforts significantly influenced the direction our revisions took, we hope for the better. We would also like to acknowledge our wise colleague, Katrina Plato, whose comments assisted us in re-orienting certain words and phrases throughout the work to better communicate the tone of connection and expansion we were trying to convey.

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3. In a 2006 article written for the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*, Kelly developed the term “ourstory” to signify a feminist relational conceptualization of the “mystory” form of interpretive ethnographic writing developed earlier by Norman Denzin (1996). Denzin and others described mystories as “montages” that juxtapose strands or fragments of personal narrative with popular culture and scholarly discourse. Similar to my deployment of the term in 2006 to underscore the interdependency of my narrative with my research participant’s shared expressions, Jessica and Kelly use “our” here not as a reckless dismissal of Denzin’s careful treatment of the ‘Other’ in his explanation of this and similar forms of interpretive, critical, performative texts. Nor is the use of “our” a misread of arguments centered on the impossibility of a researcher’s “pure presence” and the “crisis” surrounding attempts to represent others’ lived experience. Rather, the term “ourstory” takes the representational crisis to heart, reflecting the spirit of Denzin’s call for interpretive work that holds a feminist ethic central. It honors the one indisputable truth about this narrative: its possibility lies in its co-construction and our affiliations and affections with one another.
  
4. Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) qualify that in a/r/tography the notion of living inquiry refers to “an embodied encounter constituted through visual and textual *understandings* and *experiences*, rather than mere visual and textual *representations*” (p. 902). We take a moment here to clarify how a/r/tography thinks about the conceptual notion of living inquiry in order to contextualize our discussion later in this piece of presence and the disposition toward living inquiry that a/r/tography promotes.
  
5. Initially introduced by Kelly in her 2010 book entitled, *Invoking Mnemosyne*, “somatography” is a term used to signal a broad set of beliefs grounded in material feminist perspectives about the importance of promoting epistemologies anchored in “the noticing and noting of the bodily features of discursive subjects involved in and asking questions about social, scientific, and psychic life” (Clark/Keefe, 2014, p. 5). In our present writing, aspects of somatography shift, dissipate, and expand under the theoretical, physical, and relational circumstances of exploring the interstices of EXA and a/r/tography, a provocation we hope to explore in future work.

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