Being Queer and Brown: A Queer, decolonial, arts-based, autoethnographic enquiry into art therapy pedagogical institutions and spaces

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Abstract

This article is both a scholarly enquiry into the embodied experience of a Queer, Brown art therapy trainee, and an impassioned protest against the violence of the imperial project. Beginning with an acknowledgement of Country that was never ceded, this is an account of the complexity and intersectionality of the author's own positioning and identity, which become rich material for the reflexive examination of the binary of self and other. Queer, critical and autoethnographic methods are used in the research process, reconciling visual sociology, Queer theory, critical intersectional feminist theory, posthumanism, and ideas of non-natural subjectivities. The research uncovers a connection between dominant pedagogical and institutional discourses and the internalisation and embodiment of heteronormativity and 'otherness'.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, heteronormativity, cis-heteropatriarchy, decolonisation, white supremacy

Acknowledgment of Country

I want to acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land where I stand, walk and learn, which was violently stolen by an imperialist project: the Wangal and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I also acknowledge Elders past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal Land.

Introduction
Self-reflexivity

I cannot begin this paper without acknowledging the continuing violence and brutality inflicted upon the First Nations people of this land. I must acknowledge the context in which I write and conduct this project: a time of enduring Black and Brown suffering, a time of Black First Nations deaths in custody at the hands of a violent imperialist project that continues to benefit from white colonial rationalisations. I stand in utmost protest against police brutality; I stand in fierce solidarity with our First Nations people, to condemn their mass incarceration, to support the Black Lives Matter and Black Trans Lives Matter movements, and to always remain critical, not complicit, interrogating the ways in which we non–First Nations people continue to benefit from the subjugation of these ancient peoples.

I come into this critical and creative inquiry from a place of becoming. I acknowledge my many locations, noting my privilege as a non–First Nations, cis-gendered, able-bodied femme, with access to education, housing and food, while honouring the intersections of my South Asian heritage and lived experience as a survivor of racial trauma and homophobia. I acknowledge too my Queer identity as radical and political. Within and amid these many identities and positionings, I seek to resist complicity with Western imperialism, and critically examine systemic 'othering' of myself and others.

The term 'white' or 'whiteness' is not merely a racial signifier, but a concealed mode of social power (Kendi, 2019; Taylor, 2018). In this paper I appropriate the admittedly psychologised, middle-class and white concept of 'self-care' to describe my own mode of survival as a Brown, Queer art therapy

trainee (Taylor, 2018). In this sense, the complex and ultimately revealing research methodology described here evolved in response to my critical need for 'self-care'. I consider the consequences of art in producing, re-authoring and augmenting self-narratives, by using my own data to validate how art creates potential to subvert or transform the oppressive experiences and governing visual signifiers that are inflicted on marginalised bodies (Bakshi, 2020). I discover what is meaningful for the decolonial pursuit, through decentring whiteness and centring marginalised systems of knowing and being.

Contemporary efforts in social justice illustrate the potential for arts-based methodologies to support the fruition of a deeper consideration and responsiveness when working with and alongside LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual +) and POC (people of colour) bodies (Sajnani, 2017; Talwar, 2010). Despite assertions that arts offer a valuable stage for community development and social justice, there has not been substantial work that reflects critically on what implementing this through an intersectional framework actually looks like, and even less on how to move away from the neoliberal fetishisation of POC in diversity discourses, towards a true liberation and decolonisation (Grzanka & Miles, 2016; Hage, 2000; Huss & Cwikel, 2005; Sajnani, 2017; Talwar, 2010; Taylor, 2018).

Under the imperialist project of white cis-heteropatriarchy (cisnormative-heteronormative patriarchy), LGBTQIA+ POC have been materially, intellectually and spiritually colonised (Taylor, 2018). Even in 'healing' spaces, we are colonised on structural, institutional and relational levels (Seet, 2019; Talwar, 2002). For epochs we have learned to internalise and espouse even the crudest values and assumptions of white supremacy and Western imperialism as though they are innately true (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Taylor, 2018). Due to this endemic conditioning, we are often not fully aware of internalisations as they begin to manifest (Taylor, 2018).

Not only do internalised racism and heteronormativity affect how LGBTQIA+ POC recognise, understand and locate ourselves, they collide with how we recognise, understand and locate other LGBTQIA+ POC communities (Comas-Díazet al., 2019; Talwar, 2010).

This internalisation is a symptom of systemic racial and Queer trauma, in institutions that often fail to recognise their complicity (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). There is insufficient research in art therapy literature that considers how destructive internalised racism and homophobia can be to the collective welfare of our already marginalised peoples. Nor does the art therapy literature normalise 'unlearning' internalised racism and heteronormativity as a critical practice of both community and self-care (Taylor, 2018).

Unless this 'unlearning' becomes central to the institutions and pedagogical practices of art therapy, these institutions and practices will remain predominantly complicit with imperial and heteronormative power (Talwar, 2002, 2010). Nominally progressive institutions and pedagogies can be as complicit as more conservative ones, when espoused values sit in contradiction to the visible and readable signifiers of dominant power.

I want to lay down the foundations for a wider inquiry by first uncovering my own personal experiences in navigating, locating and exploring any incongruence between what is being articulated, and what is being applied empirically in the art therapy and pedagogical spaces in which I operate, specifically when it comes to claims of institutions being affirming and inclusive of POC and LGBTQIA+ identities. I also seek to make sense of any protesting, resistant implications that may materialise when an LGBTQIA+ POC artistic or embodied initiative acts upon the critical idea of proclamation or 'enunciation' (Bakshi, 2020), meaning: What happens when I speak up about this incongruence in these spaces?

With a specific reference to works that I have created, both artistic and narrative, I want to explore how this is realised through the lived experience of a Queer South Asian art therapist (me) who occupies this critical intersection of trainee, researcher, 'consumer' and activist. The following research is informed by responses of decolonial processes of perceiving or 'aesthesis', by engaging with my Queer POC assemblage as it intersects with acculturative and colonial legacies (Bakshi, 2020).

Further questions

My choice of arts-based, autoethnographic methodologies offered me the opportunity to explore further complex questions, including: How can I

make my body safer in a colonised, heteronormative space? Can I explore self-care as a decolonisation of my body, as political resistance, as a protest, as radical (Taylor, 2018)? What happens when racism and homophobia and heteronormativity are not seen as continuing, accumulative and enduring traumas, when there is no 'post' in our post-traumatic stress (PTS) (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019)? How can a Queer POC then be placed in situations with other Queer or POC and be able to contain these spaces when the structures themselves are colonised, heteronormative and complicit in bodily hierarchies (Talwar, 2010; Taylor, 2018)? How does one destabilise Eurocentrism in Queer POC artistic assemblages, in order to reveal a visualisation of decolonial Queer POC subjectivities (Bakshi, 2020)? How does my Queer POC lived experience negotiate the 'colonial wound' (Bakshi, 2020) in order to rematerialise and reconcile with it?

Approach and methodology

The complex and challenging questions I have sought to explore in this research have necessitated a critical multi-hyphenated methodological approach. Using both arts-based, autoethnographic methodologies and a Queer decolonial critique, I hoped to capture some of the social and material realities rooted in the passage of embodiment (Thompson-Lee, 2017), identity and their implication for LGBTQIA+ POC lived experience.

My arts-based research arose out of a personal need, and is used in this project as a conduit for critical self-understanding. Self-acceptance, even in a context of continued 'othering', can be learned through the production of artistic narratives and counternarratives (Huss & Cwikel, 2005). While appreciating that the critiquing of art responses have the potential to contain, construct, communicate and transport information and knowledges (Hogan, 2015), I believe that art responses themselves can greatly enrich our understanding, by promoting meaning-making that exceeds the possibilities and limitations of 'cultural competency training' and 'interpersonal communication'.

The arranging and interpretation of art are a pursuit that compels numerously located subjectivities; they call for attuning to the body and spirit. Appointing a Queer decolonial critique draws parallels here, by making space for heterogenous

reflections, exploring sexuality, cis-patriarchy and racial trauma, calling to the sensibilities of the researcher, researched, consumer and activist (Bakshi, 2020).

I have chosen autoethnography as a methodology, to examine how I am not integrated into the dominant cultural narrative (Thompson-Lee, 2017). In doing so, I aim to uncover approaches of QPOC art and narrative that speak to my various locations. I will draw upon my own archival knowledges and articulation of decolonial 'aesthesis' and will use as data markers my experience as researcher-subject, consumer-activist (Bakshi, 2020). Autoethnography not only allows one to go deeper into one's own lived experience, but it also creates a site or space where the reader can bear witness. I aim to reveal how an arts-based Queer-decolonial-critical autoethnography can be adopted, to not only unveil and illustrate the often covert, heteronormative societal forces operating in art therapy and pedagogy, but also to emphasise any multifarious, complex and perhaps even dissenting identity negotiations (Bakshi, 2020; Flemons & Green 2002; Talwar, 2010; Zappa, 2017).

These explorations are then alchemised into an archetype of holding and conveying seemingly outlying knowledges in diverse ways, potentially destabilising the binaries of the coloniser–colonised and researcher–researched (Dashper, 2016).

The 'data'

My research drew on a multiplicity of personal, scholarly and institutional archival sources. I delved into and continued to generate a personal collection comprising of reflective journals, personal papers in response to neo-colonialism, personal art responses, and poetry.

I created my art responses using diverse media and techniques, including digital mediation, oil-painting, video, and mixed media. I selected works for this research that provided revealing visualisations of, and significant markers in, my emotional, mental and spiritual states. The data was gathered and translated through alternative knowledge systems arising from my own culture of intuiting, sensing and feeling. I selected works and responses spanning the entire two years that I spent as an art therapy trainee studying for my Master's degree. These worked as elicitations, illustrations and artifacts in response to lived experiences of heteronormativity and white supremacy. I aimed to show that identities of being

a Queer femme from an immigrant community are continuing processes, perforated with relentless negotiation and re-negotiation within systems of power (Bakshi, 2020; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Talwar, 2010; Taylor, 2018). In the face of this continuing struggle, my art responses also explored how the materiality of art-making could inform self-care and decolonisation of my own body (Taylor, 2018).

I drew too on the art therapy and broader social sciences literature. My relationship with these is complex, in that sometimes the literature is my ally in the deconstruction of imperial and heteronormative discourse, while sometimes the literature is the focus of my critique. Material such as the presentation slides from seminars and lectures and video recordings and journal entries documenting class discussions and experiences also became artifacts with which I interacted and variously critiqued, deconstructed or attempted to transform.

Ethical considerations

Being both subject and researcher, I initially assumed that an autoethnographic methodology would absolve me of any real ethical difficulties concerning exploitative research. In a way, this methodology can feel validating: because autoethnography is grounded in a reflexive philosophy and in the discourse of one's 'voice' in social research, it articulates that my ways of knowing *mean* something. In this manner, autoethnography acknowledges the entangled connection between the personal, the socio-political and the cultural, to make room for subversive, non-normative forms of inquiry and expression (Dashper, 2016). It enables one to discover diverse knowledges or ways of knowing, through lived experience, challenging dominant knowledge hierarchies. Autoethnography, then, can be seen as–effectively–Queer (Adams & Jones, 2008). Just as a Queer critical methodology critiques cis-heteropatriarchy as dominant discourse, and identity as socially constructed, autoethnography demonstrates that data can be socially constructed, and that subjectivity as a qualitative research methodology is a response to the fact that objectivity is not necessarily achievable in traditional research (Gallagher, 2006; Wall, 2006). Autoethnography critiques objectivity's dominance in traditional scientific analysis, and acknowledges that all research is ultimately experiential (Freeman, 2015; Wall, 2006).

But some ethical considerations did emerge, relational ethics revealing itself as a potential concern. Here, there are questions of story ownership regarding the representation of others, as others tend to materialise, even in self-narratives, through the inevitable social and relational construction of self (Clandinin, 2006; Tolich, 2010).

I am also concerned with some of the personal accounts, which were written retrospectively. Although I journalled and created art responses to actual events, the research still relies on my memory and interpretation. There are ethical considerations regarding what I am choosing to reveal and what I am not, what is safe to reveal and what is not. In this sense, this enquiry reflects a cautious connection with the idea of 'truth' or perceived truths, and the potential divergence of memory (Thompson-Lee, 2017).

Though autoethnography is commonly positioned as 'unobtrusive' research, I am dealing with subject matter that requires immense emotional, spiritual, bodily and psychic labour. What happens when QPOC bodies are constantly made to be explicit in order to be didactic? Is this the only way our experiences are valid: through the legitimisation of

Above: Figure 1. Kirthana Selvaraj, *Do you see me?*, 2020, mixed media, 290×200mm.
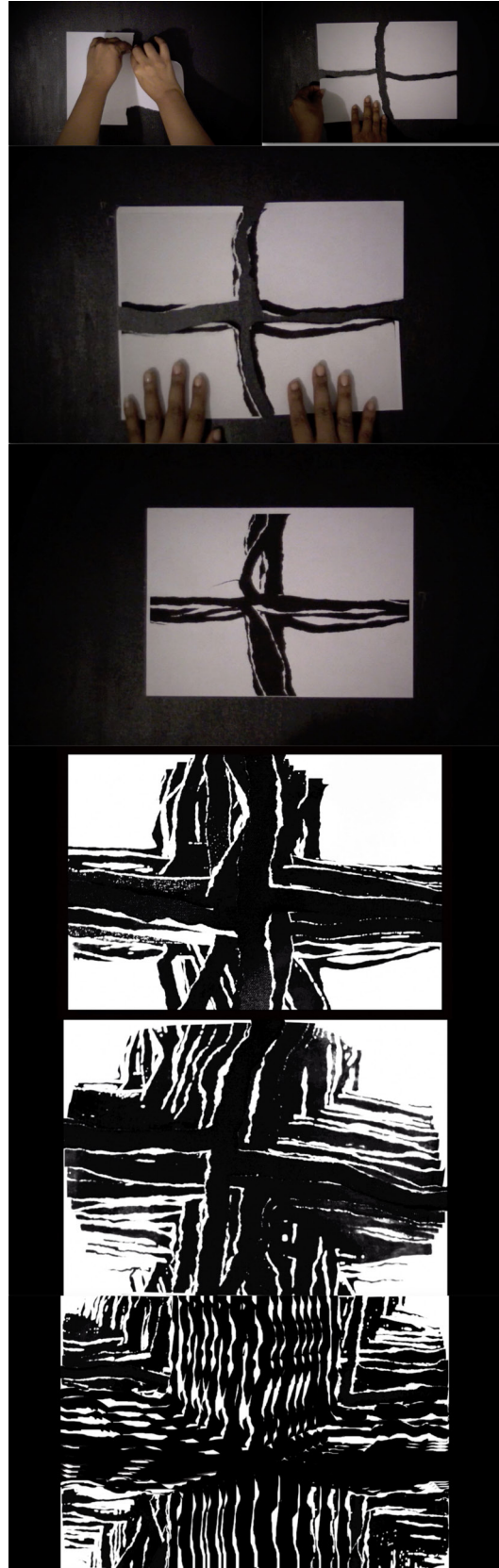
Top left: Figure 2. Kirthana Selvaraj, *Trapped in trauma, trapped in the white cis-heteropatriarchy*, 2020, oil on canvas, digital mediation with negative space, 762×609mm

Bottom left: Figure 4. Kirthana Selvaraj, *Decolonise me,* 2020, oil on canvas, 762×508mm.

Above: Figure 3. Kirthana Selvaraj, *Technology of nature, tearing, and assemblage*, 2019, stills from video.

the academy, of institution, through extraction and excavation – a source of learning for others, at the expense of the colonised body (Taylor, 2018)? How much of my political body do I choose to navigate or uncover publicly?

Self-portraiture as 'research findings'

Discussion

Decolonising self, decolonising self-care

Self-care has been integrated into pedagogy as necessary for enduring and managing the challenges of training as an art therapist. Noticing my own personal internalisations, specific to my South Asian culture and Queer identity, while navigating this field as a trainee, activist and 'consumer', I had to contest the Western imperialistic capitalisation of self-care and 'wellness' itself, and acknowledge the difficult and hurtful feelings that emerged in me when 'mindfulness' practices were encouraged and disseminated (Hsu, 2016) (see Figure 4).

There is a pervasive neoliberal logic that is hard to escape, when Western mindfulness practices become increasingly popular in the broader commercial domain and, more closely, in the expressive therapies and pedagogies in which I operate. Mindfulness introduced the West to ancient knowledge systems, encouraging one to pay attention to breath and deep observation. However, this secular mindfulness, as it frequently operates as, feels like something beyond a celebration of outlying knowledges, instead becoming a Western co-opting of ancient Eastern practices, often being applied by white practitioners, students and teachers using mandalas and sacred rituals in classrooms and sessions without context and without acknowledging history (Hsu, 2016).

While for some, sharing instead of protecting something useful found in ancient knowledges contributes to individual, collective and structural transformation, for many in the South or Eastern Asian diaspora this 'sharing' has very real material consequences that are complicit in the racial conditioning of white superiority (Hsu, 2016), where whiteness is positioned as standing separate from culture and is the collective archetype of human (Bakshi, 2020; Taylor, 2018).

Particular to my experience, I would observe people in the dominant culture freely extracting from my culture, for 'universal' gain and 'self-care' (Hsu,

2016) and, in many cases, profiting from it financially or academically. I witnessed an omission of bodies like mine from 'mindfulness' discourse, which often centred the white experience only. Students and teachers would oscillate with curiosity between being intoxicated by my embodiment of Brownness to being triggered by it.

What is being risked is not only the erasure of the enduring labours of Hindus and Buddhists in sustaining cultural legacies and Dharma teachings to feed the appetite of an awakening global North, but also the loss of an opportunity to invest in a non-white imaginary.

I needed to find a way to navigate self-care that acknowledged this difficult space in my body. I needed to address the inequities I embodied that were symptoms of the inequities found in the larger systems in which I operated.

My burnout was – and is – a response to racial trauma

As a QPOC, seeing messages that reinforced white centrality affected how I would think, feel, view and treat myself as racially inferior (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Taylor, 2018). I chose to use art as a research methodology and a tool for healing and retaliation (see Figure 2). This would reveal not only how I responded to encounters with 'power hoarding' – a term used by Tema Okun in her examination of white supremacy in institutions (Okun, 2000). Okun emphasises that power hoarding is a central feature of white supremacist culture, which involves the amassing of power, resources and opportunities. My use of art also revealed how I confronted this divergence in my mind and body.

Just showing up as I am – in all my Brownness and Queerness – elicited many complex and confusing responses from my peers and teachers. This affected my consciousness by making me feel guilty about my joy, and by creating a sense that prioritising myself was somehow selfish, that I must earn my 'usefulness' through bodily sacrifices. My responses revealed how I put pressure on myself to prove my own worth, that I must work ten times as hard for only half as much. I found myself pushing through enormous personal adversity during my studies; indeed, I worked so hard that I became sick. I overextended my emotional, physical and spiritual capacities. I found myself minimising the microaggressions and racism that I was experiencing,

almost surrendering to the idea that my worth was inextricably linked to my productivity only.

When an entire community has been historically dehumanised, that community becomes easier to exploit and to excavate from our own mind, body and spirit (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Because of pervasive colonial legacies over epochs, many Black and Brown people have been hardened to assume that our value is derived only from our labour (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). In reality, those harmful ideas are a part of me, because of acculturative pressures, the strain of intersecting identities, and the internalising of systems of oppression (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Taylor, 2018) (see Figure 2). This is a symptom of racial trauma.

I reflected on this internal 'maintenance' of pervasive systems and became curious about the paradigms of restructuring and emotional reclaiming (Taylor, 2018). I began to think about radical self-care and ontological rifts such as human/nature or subject/object, entanglements, new materialism, and the entrapment of the Anthropocene (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2021; Taylor, 2018). How could I then recentre my Queer Brown body in my own experience?

When a Queer Brown woman nurtures and loves herself, it is emphatically revolutionary (Lorde, 2018). Such nurturing and love subvert the power of the white cis-heteropatriarchy, which is largely dependent on the subjugated person harbouring shame about who we are, interrogating the experiences of our bodies, taking up less space, venerating whiteness, disengaging from our own desires and pleasures, doubting our capacity, and even justifying the enduring or tolerating of harm that racism and colonialism have imposed (Carter et al., 2017; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Franklin et al., 2006; Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020; Taylor, 2018). This is why returning to my bursting magical self as a QPOC is a gorgeous act of defiance, contesting the toxic ideologies that were never really mine to embrace.

Decolonising through proclamation

Figure 1 is from a series of responses to a particularly painful seminar in 'ethics and diversity in research' during my Master of Art Therapy course. The subject matter centred around 'cultural competency' training involving racism, postcolonialism, systemic power imbalances and subsequent oppressions as a result of the colonial system.

What was revealed in this seminar was how discourse on diversity or cultural competency often *reinforces* rather than dismantles whiteness, championing diversity without actually undoing institutional racism (Hage, 2000; Kunstman, 2017). I often received hostile and defensive responses from teachers and students when I embarked on a critical act of enunciation, meaning speaking up, holding to account and naming whiteness (Bakshi, 2020). I would hear fellow white students and teachers say to me:

"I'm colour blind."

"What about *my* trauma?"

"PC culture is getting out of hand."

"Use strengths-based language."

"I don't see race."

"Saying white is racist."

"All people matter."

"Not all white people have white privilege; some are more disadvantaged than you."

"I was othered being Italian, and moved on."

"Here we go again."

"I feel like you're being aggressive."

"I'm from a different generation, where we didn't make excuses."

Being an art therapy trainee, I reflected on how pedagogy and training would often underscore the overtly violent nature of racism, but rarely interrogate the more covert nature of white supremacy (Hage, 2000; Puwar, 2004; Taylor, 2018). Such covertness was often circulated through coded semantics such as those expressed above.

I saw that, in this seminar and related literature, the only way that my body would be seen, read, empathised with or realised was through visibilities of marginalised bodies constructed in relation to what they meant to whiteness. What emerged was an appeal for white people to bond, or negotiate, with diversity discourse without the actual labour of dismantling bodily hierarchies (Hage, 2000; Puwar, 2004). This meant that I witnessed those holding power, such as academics or teachers, inserting seminar lectures on 'postcolonialism' without adequately holding space for robust – and, more importantly, safe – conversations between students. The result of this for POC and First Nations students was the witnessing of triggering and problematic language, and for white students

a lack of an informed example of how to deal with such painful subject matter in the first place. By the teacher not properly holding this space, it became a lost opportunity for real growth, 'unlearning' and transformation.

The burden then falls onto those who are marginalised to hold this space while also trying to manage their own painful triggers. My attempts to negotiate between these states of feeling – unseen, yet also focused on so closely – created anger and resistance in me. I faced students who saw me as being 'derogatory' because I was not being passive. Another layer of friction and disconnect, a schism, emerged, isolating me from those who were my friends. It took away a sense of community that I thought I had. It was not my job as a Queer, Brown student to be the representative of a 'colonised body'; nor was it my responsibility to put my identity under the microscope for white examination. It became my perceived obligation in the absence of meaningful, self-reflexive discourse.

This dynamic reveals *whose* cultural norms, values and perspectives the institution and society consider to be 'natural' or legitimate, and whose voices, experiences and truths are suppressed and delegitimised. Expressions from students such as "getting aggressive isn't helpful" not only invalidate the very real experience of POC through tone policing, but can also be weaponised to reinforce white governance, by subjugating, gaslighting and pathologising POC lived experience (Bakshi, 2020; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Taylor, 2018). The task then shifts to the Black or Brown body, who must make a performance of collegiality and remaining 'calm' so as to be palatable, even with the additional endangerment of microaggressions and veiled – or even unveiled – racism (Puwar, 2004; Taylor, 2018; Vaccaro & Koob, 2019).

How can white cis-het (cisgendered-heterosexual) art therapy trainees and teachers become more enlightened, and more critically and socially aware (Kuntsman, 2017)? How can they become healers navigating diverse identities and cultural backgrounds, when a large portion of white students and teachers of art therapy do not see, or are unwilling to see, the continuing oppression of QPOC as enduring and persistent trauma? How can they properly accept the challenge of undoing systemic racism, when they are unable to locate themselves in the project of Western imperialism?

Heteronormativity in art therapy pedagogy

Absolute truths, biological essentialisms and naturalisms located in psychoanalytic language offer nothing to the Queer (being Queer was once considered a pathology), the stateless, the marginalised, and the oppressed (Devitt, 2008; Talwar, 2003, 2010; Zappa, 2017). Misgendering and presuming sexuality are symptoms of a heteronormative structure, because they continue to declare what is 'natural' and what is 'other' (Zappa, 2017). The rhetoric of art therapy pedagogies often proclaims the importance of dismantling systems of power (Savneet, 2003; Talwar, 2010). But what happens when power continues to be enacted through white heteropatriarchy? How many Queer, Brown/Black practitioners work in art therapy practices compared to their white counterparts? How many Queer Brown/Black academics teach art therapy in Eora? Is there pedagogy for the oppressed? Why is heteronormative language still being used, punctuated by the dyadic mother and father in clinical language and training, the assumption of pronouns, the binaristic understandings of being a 'woman', a 'man', of relationship structures and family genograms (Zappa, 2017)? What happens when these Queer, decolonial, critical knowledges that pedagogy claims to espouse are not applied laterally in curriculum and practice?

There is a clear incongruence between the resistant and disruptive theories that are being advocated for in art therapy education and the bodies in the room, the bodies in the executive branch, the bodies that disseminate the knowledges, the bodies that are thriving and the bodies that are being excavated from. As a Brown person, I am continually positioned to 'learn' about empires, marginalised bodies and colonialism through a white positionality. This needs to change.

Noticing my own personal internalisations – which are specific to my South Asian culture and Queer identity – while navigating this field as a trainee, activist, 'consumer', I found myself yearning for a white allyship, which often fell flat. In truth, I did not want my body to become something to be extracted from for the education of others. I did not want to feel that my body only mattered when it aligned with the self-interest of a white person. I not only wanted to see representations of Queer, Brown leadership; I also wanted to imagine a

different future for myself. Rather than being relegated to becoming the rich subject matter of someone who sits in the dominant culture, I wanted to write my own bodily history.

How can I make my body a refuge that stimulates my complete humanity?
By creating new knowledge systems through art: feeling, sensing as systems of knowledge, subverting Eurocentric epistemological constructs

I chose to use art as a research methodology, but also as an apparatus for healing and resistance. I created art not only to reveal how I responded to these encounters with racism and power hierarchies, but also to notice how I confronted this divergence in my mind and body (see Figure 2). I chose to explore a decolonial practice, located in my South Asian culture of intuiting. This led to knowing, which then led to believing (see Figure 4). Embracing acuity and perception, I was in search of marginalised and historically relegated modes of knowledge production (Bakshi, 2020; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Moving beyond the ostensibly objective analytic lens, I integrated and embodied illustrations of knowledge creation that occupied a space of meaningful consciousness, forming an archival practice that venerated the collective, personal and cultural, a narrative that sat outside white governance (Gopinath, 2018).

Queering normative materiality

As a QPOC I have always turned to making art as a way to archive my feelings and work through trauma. Ever since I came to realise that I was not part of the dominant narrative, my work has been entrenched in the Queer imaginary and in the knowledge that the intuitive has something critically valuable to offer me.

In this research project I wanted to find a way towards Queer materiality, attempting to locate and disrupt cis-heteropatriarchal assemblages, to re-emerge by subverting normative materiality. This intentionality was not as a performance of making my body legible and didactic for another, but for my own empowerment and knowing. I began using materials in 'non-natural' ways, against their design. For instance, I experimented with sewing into playdough, and with painting by moving the substrate around a tube of paint, so that the substrate is leading, rather than receiving, the paint. I dipped my fingers into crushed turmeric and stained public white walls,

in honour of the rich ochres of my culture and the enduring Ayurvedic knowledges of healing with turmeric. I found images of myself that I took after crying from a racial slur, and chopped them up to create new assemblages – a new citizenship (Kuntsman, 2017), a decolonisation. This was all part of my wish to reclaim agency, to recontextualise and rematerialise for my ancestors and for those who will come after me (Bakshi, 2020). I became curious about approaching my own racial trauma by using these techniques of queering materiality and decolonising self-care, ultimately giving myself permission to pursue a radical self-care and radical self-love.

Conclusion

Is art therapy – through my experiences in its pedagogy and spaces – really a more enlightened, equitable place? Living in a constantly traumatising environment means living in a set of enduring conditions (Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020). While this kind of racial and heteronormative trauma is recognised in some literature and studies, there is no clear framework or model for properly dealing with issues of racism and homophobia as they intersect (Carter et al., 2017; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Franklin et al., 2006; Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020; Taylor, 2018). Rather, these issues seem to operate as liminal spaces in pedagogy and practice. No one appears to really talk in depth and at length in training spaces about how racism is a traumatic experience that endures beyond an explicit incident or an obvious signifier.

My research revealed that, even though I can take steps to begin a decolonisation of my body, it becomes exceedingly difficult to do so while operating in white cis-heteropatriarchy, which urges a strange logic of existence (Carter et al., 2017; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Franklin et al., 2006; Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020; Taylor, 2018). Even in writing this paper I found myself adopting abstracted, sometimes inaccessible, language to just be part of the discourse. Will this make me more credible? Will I finally be seen in this space?

I wonder if this research process would have felt more healing if my survival wasn't contingent on the goodwill of the dominant culture – if I was not required to struggle to assume my entire humanity in the face of an inhumane system of governance.

Decolonising and liberating marginalised bodies is not just about a collective acceptance; it is also about collective consciousness, self-examination and unlearning. Challenging internalisations of racism and heteronormativity means more than disseminating anti-racism and anti-heteronormativity through pedagogy and practice, and going beyond the over-indexing and performative allyship that tends to take place (Kendi, 2019; Kluttz, Walker & Walter, 2020; Taylor, 2018). It is not enough to posit the urgency of 'self-care' when facing this system. An unexamined discourse of 'self-care' can become complicit with 'othering', and self-care practices may become the privileged province of already privileged subjects (Bakshi, 2020; Taylor, 2018). For instance, I have seen white cis-het students encouraged to 'forgive themselves' for making 'mistakes' such as misgendering, or for their 'accidental' microaggressions towards culturally diverse people, instead of being reminded of how these 'mistakes' have very real and material consequences, and are felt as actual violence by oppressed groups and individuals. In such environments, my appropriation of and research into self-care as a Queer Brown art therapy trainee has become a radical act.

My research, while drawing on my own personal, embodied experiences, challenges the implication that it is the responsibility of already marginalised subjects to adapt to oppressive systems. Here, the critical examination of art therapy training institutions and practices is essential. A real interrogation of dominant cultures, positionality and unconscious biases must take place, filling gaps in the curriculum and intentionally designing courses in which whiteness is decentred and solid social justice pedagogy strategies are implemented (Okun, 2000; Sajnani, 2017; Talwar, 2010). Otherwise, it is like sewing gold thread into white tissue paper: the structure itself cannot hold the weight of the threads, if it has not been fortified with knowledge of how to do so.

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