
Phil Smith Symposium Paper

PAYING AESTHETIC ATTENTION:
THE ART OF WORKING TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE¹

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When I began my Ph.D. program in Philosophy of Education in 2004, I felt I needed a creative outlet beyond school, a place to “move away from” politics and moral theory for a little while, so I decided to start a band. I gathered together a group of seven women of varying musical abilities, some of whom were just picking up an instrument for the first time, but all of whom were dedicated to learning and playing together. What I soon discovered was that rather than creating a space in which I could “escape” the issues and tensions that arose in my school work, a space that was “just” about art and imagination, the other band members and I together had created a space that required a constant renegotiation of boundaries and power dynamics, that required compromise, collaboration, a keen attention to each other and to the music.

I began to realize that making music with others could be considered a *political act*, to borrow from María Lugones’s conception of political², in that making music with others required practicing coalition work across social differences. Not just in the sense that working with others towards a common goal often involves compromise and struggle, but in the sense that playing music together required that my bandmates and I learn to pay a *particular kind of attention* to each other, a kind of attention to self and self-with-other that I struggled to understand through my class readings, but came to experience as a fully embodied phenomenon during band rehearsal.

I came to realize that the sort of attention required in creating aesthetically-meaningful music with others was a similar sort of attention to that required for politically-meaningful social activism. Thus my involvement with the band came to heavily influence my scholarly theory and practice, while my music-making also came to be informed by my scholarship. Creating music began to take on an ethical dimension, a political dimension, as I began to take greater notice of *who I needed to be, what I needed to contribute, and how I needed to see and be with others* when we came together as a band. Arising out of my experiences making music with a group of women, this essay challenges the disjunction between aesthetics and ethics, challenging what gets to count as “within-bounds”³ political activity by exploring how the process of artistic creation can at times be considered a political and ethical act. I want to

explore what a notion of “aesthetic attention” might contribute to social justice theory and pedagogy, in terms of both scholarship and classroom practice.

As evidenced in *The Republic of Plato*, artistic imagination has often been considered distinct from, if not contrary to, philosophical reasoning. Plato writes:

We have, then, a fair case against the poet and we may set him [*sic*] down as the counterpart of the painter, whom he resembles in two ways: his creations are poor things by the standard of truth and reality, and his appeal is not to the highest part of the soul, but to one which is equally inferior. So we shall be justified in not admitting him into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason.⁴

Put differently, aesthetics and ethics are often seen to be concerned with incompatible goals. Paraphrasing from Kierkegaard’s *Enten-Eller*, Alasdair MacIntyre writes: “The choice between the ethical and the aesthetic is not the choice between good and evil, it is the choice whether or not to choose in terms of good and evil.... Each of the two ways of life is informed by different concepts, incompatible attitudes, rival premises.”⁵

This distinction between art and philosophy, between reason and sensation, is highlighted in a definition of “aesthetic” offered in *Webster’s Dictionary*, which characterizes “aesthetic” as: “Of or [pertaining] to pure feeling or sensation, *in contrast to ratiocination and the like*.”⁶ Considerations of artistic beauty or merit are here marked as entirely separate from rational thought. However, aesthetics is also defined in the same dictionary as: “The science of cognition through the senses.”⁷ It is this latter definition, which recognizes aesthetics or the search for beauty as a *way of knowing, as a process of learning*, that I am interested in taking up in this essay, particularly in regard to how art can help us⁸ to come *to know* and *to be* more ethically.

As Maxine Greene points out, art can open up as-yet-unrealized possibilities for alternate realities, for more equitable social relations, for new ways of understanding the self and others. Quoting from Herbert Marcuse, Greene writes, “The languages and images in works of art, when persons are released to attend and let their energies go out to them, ‘make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life.’”⁹ My focus here is not so much on the moral or political value of particular works of art or art itself, but rather on the sort of social imagination, awareness, and attention to the self and others that is required when making particular kinds of art.

As María Lugones,¹⁰ Uma Narayan,¹¹ and Bernice Johnson Reagon¹² have pointed out, working in coalition across social difference to dismantle multiple forms of oppression requires a particular way of being in the world

and with others, a way of being that often runs counter to what one is taught about being a “good” philosopher, scholar, educator, or student. I want to suggest that cultivating one’s aesthetic attention by focusing on the *process* of making particular kinds of art can help one develop the skills necessary for effective coalition work across such differences as race, culture, gender, sexuality, age, language, education, ability, religion, class, or nationality. Using the process of musical jamming as an example, I draw upon the theories of Lugones, Narayan, and Reagon to help conceptualize how the development of aesthetic attention can help scholars, educators, and students more effectively disrupt systemic social injustice.¹³

The term “jamming,” as I want to use it, can be defined as:

...[A] musical act where musicians gather and play (or ‘jam’) without extensive preparation or predefined arrangements. Jam sessions are often used to develop new material, find suitable arrangements, or simply as a social gathering and communal practice session. Jam sessions may be based upon existing songs or forms, may be loosely based on an agreed chord progression or chart suggested by one participant, or may be wholly improvisational. Jam sessions can range from very loose gatherings of amateurs to sophisticated improvised recording sessions intended to be edited and released to the public.¹⁴

Key to a notion of “jamming,” as opposed to other ways of playing music, is its lack of definitive structure, its flexibility of rules (where they exist), the attention and responsiveness to others it requires. All of these features of jamming are what allow for the collaborative creation of new material, for bringing into existence something previously unrealized or unrealizable.

As I discuss in further detail shortly, I use the term “aesthetic attention” to refer to *how* and *what* one is called to notice in the process of creating certain forms of art. When we are asked in meditation, for example, to pay careful attention to the breath, or when learning to swim to pay careful attention to the movement of particular muscles, we are being asked to take notice of things that are occurring all the time, yet of which we are seldom aware. So too does the making of art ask us to pay particular attention to ourselves and those around us in a way we are unaccustomed to but can improve with practice. Maxine Greene speaks of being “fully present” to a work of art, which she explains “depends on understanding what there is to be noticed in the work at hand, releasing imagination to create orders in the field of what is perceived, allowing feeling to inform and illuminate what is there to be realized, to be achieved.”¹⁵ I would first like to examine what it might mean to be “fully present” in coalition work, to examine *what* and *how* we are being asked to notice by Lugones, Narayan, and Reagon, then explore how some forms of art can help us cultivate this way of being together.

 COALITION POLITICS: ATTENDING TO MULTIPLICITY

In her essay “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” Bernice Johnson Reagon highlights the need for an *openness to multiplicity* when working in coalition, stating that: “We’ve pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that is ‘yours only’ – just for the people you want to be there...To a large extent it’s because we have just finished with that kind of isolating...There is nowhere to go and only be with people who are like you. It’s over. Give it up.”¹⁶ This multiplicity, she points out, brings with it difficulty and *discomfort*, although coming to accept the tensions inherent in coalition work is necessary for sustaining relations across difference. Reagon writes: “Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do...You don’t get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can’t stay there all the time.”¹⁷

Summoning the courage for and commitment to facing the discomfort of coalition work can be aided by an attitude of *playfulness*, asserts María Lugones, which can help sustain forward movement in the face of fear. This sort of playfulness, I want to suggest, can be learned through the practice of music as well as other forms of art. Playfulness is central to coalition work, according to Lugones, because it necessitates “an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred, and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight.”¹⁸

One cannot approach a coalition with arrogance, with the expectation of having all the right answers and feeling comfortable at all times. To do so would be to fail to engage with and address the systemic inequalities present in a coalition. As Lugones writes:

...[W]hen one considers the many crossings [of social boundaries necessitated by coalition work], I think it is important to cross, to go through, in uncertainty, open to risking one’s own ground, including one’s own self-understanding...*It is that openness to uncertainty that enables one to find in others one’s own possibilities and theirs.*¹⁹

In taking up a playful attitude, one is asked to entertain possibilities, to be open to surprise: “While playful, we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular ‘world.’ We *are there creatively*. We are not passive.”²⁰ Lugones calls upon playfulness as a way of stepping outside of oppressive power relations, as a method of resistance, as an important way of being with others in the creation of new, more equitable social realities.

Of course, playfulness or opening oneself up to being a fool carry different risks for different individuals and groups. Were I just beginning my

doctoral studies rather than nearing the end of my program, I would likely take fewer risks in my work for fear of not being taken seriously. Similarly, if I were accustomed to not being taken seriously or being made a fool of because of my race, my age, my sexuality, my English language abilities, my class, my level of education, or for other reasons, I would likely be hesitant to risk seeming a less rigorous or less serious scholar. Conversely, if I were a white male rather than a white female, or a tenured professor rather than a doctoral student, perhaps I would be inclined to take greater risks in my work. As Lugones points out, one may animate playfulness in certain social worlds or contexts, though not in others.²¹

What I take Lugones to be suggesting is that playfulness is neither always possible nor always desirable, but that it can be one method of moving through struggle with others, in spaces where one feels “healthy”²² enough to engage in playfulness. Further, I do not think Lugones would want to recommend that individuals or groups stop worrying about competence or looking a fool in situations where one is already constructed as incompetent or foolish due to systems of oppression. Playfulness, as I understand Lugones to conceive of it, is not intended to exacerbate unequal power relations or to force an undue humility upon systemically disadvantaged groups. Rather, I see Lugones to be taking up playfulness in terms of joyful, exploratory, inventive interaction with others. She also speaks of playfulness in terms of resistance, in the way that a trickster or jester figure may function in a story to disrupt existing power structures, using play to turn hierarchical relations on their head and to reveal the foolishness of those at the top. Like Uma Narayan or Iris Marion Young, whose work I discuss shortly, Lugones calls attention to the asymmetry and asymmetrical responsibilities between differing social locations or social “worlds,” which must be kept in mind as one wades through her discussion of playfulness.

In addition to the importance of playfulness in coalition work, Lugones introduces the term “*tantear en la oscuridad*”²³ as a way of moving about and with others through unfamiliar social terrain, as one attempts to map new geographies of resistance and emancipation. Lugones writes on the first page of her book, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*: “The ‘pilgrimage’ that the title of the book calls forth moves through different levels of liberatory work in company forged through a practice of *tantear* for meaning, for the limits of possibility.”²⁴ In a footnote she explains, “I use the Spanish word ‘tantear’ both in the sense of exploring someone’s inclinations about a particular issue and in the sense of ‘tantear en la oscuridad,’ putting one’s hands in front of oneself as one is walking in the dark, tactilely feeling one’s way.”²⁵ Lugones here evokes a rich image, I believe, of coalition work as a process of moving tentatively about a dark room; slowly estimating one’s surroundings, sizing up and testing out the environment before making any sudden moves; attempting to conceptualize or envision what the

room might look like in the light, while recognizing the partiality and limitations of one's ability to know.

This hesitation, this suspended but sustained movement (suspended in the sense of hanging or hovering without putting one's weight down fully), is reminiscent of Uma Narayan's call for *methodological humility* and *methodological caution* when approaching coalition work as an outsider to (particular forms of) oppression.²⁶ It is also reminiscent of the sort of movement necessary when participating in a musical jam, which I return to shortly after a discussion of Narayan's work. Addressing the perils involved in "working together across difference," Narayan explores how by failing to take emotions seriously, outsiders to certain forms of oppression can damage the possibility for communication with members of an oppressed group, despite one's best intentions. As Narayan writes:

...[A] simple resolution on the part of individuals or groups that they will try to understand the experiences of more disadvantaged persons or groups, whose oppression they do not share...is not going to solve or resolve the thousands of problems that are going to crop up in discussion and communication....[T]he advantaged would be wrong to expect [goodwill] to be sufficient to cause strong, historically constituted networks of distrust simply to evaporate into thin air.²⁷

What outsiders to a form of oppression must keep in mind is that "members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppression than people who are non-members of the oppressed group."²⁸

This "epistemic privilege"²⁹ of the oppressed calls for outsiders to approach coalition work with a sense of the limitations of one's understanding, with a willingness to listen, a willingness to learn, and a sense of responsibility to inform oneself. Narayan calls for outsiders to oppression to approach dialogue across difference with "methodological humility" and "methodological caution." She explains:

By the requirement of "methodological humility" I mean that the "outsider" must always sincerely conduct herself under the assumption that, as an outsider, she may be missing something, and that what appears to her to be a "mistake" on the part of the insider may make more sense if she had a fuller understanding of the context. By the requirement of "methodological caution," I mean that the outsider should sincerely attempt to carry out her attempted criticism of the insider's perceptions in such a way that it does not amount to, or even seem to amount to, an attempt to denigrate or dismiss entirely the validity of the insider's point of view.³⁰

Such humility and caution also require that one makes space for *polyvocality*, that one learns how to pay attention to multiple voices simultaneously, learns how and when to be quiet. Narayan asserts:

Historically, those in power have always spoken in ways that have suggested that their point of view is universal and represents the values, interests and experiences of everyone. Today, many critiques of political, moral and social theory are directed at showing how these allegedly universal points of view are partial and skewed and represent the view points of the powerful and the privileged. The oppressed will, therefore, be quite warranted in being sceptical about the possibility of “outsiders” adequately speaking for them.³¹

As Iris Marion Young explains about the asymmetricality of differently-situated voices: “A communicative ethics should develop an account of the non-substitutable relation of moral subjects. Each participant in a communication situation is distinguished by a particular history and social position that makes their relation asymmetrical.”³² She further highlights: “The perspective of those who maintain privilege under an unjust status quo does not have legitimacy in the same way as does that of those who suffer the injustices....[A]sking the oppressed to reverse perspectives with the privileged in adjudicating a conflict may itself be an insult and an injustice.”³³

Attempting to take up the sort of attention I discuss in this paper thus requires noticing the limitations to my point of view as a woman located in multiple positions of privilege, as well as noticing that the ideas I put forth bear differing significance for different readers. For some, these ideas may be a way of addressing one’s own social privileges. They may also be a way of helping one’s students come to recognize the positions of power they hold in society, or else as a method of disrupting and resisting the oppression one faces in one’s own life. Jamming can be a space of social rupture, a space to challenge existing social injustices. Though playing varying roles depending on one’s social location, artistic creation and aesthetic attention can help transform social realities and relations across difference.

The skills or ways of being that Reagon, Lugones, and Narayan identify as required for sustaining dialogue and action across social difference, skills such as *openness to discomfort*, *multiplicity*, and *polyvocality*, as well as *playfulness*, *methodological humility* and *methodological caution*, are all skills or ways of being that can be learned and improved upon, I wish to suggest, by employing the sort of aesthetic attention required when taking part in a musical jam. This sort of aesthetic endeavour, I believe, can be used as a valuable tool to help scholars, educators, and students work more effectively together towards social justice, as one comes to develop through the process of artistic creation the ability to *attend to* and challenge the self and others in a way that is often ignored or neglected in scholarship and in the classroom. Through jamming, one learns to develop a certain flexibility, a heightened embodied

alertness, an ability to consider multiple parts or voices at once, to evoke a responsiveness from others, to negotiate one's own contribution to a larger whole, as well as to integrate or weave together disparate parts in the creation of a tapestry of complex and intricate design.

In discussing the literature of Henry James, Martha Nussbaum argues that certain works of art can help us to develop our moral imagination and attention in order to “make ourselves people ‘on whom nothing is lost.’”³⁴ For James, Nussbaum writes, moral knowledge is “not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling.”³⁵ Building upon Nussbaum's notion of moral attention, I want to suggest that particular acts of artistic creation such as jamming require a unique form of attention to aesthetics that can aid in the effective practice of coalition work.

Jamming as Artistic and Moral Process

Whereas Nussbaum focuses on the *content* of James's work in her discussion of moral attention, I am more interested in considerations of *form*, focusing on art at the meta-level, as creative *process*. I want to explore how jamming and other forms of art may help us to become people “on whom nothing is lost,” by calling us to attend to our practice *as* practice, as a learned way of interacting with others that carries with it certain expectations about how and what to perform. That is, I am interested in how art as creative process can call attention to creative possibility, to cracks or fissures in the boundaries of reality that allow one to imagine being differently with others, an enfolded, rich attention to self and self-with-others. All of these are required when attempting to sustain with a group a complicated improvised tune or rhythm. Through learning and practicing the art of jamming, one can learn to see reality “in a highly lucid and richly responsive way,” to “[take] in what is there, with imagination and feeling.”³⁶

As Babatunde Lea explains in regard to hand-drumming instruction as a tool for social change:

Music is a creative process that can lead us into cultural spaces outside of our normal experience. In these spaces, the normal is disrupted: the frontiers between thought, feeling, and spirit can dissolve. Music can engage the passions and motivate us to become more creative. In this creative state, we are more likely to think critically about the social and cultural forces that influence us. With an enhanced sense of what is creatively possible, we are more likely to be able to access cultural knowledge that has become “dysconscious,” relegated to a place below our consciousness because it makes us feel uncomfortable.³⁷

Lea here suggests that learning to drum can help us explore possibilities, both musically and socially, that would otherwise seem closed or unapparent to us. The way he speaks of music in the above quotation brings to mind the sort of playfulness and openness to uncertainty that Lugones calls for in her work, the sort of playfulness that will help carry us through our fear and discomfort.

Lea notes that when teaching students how to create a polyrhythm by drumming different rhythms with their right and left hands, students initially struggle with the activity, finding it very difficult. He explains that finding the “One,” the place where the rhythms begin and intersect, is hard to do, but becomes easier with practice and concentration. Playing a polyrhythm, learning to sustain multiple rhythms at once, Lea writes, requires “a concerted effort and motivation. It takes will and commitment. That of course, is the point of the activity.”³⁸ As Maxine Greene remarks:

Hoping to challenge empty formalism, didacticism, and elitism, we believe that shocks of awareness to which encounters with the arts give rise leave persons (*should* leave persons) less immersed in the everyday, more impelled to wonder and to question. *It is not uncommon for the arts to leave us somehow ill at ease, for them to prod us beyond acquiescence. They may, now and then, move us into spaces where we can create visions of other ways of being and ponder what it might signify to realize them.*³⁹

When first learning how to play a polyrhythm or how to jam, one may feel uncertain about how to get her or his part “right,” or uncomfortable trying to sustain a rhythm in front of others. Some may feel frustrated at making mistakes, or may take it as an opportunity to learn with others. Some may see it as a chance to engage, to participate, to take action. All of these feelings are the sort of things we need to pay attention to in coalition work, Lugones, Narayan, and Reagon illustrate.

Opening oneself up to uncertainty, to exploring possibilities, to taking or following a lead, to challenging others to respond creatively, to making mistakes, all become easier with an attitude of playfulness, which, I want to suggest, can be developed by playing with music. I say “playing with” rather than simply “playing” because I want to move away from the notion of playing music as simply technical mastery of an instrument. I want instead to evoke a sense of testing out, experimenting, seeing what works and what doesn’t, in Lugones’s sense of the term “tantear.” But I also want to use “playing with” in the sense of being responsive to others, of treading lightly with uncertainty about one’s final destination, similar to the way in which Narayan speaks of “methodological humility” and “methodological caution.”

When improvising music with others, one cannot charge ahead on one’s own without losing the song, without dropping the rhythm. Jamming necessitates paying careful attention to all the other instruments and players,

listening closely for ways to take up the rhythm, responding with flexibility to changes in tempo, hanging back during another person's solo. Just as Narayan and Young talk of creating spaces in which the voices of insiders to oppression are given priority, so too does jamming demand that some musicians are given the space to take the lead or drive the music in a particular direction at moments, requiring listening and responsiveness on the part of the other musicians. If the musicians are not playing *together*, if they are acting independently or arrogantly, the result is an aesthetic mess.

With reference to polyrhythms, I think the same can be said for multiple instruments in a jam, Lea writes: "If there is any aspect of a polyrhythm that is wrong, then the whole rhythm is set askew. All must learn to understand and respect the other rhythmic components and their importance to the polyrhythm as a whole."⁴⁰ Jamming requires that one immerse oneself in the multiplicity of sounds, "hanging out" in the rhythms and notes, as Lugones might term it, in the sense that "Hanging out is always a hanging out with/among others in an openness and intensity of attention, of interest, *sensorially mindful in each other's direction*."⁴¹

While jamming requires a certain humility and caution, humility in that one must recognize an interdependence between the musicians, and caution in that one must move forward tentatively, with light steps, jamming also requires constant action to carry the rhythm along. If a musician were to stop abruptly after losing one's way, the beauty of the music could not be sustained. When one makes a mistake, she or he must carry on, must attempt to pick up the momentum of the music again as the song moves forward. I take up a discussion of jamming here not just as a metaphor for ways of understanding the sort of work that needs to be done in coalition, but as a fully embodied, imaginative, creative process of learning and practicing how to sustain dialogue and action across social difference.

Lugones offers a beautiful description of palpating one's way towards social justice that I think can be useful in thinking about jamming as well. She explains:

I tentatively provoke a sense of *contestatory interactive intersubjective sense making as processual and located*....As I seek out, put out, rehearse, consider tactical strategies of emancipatory sense making....I think of people at the time of tentative, often ill defined and not quite articulable intention formation: with whom, how, where, in the midst of what constraints and openings, negotiating what materials, words, sounds, touch, movements, gestures. I think of the nonlinear journey of the sign-word/

gesture/movement enunciated there and of the concerted, disjointed struggle to make it make sense without dropping it, like a delicate thing that is to be something at some point in the journey.⁴²

As in the improvisation that happens within a coalition, musicians improvising together participate in processual, located, “interactive intersubjective sense making.” Only in the process of collaboration and paying a particular kind of attention to each other can musicians create music that will make aesthetic sense. Furthermore, one does not set out to jam with a road map, with a set of directions on where to go and how to get there. Instead, one plays his or her instrument with “ill defined” intentions, responding in the moment to constraints and openings, negotiating rhythms and movements, on a “nonlinear journey” of sound in a “concerted, disjointed struggle” to make the music make sense “without dropping it, like a delicate thing that is to be something at some point in the journey.”⁴³

So how can musical jamming and aesthetic attention be brought into our practice as scholars, educators, and students? I am not advocating for a science class on mitosis to erupt into song, but rather that we spend more time thinking about how we might creatively engage ourselves and each other in imaginative ways of noticing that swell with possibility. This may happen in our own writing as scholars, in working collaboratively with others, as educators in a classroom, or as students learning together. It involves asking ourselves what a scholarly “jam” or educational “jam” might look like, if we think about our practices in terms of a yet-to-be-determined structure, an improvisational activity that requires participants to be responsive to each other with heightened awareness, in a richly embodied and creative way.

Furthermore, moving away from “jamming” as analogy, practicing and critically engaging with the process of artistic creation, whether in one’s spare time, as a classroom activity, or as a project taken up with colleagues, can help us to envision and realize more equitable social relations. Though simply playing music together can open up a space to explore new possibilities, critically engaging with the creative process is key. Asking oneself and others what the experience was like, what one was being called to attend to, when did moments of discomfort arise, how were these resolved, questions like these are essential to the application of aesthetic attention to social justice pedagogy and activism. Lea explains of hand-drumming instruction: “When searching for the ‘one,’” the place where polyrhythms come together and intersect, “we must develop a critique along the way so that we can understand when and why our efforts fail.”⁴⁴

Understanding how and when one might struggle in a jam session can help one come to understand better the difficulties of coalition work and what needs to be done in order to improve one’s practice. Scholars may employ the sort of aesthetic attention required in jamming to one’s own work, bringing to it the sense of playfulness, openness to polyvocality, multiplicity and discomfort, as well as the humility and caution that one must bring to a jam. These skills or way of being can be taken up in one’s own scholarly writing or when working collaboratively with others. Educators may use music or other creative

endeavours as a tool to help students learn and understand the skills needed to be with others across social differences, to resist oppressive social relations (whether coming from a position of social privilege or disadvantage), as well as in one's own teaching practice to disrupt traditional authoritarian power relations between teacher and student. As students, borrowing from the practice of jamming to take up aesthetic attention in one's studies can help equip one with the tools necessary to challenge unjust social relations in the classroom, in the school, and in society at large. This may occur through collaborative work, creative dialogue, or through resistant reading and writing practices that move away from expectations of scholarship- or education-as-usual which leave systems of oppression intact.

Jamming is just one form of artistic process that can help to develop the sort of embodied, self-reflexive, panoramic attention necessary for successful coalition work. As suggested in the work of Audrey Thompson,⁴⁵ unreliable narration may be another way that attention to aesthetic merit can help in the development and practice of one's moral attention, as may be Bertolt Brecht's notions of epic theatre and the alienation effect.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to address how these other creative processes can contribute to anti-oppression scholarship and pedagogy, and so offer jamming as only one example of how art may be used by students, educators, and scholars working towards social justice.

I advocate for academics and teachers to explore the possibilities that jamming, unreliable narration, epic theatre or other forms of art could open up for their/our work, whether these activities are pursued privately as professional development activities or integrated into the classroom curriculum as critical thinking exercises aimed at fostering social critique. I advocate for teachers, students, and scholars to *take art and artistic creation seriously* as a way of learning how to ethically engage with each other. As Karen Gallas writes, "...[T]he arts offer an expanded notion of classroom discourse that is not solely grounded in linear, objective language and thinking, but rather recognizes the full range of human potential for expression and understanding."⁴⁷ Just as learning to read and write can aid us in a variety of contexts, from composing an essay to sending a text message, so too can jamming equip us with a set of skills that serve numerous purposes.

I want to move beyond jamming as an analogy for coalition work towards an understanding of the tools it can provide for building a more equitable society. The process of artistic creation required in endeavours such as musical improvisation can help one become more sensitive to *what it means to respond ethically* across social difference, or to *what counts as political activity*. Furthermore, it can also help one to develop, I believe, a sort of coalition literacy, an ability to read social situations for openings, tensions, possibilities, problems, weaknesses, hope. Though aesthetics and ethics are often perceived as separable, distinct, such incommensurability is an illusion. A focus on

aesthetics can come to greatly inform one's understanding of ethics, while one's understanding of ethics can also aid in one's pursuit of aesthetic beauty. Rather than distancing us from considerations of the ethical, paying attention to the process of creation as we make art with and for each other can inspire us to find the courage to move forward together, across differences and difficulties, towards the realization of a more just world.

NOTES

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This paper was originally presented at the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society annual conference in Dayton, Ohio, 25-27 September, 2008. The presentation involved a jam session at the beginning as a demonstration of the sort of practice I discuss throughout the paper. Unfortunately, creating a text-only version of this essay requires omitting the performative aspect of it, which is an important yet not absolutely necessary part of my argument. I hope that the reader can imagine without a demonstration the sort of collaborative improvisation I draw upon.

² María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 2. Here Lugones discusses different levels of political acts and what sort of acts are most easily understood or accepted as political. She writes, "As you dare to witness police arresting people, or dare to ask a woman who is saying 'no' to a man's hold whether she's all right, whether she wants to leave, you notice that it is quite different to do that than to organize a demonstration against Anglo takeover of land and water in the U.S. Southwest. It is all beyond the pale, but the latter is more easily understood as political – it is afforded a kind of sociality – that the others may lack. So, there are levels of disruption, levels of resistance." I use Lugones's notion of different levels of the political here to describe the recognition I began to have that playing music with others could be a political act, not just in terms of *what sort* of music was being performed, but *how* it was being performed. Something that had seemed *apolitical* to me in the past began to take on a new dimension when complemented by my studies in social justice education.

³ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 2.

⁴ *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 336-337.

⁵ As cited in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 1981), 39.

⁶ William Alan Neilson, Thomas A. Knott, and Paul W. Carhart, eds., *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed., v.1 (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1934), 42 (emphasis added).

⁷ Neilson et al., eds., *Webster's New International Dictionary*, 42.

⁸ I use the terms “us” and “we” variously in this paper, sometimes to refer to “us” as academics, educators, and/or students, while at other times calling to responsibility those who share positions of social privilege similar to or the same as my own.

⁹ As cited in Maxine Greene, “Texts and Margins,” in *Context, Content, and Community in Art Education: Beyond Postmodernism*, ed. Ronald W. Neperud (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 114.

¹⁰ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*.

¹¹ Uma Narayan, “Working Together Across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice,” *Hypatia* 3, n.2 (1988): 31-47.

¹² Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Colour Press, 1983), 356-368.

¹³ After putting together this essay as a conference presentation, I realized my own failure to take notice of the ways in which my focus on music and auditory experience makes my discussion less accessible or inaccessible to the hearing impaired and deaf. Although I use jamming as just one example of how the process of artistic creation can teach valuable skills about coalition work, skills which could also be acquired through non-auditory forms of art or through body jamming (movement improvisation), I draw attention to this vast oversight here as something that needs to be taken seriously in scholarship.

¹⁴ “Jam session,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jam_session (accessed 3 September 2008).

¹⁵ Greene, “Texts and Margins,” 114.

¹⁶ Reagon, “Coalition Politics,” 357.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁸ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis added).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96 (emphasis in original).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²² *Ibid.*, 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1, footnote.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, footnote.

²⁶ Narayan, “Working Together Across Difference,” 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ Harding, Hartsock, and Jaggar, as cited in Narayan, “Working Together Across Difference,” 35.

³⁰ Narayan, 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³² *Ibid.*, 341.

³³ *Ibid.*, 350.

³⁴ James, as cited in Martha Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Moral Attention and the Task of Moral Literature,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no.10 (1985), 516.

³⁵ As cited in Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible,’” 521.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 521.

³⁷ Lea, “Polyrhythms as a Metaphor for Culture,” 99-100.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁹ Greene, “Texts and Margins,” 111-112 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Lea, “Polyrhythms as a Metaphor for Culture,” 98.

⁴¹ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 220 (emphasis added).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 228 (emphasis added).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁴ Lea, “Polyrhythms as a Metaphor for Culture,” 98.

⁴⁵ Audrey Thompson, “Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators,” in *Philosophy of Education: 2005*, ed. Kenneth Howe (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 60-68.

⁴⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

⁴⁷ Karen Gallas, “Art as Epistemology: Enabling Children to Know What They Know,” *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 1 (1991): 42.
