"What Knowledge is of Most Worth?":

A sociopolitical analysis of creative literacies and research-creation in education

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Touching,

Slowly,

A finger across the page. A tap on the keyboard.
A kiss on the forehead.

New tab.

A handshake, a board meeting, an office cry, a sweet goodbye.

Esc key.

New tab.

google.ca

"How to assess art"

Enter.

Is this a good poem?
Write your answer here (Yes or No): _____.

If you answered Yes, how good was it? Scale 1-10. Or more typically, out of 20. Out of 30 marks. If you answered No, how bad was it? Still a pass, maybe a B+? Or a fail?

I wrote that poem in about two minutes. I say that not in an effort to brag about how quickly I can write a poem, but to elicit the question of whether the time I spent on it relates to whether you think it was "bad" or "good" art. Amidst the rise of creative multiliteracies and research-creation (artistic) work, we (I use *we* intentionally) as scholars and artists are faced with the valuing of art as *our collective* problem in education: What is good art? Is making good art the same as making good scholarship, or does it require a different set of practices and an epistemic shift in our thinking around academic value? My central question to explore in this paper is therefore the following: How does research-creation (the university term for creative work) and creative multiliteracies (the K–12 term for creative work) beckon us as educators to re-think academic value?

Coming of age: Situating the self

As a politically engaged educator/activist/artist-scholar, I intend for this paper to be dialogically reflective (asking more questions than giving answers, providing a personal and academic voice to this reflective work). As curriculum theorists Leggo and Herdt theorize a "metissage" (2018) of knowing, I imagine this piece as a curricular blending of multiple ways of knowing, where the theoretical voice meets the personal, critical and artistic. I hope to write in ways that showcase my impetus for research-creation, my activism for writing research and assessments differently, and my tone of urgency and yet playfulness in this pursuit. Although these characteristics may exile this paper from [traditional] academic scholarship, this may be necessary to situate creative work in relation to more traditional scholarship. A blending, a "metissage," may be ideal but it may not be possible.

Curriculum studies as a field is concerned with educational and epistemic equity, as well as the sociology of knowledge, and is thus uniquely positioned to take up the argument for research-creation. Since many in the curriculum studies scholarly community self-identify as arts-based researchers, artist-scholars and activist-scholars (including myself), I believe we are at a critical standpoint where, through the pre- and post-reconceptualization eras of curriculum studies, the rise of research-creation forces us to return to the most central question of the field: What knowledge is of most worth? (Pinar 2006, 80). Furthermore, a questioning of how we have come

to value certain knowledge(s) helps reinforce hierarchies of knowing and, in turn, hierarchies of knowers (people).

> As a graduate student in education asking for creative work to be seen as "valid," and as a literacy teacher asking students to deliver on more creative assessment tasks, how might we sit with "the trouble" creative educational work begs of us?

The educational context of arts-based research for the emergence of research-creation

As some qualitative arts-based methodologists begin a new chapter in research-creation, we are faced again with either reproducing academic tradition and norms or becoming academically untethered from the colonial and power-driven mindset of literacy. This also leads to rethinking, or more importantly, recreating, what we mean by knowledge, who gets to create it and which knowledge (especially when soaked in art) is good and which is bad. What a task! To map our journey, this paper will first outline how Canadian funding bodies and leading scholars in the field (such as Loveless 2019) qualify research-creation, which will help me distinguish and wrestle with/stay with the definitions of "arts-based research" and "research-creation" for the purposes of clarifying the differences between meaning-making and doing, respectively. This exploration will prove useful as we dive into the final section, where I will explore the sociopolitical contexts within which research-creation takes place (the neoliberal academy) and how, methodologically and pedagogically, research-creation acts as a feminist intervention.

Let's explore SSHRC's definition of research-creation, specifically the part, "The research-creation process and the resulting artistic work are judged according to SSHRC's established merit review criteria" (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 2019). Subsequently, an examination of this "merit review criteria" has revealed, in my opinion, an ill-suited rubric to evaluate research-creation. Tenants of this criteria are focused more on the qualities of adjudicators (that is, transparency, confidentiality, due diligence and appropriateness, a characteristic I will explore later), and less on the rubric used to assess "the creation process and artistic expression" (2019). These loose definitions allow for gaps in the pedagogical and methodological processes of art, gaps that can allow for colonial perspectives on what makes art have "merit."

I remember assessing a student's poem last year and wondering how best to do so. I was stuck at my desk thinking: Is the poem good? By whose evaluation? Am I even qualified to comment on what a good and bad poem is? As someone assessing art, how was my palette for it influenced by social and cultural factors?

After further contextualizing arts-based research (and arts-based theses submitted for assessment) in Canada, we will now look more closely at how "the creation process and artistic expression" that SSHRC defines as research-creation work can be assessed, and the educational politics and cultural activism such an assessment raises.

Before we discuss the sociopolitical ramifications of research-creation in higher education, we should first come to a pan-Canadian understanding of research-creation in its artistic and scholarly roots. Research-creation differs from arts-based research in that the latter is not concerned with the research process itself but rather is a creative aid or supplement in the methods or dissemination of more traditional qualitative research (Barone and Eisner 2012, 180). Tara Goldstein's work on her Out at School project (Goldstein 2019) is an example of arts-based research. The project is an audio play based on interviews of LGBTQ2S+ families. Another example is Monica Prendergast's poetic inquiry work that takes narrative data and creates poems from it (Galvin and Prendergast 2015). It is important to note that this arts-based research paradigm takes the premise that art supplements "hard" or "real" qualitative data, such as interviews, ethnographic field notes or survey results. Thus, in arts-based research, art is used in addition to data as a form of creative analysis, or art is the data (such as a participant's drawings)

and is then engaged with through traditional academic analysis. Here, bookending is a common practice, where art is seen as additive and "after the fact" of the real research that precedes it. On the other hand, in research-creation, art is the data, methodology and analysis; art is the central vein of the research process and traditional academic form (if any) is supplemental.

In K–12 settings and within a typical literacy/ELA classroom, arts-based assessment might look as follows (taken directly from an assignment I gave): Write a poem or develop a collage or write a song; but accompany the art with an "artist's statement" explaining your choices. It will be the statement/explanation of the art I will mark, rather than the art itself!

In such an assignment, the art is almost described as a "nice to have" aspect or a "creative add on" to the more legitimate academic work of explaining students' choices. Arts-based research, and by extension, creative assessments thus usually understand art as not "real" research/scholarship but rather as an additive to it.

From meaning-making to doing-making

In curriculum studies, particularly within the past two decades, a subfield of arts-based research termed "a/r/tography" has developed. This was the methodological nucleus of many graduate dissertations in arts education in Canada, especially for UBC's arts-based researchers who leveraged the practices and positionality of **a**rtist/**r**esearcher/**t**eacher. The a/r/tography movement has been critiqued (Wallin and jagodzinski 2013) for its lack of critical analysis of social systems and its academic rigour. In a comprehensive scan of arguably the largest increase in arts-based research within education, Sinner et al (2006) analyzed over thirty a/r/tography graduate theses and dissertations from UBC's Faculty of Education from 1994 to 2004. They found four attributes that underpin these dissertations: a commitment to aesthetic and educational practices, an inquiry-laden process, a process of searching for meaning, and interpreting for understanding. The first two attributes continue to be central veins for artistic practice(s) as we look toward research-creation, but the final two, "searching for meaning" and "interpreting for understanding" are rooted in the curriculum studies field (as well as in my own department), which is largely informed by European continental philosophy, Aokian theory and North American reconceptualism (Strong-Wilson et al 2020). Instead of the search for meaning through interpretation, research-creation urges us to move toward a DeleuzoGuattarian model of *responding* to what something *does* rather than *interpreting* what something *means*. In producing art as academic work, this shift from interpretation art (the essay that augments the art) to doing (the art itself as the scholarly product) is colossal. Building on a/r/tographical and other arts-based methods, research-creation is not research *on* the arts or research *through* the arts (meaning and interpretation) but research *as* the arts (doing). Moving from the overused discourse of meaning-making as the only valid definition of literacy (Butler-Kisber 2010), a concept that may have lost its meaning in curriculum and literacy research, research-creation instead "does"—it acts in performative and aesthetic ways to create a response, and in many instances, is a response to not only doing things differently but othering various "doings" as well.

There is no "this is what the play was about" or "what does this art suggest about X?"; instead, the more important questions are what does this art *do* to me? To institutions and spaces? To relationships? What is the relational sympoesis (Haraway 2016) of the doing-making act to the witnesses and coperformers in this social art act? Although I've conceptualized meaning-making as the less central concern for research-creation, for many scholars (and artists) bookends (or artist statements) prove to be useful guides when viewing a work. As much as I want to let art reveal its own meaning, I appreciate an explanation about how and why they made the choices they did and what they hope the art does, especially if the artist is working in a medium I am unfamiliar with. However, I continually revert back to Barone and Eisner's (2012) foundational work in arts-based research to ground me in the principle that such research always has multiple perspectives. The role of art is not to give a statement to get all viewers on the same page; rather, "[arts-based research] is based on the notion that any perspective on the world is always partial and therefore *incomplete*" (p 166, emphasis

added). This incomplete picture includes the one we have painted about what constitutes scholarly research and valid academic form.

Politicizing research-creation I: The unarchivable, the unassessable

As I've described, arts-based research often is an appendix at the end of the dissertation or is a separate section of the more traditional qualitative dissertation. For the assessment of my MA thesis, more than half of which comprised creative writing and the rest traditional curriculum theory, almost none of my creative writing portions had any feedback other than "great!" from my examining committee. This is not to fault my exceptionally supportive supervisors, who were willing to mentor (what I considered) a quite rogue early-scholar work, but rather is a commentary to suggest that I did not have the institutional support set up to have my research-creation work assessed in a way that felt generative to my emerging artistic-scholarly practice. If we are to seriously consider the integration of art as scholarship, as Loveless' (2019) manifesto suggests, then we must consider the assessment of this scholarship. This needs to be especially done in light of sociocultural factors that constitute "good" and "bad" art in the Euro-Western artistic canon. Considering the poem I was trying to assess from my ELA class, this was a big undertaking.

> Research-creation instead hopes to reorient, make accessible and invite larger audiences outside the gatekeep of academic literacy to engage in scholarly conversation. In short, a pedagogical research-creation project seeks to reorient what and who can constitute as "academic."

Returning to the example of *doing* (research-creation) versus *meaning* (arts-based research, traditional literacy), how can we purposefully assess research-creation? Would we say, "your art made me *do* [talk to my child] ... [send a message to a power-hungry boss] ... [protest at the legislature]"? Would that constitute a *good doing* that would have to be translated into a grade... A? And if the research-creation creates a *bad doing*, such as "[your art made me fearful, where is the hope?] ... [your art made me feel less adequate about *my* art] ... or the popular [your art did nothing to me]"? Would this constitute a lower grade translation? What if my art did nothing for you, but something for someone else in the room, someone who was not assessing the work? Does art's impact rely on one sole viewer [or a small committee of reviewers that are not trained in art]? When asked what we might "do" about assessing creative work, what kind of rubric are we using? Although the answers to these questions are vital, for now the questions act as provocations only as the limits of this paper prohibit me from doing justice to a full analysis of the politics of assessment.

In *Propositions for a Radical Pedagogy, or How to Rethink Value*, research-creation scholar Erin Manning (2019) argues that "the soundscape of learning is full of inklings which reside below the threshold of actual perception" (p 44). She goes on to advocate for a pedagogy of the "undercommons," a learning that creates its own value, value misperceived and, sometimes, not perceived at all. As educational researchers attempt to archive the pedagogical experience through publishing papers, we must ask what and who we are missing in the educational research archive we are attempting to publish in so rigorously, when very little of pedagogy's intensive and charged moments make their way into the archive at all. Moreover, when we combine Manning's (2019) argument here with Barone and Eisner's (2012) proposition that arts-based research is meant to be perceived differently across audiences, then we see that perception (and perception of value) is integral to the conversation around research-creation, and more largely, creativity in education. If we can only assess that which we can perceive to exist, then research-creation is tasked with a daunting question about assessment; and for many in the academy, research-creation ignites a moral panic around what is valued, and when considering summative assessment and faculty hiring/promotion, *which knowledge is of most worth?*

Politicizing research-creation II: A critical intervention

> "The production of 'legitimate' knowledge has been closely related to the context, class affiliation, and their social identity of the producers ... European colonizers have defined legitimate knowledge as Western knowledge, essentially European colonizers' ways of knowing, often taken as objective and universal knowledge."
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> -Francis Adyanga Akenda, *Critical Analysis of the Production of Western Knowledge and Its Implications for Indigenous Knowledge and Decolonization* (2012).

Akenda's quote allows us to read the proposal of research-creation and creative literacies as a social argument in order to answer not only *what knowledge is of most worth* but also how did that worth get assigned to knowledge. In the era of truth and reconciliation, how can we reassign the worth of knowledge to be a more expansive one? When thinking in binary terms of "good/bad" art, as we did previously, I argue that we are subconsciously and simultaneously reinscribing dichotomies of "Eurocentric/Indigenous," "heterosexual/queer," "white/racialized" and "male/female." For example, male-dominated fields such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) are often romanticized as objective fields that utilize logic and the scientific method, while female-centric fields such as visual arts, drama and education are seen as practitioner-focused, "caring professions." Although, the need for artistic thinking in education has gained popularity only insofar as benefitting "hard" disciplines to develop "soft skills" such as interpersonal communication. For example, the rise of STEAM (adding *A*rt to the acronym of STEM) has become a popular educational speech act that has added **A**rt to the STEM curriculum discourse only to showcase that interpersonal and creative skill outcomes are being met (Concordia University 2022). Loveless (2019) reminds us that research-creation, and by extension, art, "is a feminist intervention, not a feminist addition" (p 6). Furthermore, "[research-creation], read in this way, demands a reconfiguring of standard academic pedagogical training and assessment practices" (p 7). By rethinking our pedagogical and assessment practices, we must also think of the ways in which our academic values are also sociocultural values that have been shaped by hegemonic structures and institutions to dictate which knowledge is of most worth and to whom. Thus, it can be argued that any creative undertaking is inherently an equity-seeking project, leading to new knowledges that have been silenced by colonial, sexist and classist understandings of academic value. Although I have reached this conclusion quickly (and perhaps missed carefully drawing out the steps that led me to make the connection between marginalized communities and marginalized knowledges), I am careful here to not conflate the experiences of sexism, racism, classism and ableism with my understandings of "knowledge on the margins." Rather, I aim to draw connections between the marginalization of knowledge and the marginalization of communities to create solidarity and build understanding across positionalities. To be clear, I am not stating that undervaluing art-as-knowing is not the same as undervaluing humans in relation to other humans; instead, I am drawing parallels between how values in knowledge and axiology are residual from values seen in an oppressor/oppressed social hierarchy. In clarifying this distinction, I hope I have illuminated the ways in which such undervaluing is related diagonally rather than synonymously.

I am intentionally returning to remind us of our central task in this paper, to ask "which knowledge is of most worth?" This is curriculum studies' central vein of inquiry. I have now laid the groundwork to view this question within the sociopolitical context of education (thought of here (and in Loveless' text) as the neoliberal academy/school). To extend this claim, if we take the suggestion that logic, productivity and the scientific method are perceived as more masculine attributes, and creativity, affect and art perceived as more feminine attributes, we can see how research-creation's value as an affective art form is socially and culturally implicated. I agree with Loveless' claim that research-creation is a feminist intervention but also extend her argument to suggest that research-creation, as an artistic and affective literacy, is also an anti-capitalist intervention. Research-creation's "ineffable moments of literacy" (Ehret and Leander 2019, 21), which are always-already "beyond our grasp" (p 2), refuse to be archived and refuse traditional citational practice, and instead elicit action in the moment. Furthermore, in schools,

creative literacy is not "job ready skill development" or fostering some sense of "entrepreneurial thinking" (Alberta Education 2013). Instead, in both research-creation and creative literacy pursuits, we see that art is difficult to assess, teach and bring into curriculum studies' scholarly conversation as we currently know it. But when assessed and included, to return to this section's question of assessment, how does research-creation escape the sociopolitical wrapping of the western canon's rubric of "good" and "bad" art? Without answering, I instead find solace in knowing that creativity and research-creation are not simply an art of social practice but an art of educational disruption in the increasingly corporatized and capitalist education systems we operate within. Research-creation not only expands what counts as knowledge (objects and methods of study), "but *who* might produce such knowledges, and *how*" (Loveless 2019, 14, emphasis in original). With this ever-expanding gate of allowance in what counts as knowledge and who its producers can be, [higher] education loses prestige and "rigorous" academic study may lose its status in a constantly corporatizing educational arena.

Reconfiguring academic value through failure and fear

We can, however difficult it may be on our own reflections of academic value, consider institutions that are beginning to formulate research-creation doctoral programs and learn from them. In Canada, the University of Regina's PhD in Media and Artistic Research attempts a first stab at such a task. Dr. Kathleen Irwin, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Research at the university's Faculty of Media, Arts and Performance suggests that the research-creation PhD "recognizes and embraces non-traditional approaches to look at research through the lens of other cultures and their methodologies. Here in Canada, for example, there is a growing awareness that new knowledge can be found within a non-European model" (Stecyk 2019). We see, therefore, that a partial answer is being attempted to the above question regarding the refusal of western notions of good and bad art. In understanding what Dr. Irwin states are "non-traditional approaches," we are not asking for an appendix but rather arguing for a requalifying of the value of scholarly work. Shifting our cultural standards of rigour and reconfiguring the paradigms of merit in education will certainly evoke fear and discomfort. This "pedagogy of discomfort" (Boler 1998), however messy to sit in and work through, is integral to any cultural or educational paradigm shift.

The academic panic around research-creation and creative literacies, I believe, comes in part from scholars and teachers who have had to learn "the hard way" and insist on continuing the supervision style that they themselves received. I too am guilty of perpetuating this "tough love" to my students. Whether in elementary or graduate school, this cyclical rite of passage often acts as scholarly gatekeeping: if you can't handle the heat, get out of the kitchen. In the university context, instead of shying away from the fact that over 65% of social science PhD students in Canada drop out before graduation (Charbonneau 2013), why do we not ask instead, Are these knowledge practices working for you? How can you know *and do* this work in other ways? If you were permitted to use the mediums of X and Y, would you perhaps stay? In addition, only 18.6% of the 35% that do graduate from social science PhDs in Canada are employed as (tenure or tenure-track) full-time professors (Kappeler 2015; Charbonneau 2013). Many graduate students who leave the academy thinking they have failed are not up for the academic-industrial complex of publishing, or simply cannot handle the required form of literacy because of the way they know the world culturally or through their own neurodiversity (Kelsky 2015). I know for me, as a neurodiverse PhD dropout with only two years of full funding, I couldn't always handle the demands of the full-time writing and reading required of me. Furthermore, in preparing PhD students, who are artists, activists and scholars, to continue their work outside the academy, our doctoral programs should be refocusing their failed curriculum to ensure that it does not simply tailor to a bleak market for its graduates. With these failures in mind, research-creation seeks to intervene pedagogically to support a research training program suited to new knowledge practices. Additionally, students who are not only in graduate programs in arts education and those that don't necessarily come from minority backgrounds would also benefit from research-creation. Regardless of whether I cite all the ways that creativity is beneficial to the brain, mental health and academic achievement, I am interested in the

risk of doing creative as learners and teachers. With that risk comes failure, something our education system has no tolerance for. But what if we reorient (again) to see failure as pivotal to any academic task? What better way to explore failure than through creating/doing art?

If we use the word "academic" synonymously with the words efficient, logical and rigorous, is research-creation not academic enough to survive in education? Don't its goals reflect the curricular outcomes of rigour and academic excellence that the social science PhD prides itself on? Is research-creation set up to fail in an academy only-already prepared to swallow up diverse knowledge practices into its bottomless belly of assimilation? Or can we reconceptualize the failure of research-creation as a set of "complicated [curricular] conversations" (Pinar 2004)?

Conceptualizing research-creation as an "academic failure" (Loveless 2019, 46) in a way that resists neoliberal frameworks for understanding success helps us see research-creation's potential. If we understand art through the lens of multiliteracy, we can see research-creation as an access point into knowledge production and circulation. Podcasts, films, comic books and paintings, due to their accessible and public form, produce a low, instead of high, theory scholarship (Halberstam and Halberstam 2011). Why are certain literacies higher or lower than others in their academic (and by extension cultural) currency? In my classroom, when utilizing podcasts and comic books in ELA, I have received criticism from colleagues for not being rigourous enough and focusing my class on the "easy, fun stuff." In an interview with queer theory scholar Jack/Judith Halberstam, she suggests that in her forthcoming book, *Dude, Where's My Theory?*, low-theory spaces are fruitful sites for knowledge production where "negative epistemologies... such as forgetfulness, stupidity, and failure" (Danbolt n.d.) will help us produce contrary knowledges (like research-creation) necessary for our revolutionary times.

Refusing quick solutions and conclusions: An invitation into complicated conversations

In many ways, our schools and universities are failing with respect to the student mental health crisis, precarious "publish or perish" employment standards and declining student interest in and engagement with research and academic form. I have argued in this paper that curriculum studies, as a field supposedly concerned with educational and epistemic equity as well as the sociology of knowledge, is uniquely positioned to take up the argument for research-creation as a complicated conversation. To think seriously about counter-hegemonic academic practice, we must theorize in new ways with new learners whose knowledges have been excluded from education. We must refuse the status complex that comes with failing "our beloved," as Loveless (2019) states, "academy." As curriculum scholars and artists within the academy, we are in a privileged position to re-(re) conceptualize curriculum studies and educational thought to not only convince the school and university of research-creation's value from the perspective of what is accepted as academic success but also to decide that value for ourselves.

Discussion questions for class conversations on the value of different knowledges/subjects (Used with Grade 11 students in November 2022)

This activity can take place over one or two class periods. Invite students to respond to each of the four initial questions first, and if they would like to discuss in more detail, invite them to respond to the prompt following each initial question.

I like to start by having students respond independently to each question for 2–3 minutes each in any medium they want.

To start a discussion from the responses, use your favourite "discussion starter" activity to build on the initial student responses (such as a Snowball activity, musical pairs, gallery walks or Padlet responses).

Questions for individual and class discussion (tailor to your specific grade group and student demographic as needed):

1. Which rubric has been used to determine what is a "core" and an "elective" subject? To what extent do these value systems of

disciplines suggest a hierarchy in answering the question *what knowledge is of most worth?*

Further prompt to deepen discussion: Does this hierarchy have economic causes and/or repercussions (such as artists making less money than coders)?

2. In what ways do our school practices (reading, writing, sitting all day) reinforce colonial values of education?

   Further prompt to deepen discussion: Which school practices do we have that work against colonialism?

3. In what ways do we associate cultural assumptions with disciplines? That is, why is math more powerful than creative writing in our western economy?

   Further prompt to deepen discussion: In what ways do gender and class intersect with the hierarchy of subjects?

4. Considering that value = rarity in late capitalism, does knowing something most people don't know mean that you are smarter?

   Further prompt to deepen discussion: For example, if everyone could read Shakespeare fluently, would that make it less prestigious? If everyone can draw, does that make art less valuable? If everyone could do advanced calculus, would that make it less impressive?

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Brent Saccucci *is a passionate teacher and engaging facilitator who is currently working as a literacy specialist teacher in Sikóóhkotok (Treaty 7 territory in Lethbridge), where he also sits on the equity and diversity council of his local ATA chapter. Brent's somewhat nerdy claim to fame is that he has taught everything from kindergarten to graduate school (and those happen to be his two favourite demographics to teach). Brent holds two master's degrees in teaching and learning—an MA from OISE/UofT and an MEd from UAlberta. He examined the field of curriculum studies during both degrees. As an evidence-informed teacher, Brent's research and writing contributions have been published in the English Language Arts Journal, PRISM: A Toolkit for Gender & Sexuality in Alberta Schools, Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies Journal, alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage and ZINES: An International Journal in Media. Brent also facilitates workshops on inclusion to groups from K–PhD where he shares his passion for inclusion and transformative learning praxis. Outside education, Brent plays video games, obsesses over his puppy and enjoys time with his musical partner.*