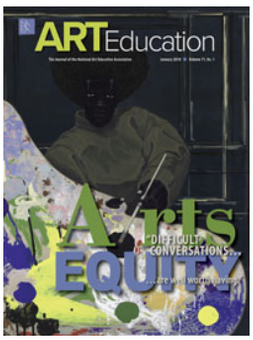

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Making Space for the Possible: Artists-in-Residence in Community College

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Making Space

Figure 1. Peter Kyle leads class in movement warm-up.

Offering art education and art experiences to marginalized student populations provides a break from the academic familiar and creates space for radical possibility both in the art classroom and across academic contexts.

for the Possible:

Artists-in-Residence in Community College

Lori D. Ungemah and Ariana Gonzalez Stokas

In a large classroom at the end of a hall, a modern dancer calls out to a room full of community college students, "Touch your hip, then move your hip. Touch your nose, move your nose. Touch your shoulder, now move your shoulder," and like rag dolls they obey, some giggle, and everyone moves as they construct a modern dance sequence. In the college's computer lab, students print corporate logos of their consumer lives to cut and assemble into a self-portrait; the room is silent with concentration. On the fifth floor, students stand in a circle, laughing hysterically, doing theatrical warm-ups to create improvisational skits. Artists-in-residence lead this mandatory arts class, and the students experience a break from their traditional community college curriculum—they experience what becomes possible if there is space to make art.

Maxine Greene's philosophy helps us to understand the art experience as an entrance into possible worlds; people can only enter these worlds when they break with what is familiar and mundane through imaginative engagement (Greene, 1995). John Baldacchino in *Education Beyond Education: Self and the Imaginary in Maxine Greene's Philosophy* (2009) illuminates her philosophy of possibility as constitutive of leading to a radical possibility, the first order being the creation of art worlds that break from the familiar and the mundane. To achieve radical possibility in schools, two elements must happen: Students must have foundational arts experiences that break from the curricular mundane, and instruction in the arts must be offered to a diversity of student populations so that all students have access to these radical, possible worlds.

Historically, marginalized groups have been dominated through the suppression of their cultural and aesthetic norms (Quijano, 2000). This history of artistic suppression continues in the public schools and has contributed to the elimination of the arts as a core component of the educational experience of low-income students. The 2012 National Center for Education Statistics publication on arts education shows a statistical equity divide in access to the arts. While there is nuance to the data across type of art instruction (drama, music, or visual), it can be concluded that there exists a correlation between poverty rates and arts availability. For example, "The percentage of public secondary schools that offered instruction in drama/theatre in the 2008-09 school year was smaller in schools with the highest poverty concentration (28 percent) than schools with lower concentrations of poverty (41 to 56 percent)" (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012, p. 64). This equity divide is, we posit, predicated on the belief that access to learning and making art, breaking from the familiar and mundane curriculum to encourage the creation of possible worlds, is not seen as the need or the right of *all* students. Art education is reserved as an academic luxury when there is sufficient funding and sufficient time (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). We argue that offering art education and art experiences to marginalized student populations provides a break from the academic familiar and creates space for radical possibility both in the art classroom and across academic contexts.

In this article, we show the value of artists-in-residence in community college. Community colleges have received a great deal of attention in the past years, but rarely for their work in the arts. The economic recession of 2008 put community colleges back on the map due to a re-examination of the American economy, the dearth of work opportunities, and the need for vocational education. Community college students make up 45% of undergraduates in the United States, and most community college students are low-income, racial minorities, immigrants, and older

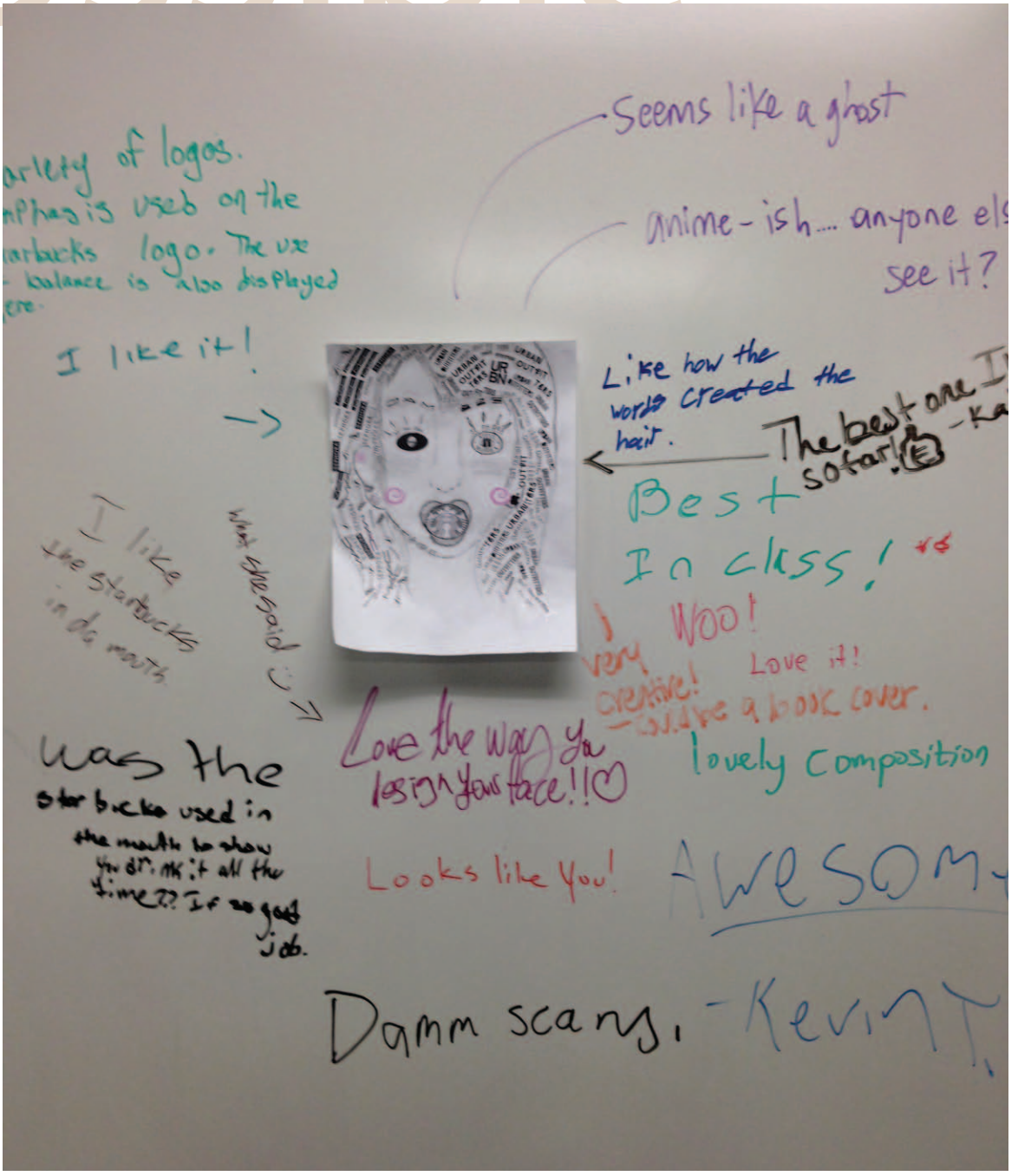

Figure 2. Students' critique of consumer self-portrait.

adult students, with 36% being the first in their family to attend college (Tugend, 2016). Our community college student population mirrors our city's public school population, and for these students the arts and art education, as we will discuss below, are rarely considered an academic priority.

Arts in New York City is part of the first-year curricular pathway for all students at Stella and Charles Guttman Community College. It explores the arts through art history content, visual literacy, experiential visits to art museums and institutions, an introduction to various art forms (film, hip-hop culture, and theater have been topics of study), and artists-in-residence who engage the students in the process of exchange and creation. The findings presented in this article, culled from observations of the artists-in-residence and a student survey, reveal that the artist-in-residence experience developed another type of possible world for the students. In this world, the students find themselves comfortable in the higher education classroom and begin to exhibit ways of academic thinking necessary for success in college: They recognize multiple ways of knowing, they express a feeling of comfort in the academic space, and they see that learning can be associated with joy and fun. We conclude that art education—especially the experience of making art with an artist—is a doorway through which these

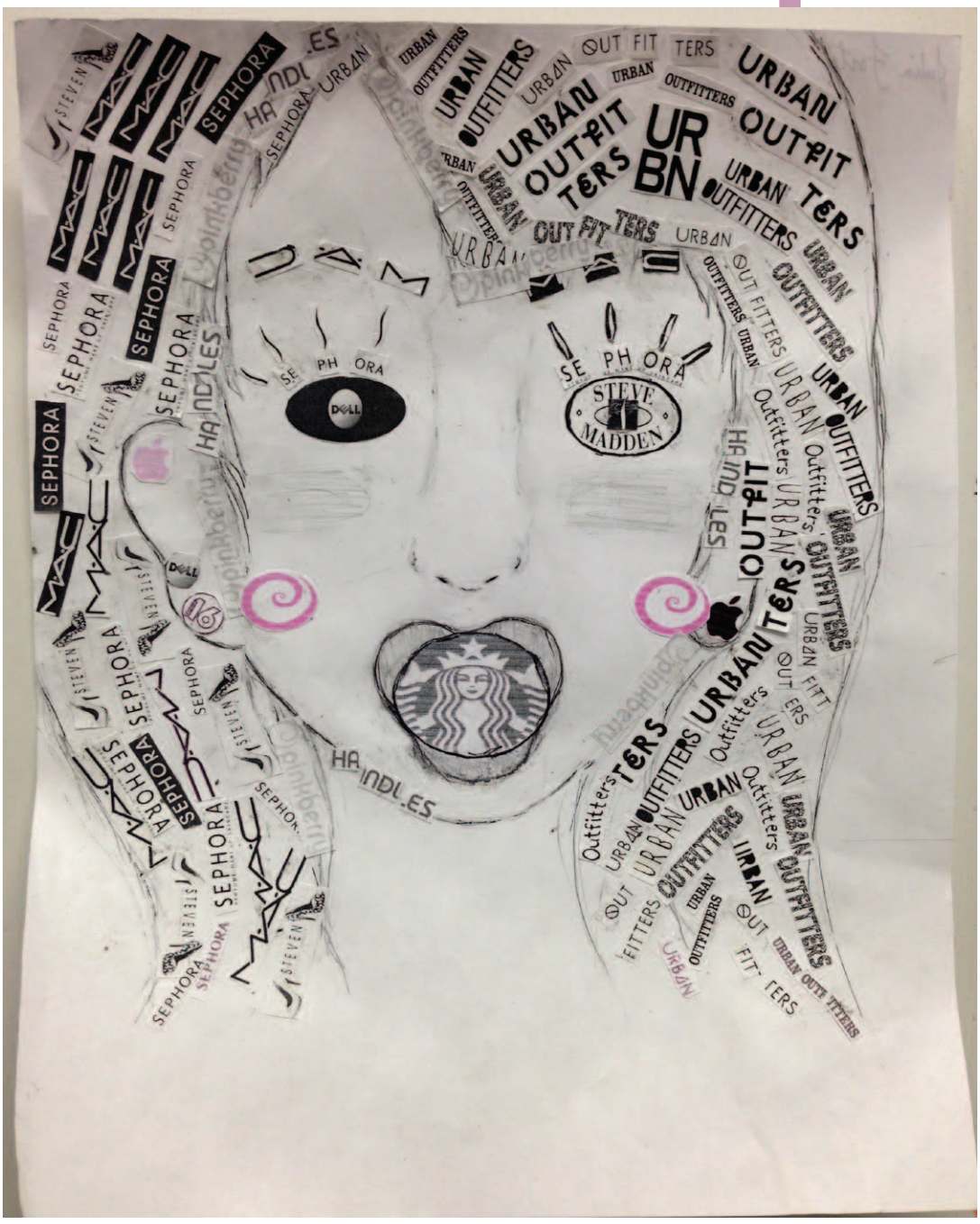

Figure 3. Close-up of consumer self-portrait.

community college students generated radical possibilities of how to be a student in the college classroom.

Contextual Information

Guttman Community College (GCC) mirrors the typical demographics of community colleges across the nation in that it serves "low-income, immigrant, first-generation, and ethnic minority students" (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 1). GCC students largely matriculate from the New York City Department of Education public schools, a system where access to the arts has been severely limited. According to the 2014 NYC Comptroller Report, *State of the Arts: A Plan to Boost Arts Education in NYC*, "419 schools in New York City (28 percent) lack even one full-time, certified arts teacher, including 20 percent of all high schools (76), 22 percent of all middle schools (59) and 38 percent of all elementary schools (232)" (Office of the NYC Comptroller, 2014, p. 1). This makes it highly possible, given the schools that GCC draws from, that students arrive with little to no formal instruction in the arts.

GCC is a new 2-year, public community college within the City University of New York system that opened its doors to its first

students in 2012. Two thirds of community college students fail to meet their institution's standards for college readiness (Bailey et al., 2015), and this is no exception at GCC. Because of this reality, the curricular pathway for GCC students involves courses designed to focus on building academic skills while earning the credits needed for an associate degree. Culturally relevant topics of study such as housing, food, gentrification, work, immigration, and education engage the students in their first-year curriculum, but their academic assignments consist of traditional college-level work (readings, papers, exams, presentations) and are challenging for underprepared students as they begin college. Within this model, students are given multiple opportunities to master academic work, but opportunities to explore and imagine creatively are limited.

During the college's winter term, all first-year students enroll in the Arts in New York City course. Arts in New York City fulfills the arts requirement, and it was designed to foster the creativity that is oftentimes stifled amid the recursive skill learning of academic preparation in the first year of study. In this course, students are introduced to a range of artistic forms, venues, media, and arts movements. They leave the classroom weekly to engage in experiential learning through museum and gallery visits and dance, theater, and music performances. The course is meant to immerse students in learning, experiencing, and making art; it is meant to foster the possible worlds and the radical politics of possibility Greene (1995) encouraged.

The artists-in-residence component of Arts in New York City began the second year of GCC, in the winter term of 2013. At the suggestion of our college's president, three artists were hired to spend 1 week (a total of 6 hours) engaged in their individual creative process with a class of students. The artists were selected by their relationship with someone who worked at GCC and their ability to work with the GCC class schedule. Artists were asked to structure their three 2-hour classes as follows: Class 1: Artist talk. Explain how you became an artist, show examples of your work, and introduce what you and the students will create together this week; Class 2: Creative working time. Guide the students through the creative process of the art form you introduced yesterday; Class 3: Closing activities. Upon completion of the creative process, lead a group critique of the class's work. Artists were asked to meet before and after their residency with Professor Lori Ungemah, the lead faculty for Arts in New York City at this time. All artists-in-residence followed these guidelines for their 1-week residency.

Professor Ungemah attended and documented all artist-in-residence classes during their work at GCC through participant observations and photographs. Three artists of different mediums—Peter Kyle, a modern dancer; Clay Drinko, an improvisational comedy actor; and Vandana Jain, a mixed-media visual artist—were each welcomed and received enthusiastically by the students. A brief synopsis of their experiences in the classroom

Figure 4. Clay Drinko leads students in warm-up.

1. Who was your artist-in-residence?
2. Explain one idea about art (or the practice of art) that you learned from your work with your artist.
3. What was the most valuable part of working with a practicing NYC artist for you?
4. If you could add anything to your experience with the artist-in-residence to make the week more worthwhile, what would you add?
5. In conclusion, what did having an artist in your class for one week bring to your Arts in NYC class?

Figure 5. Survey questions for students after artist-in-residence experience.

is presented below as a context for the students' experiences and the survey data that follows.[1]

Peter Kyle began his first class with guided movement. The students participated, awkwardly and then with growing comfort, and enjoyed the kinesthetic nature of these exercises (Figure 1). Drawing on our college's first year themes of ethnographic research and the city as a research topic, Peter asked the students to conduct observations of people moving around the city as inspiration for their choreographed dance pieces. The students came in on Day 2 with amazing observations of how people walk, lean, sit, stand, run, and touch each other, which they used to construct their own 2-minute modern dance sequence in small groups. They performed these sequences on Day 2 and critiqued their performances. Peter concluded with an artist talk.

Vandana Jain, a visual artist who uses corporate logos and symbols to re-create ancient art forms such as totem poles and mandalas, showed her work and then explained that the students would create a self-portrait made out of the corporate logos of their consumer lives. For homework, they collected data on the name brands of their food, clothing, and technological devices from their homes. On Day 2, the class met in the computer lab, where students printed logos and constructed self-portraits. The students spent 2 hours creating, and the rare silence demonstrated their engagement. A critique concluded her week: Self-portraits were taped on the whiteboards, and each student commented on each other's work with a dry-erase marker (Figures 2 and 3). Next, the whole class went piece-by-piece, as Vandana gave artist feedback. The students basked in her individual attention, even if only for a few minutes.

Clay Drinko, an improvisational actor, had the most energetic classes observed. Using an endless cache of theatrical warm-up exercises, the class constantly engaged with each other physically and verbally (Figure 4). On Day 1, Drinko gave an artist talk on types of acting and the importance of being in the "zone" with your partners when engaged in improvisation (improv) acting. He gave the rule: "Don't think too much or try to be good or funny, just focus on being honest." The students spent the next two days on theatrical skills and small skit development. They laughed, participated, and made the connection between improv and freestyling in hip-hop. One student said: "It's freestylin.' They just made up a whole story right now from nothing. They used their brains."

The most powerful element of the Arts in New York City course to date has been the artists-in-residence program, which thrives today. The data presented below are from a survey after GCC's first artist-in-residence program. As an exit assessment, a survey (Figure 5) was administered to the students who participated. The survey consisted of five open-ended questions about the experience of working with an artist. A total of 51 surveys were collected, and, in an examination of the responses, we found three prominent themes that demonstrate the power of the arts in education.

Making Space for the Possible

Multiple Ways of Knowing

One idea the students expressed after their work with the artists was an understanding that there are multiple ways of knowing when experiencing creative freedom. Student 4[2] reported, "There is no right or wrong when it comes to art… just do exactly what you feel." Student 7 concurred, "No idea is wrong and everyone has a different idea of interpretation." Students came to these conclusions through feeling they had the freedom to express themselves during the artmaking process. While we acknowledge teaching validity and truth is integral to education, our students need moments where they can experience what many highly prepared college students come equipped with: that ideas are open to rigorous interpretation. Student 8 explained that the artist taught them "to be comfortable with ourselves" and to "express ourselves freely" while Student 11 talked about "freeing your mind and speaking your mind," as did Student 17, who talked about engaging in art as a way to "Ease your mind."

It is clear from the students' words that three days with an artist engaged them in the radical possibility of seeing the classroom as a new and different space where one can be oneself though comfort, expression, and various perspectives. They embraced the idea that there are multiple ways of understanding, and that this perspective comes from the ability to free oneself (be it mind or body) to be open to a possible world in which many answers and ways of thinking are considered valid. Their words implied that this

This was a new feeling in the classroom, one they had not previously experienced.

was a new feeling in the classroom, one they had not previously experienced. This offers us, as their faculty, insight as to how they might feel in the classroom typically: uncomfortable, invalid, and restrained from personal expression.

Finding Comfort in the Classroom

Students clearly stated that the most valuable part of working with an artist-in-residence was their ability to, as Student 11 said, "Get out of my comfort zone" and express themselves differently in the classroom. Student 21 said that the artist helped him/her, "learn to do things that you never thought you could do" and Student 6 claimed, "I could express my ideas without shame." Student 4 said s/he, "discovered a side of me that I really didn't know I had" and Student 20 explained that s/he, "felt things I had never felt before," while Student 25 claimed that the best part of a week with an artist was, "learning how to be ourselves."

Here we see that only one week of creative practice with an artist provided an opportunity for self-discovery and self-realization in the classroom. Students' brief introduction to modern dance, acting, and self-portraiture differed from their typical learning experiences and gave them a new and different sense of self in the academic setting. The above comment on expression "without shame" illustrates to us how fearful and tentative our community college students are upon entering the academic setting of higher education and reminds us to be mindful of this. However, after working with the artists, they gained a sense of voice and of belonging. When asked what could be added to make their week with the artists-in-residence better, the word "more" was noted in 28 of the 51 students surveyed; they wanted "more" time, experiences, classes, and mentoring with their artist. The creative process of making art moved the students outside of their comfort zone (or, it seems, their zone of discomfort in the classroom), broke with the familiar, and served as a pathway to self-discovery and self-acceptance as students who belong in the higher education classroom.

Fun Provided by a Break From the Traditional Curriculum

Another theme found in the survey was the idea that the classroom could be fun, and this fun was provided by a break from the traditional curriculum. Student 8 said, "It brought a burst of fun and excitement. Having this artist gave not only me but the whole class something to talk about besides papers and vocabulary." Student 14 distinguished the difference of passive and active learning: "It brought something different; it wasn't much of a lesson on acting but an actual acting class." The same sentiment was echoed by Student 18 who stated, "It made the class from more than just a discussion about the arts, into actually being a participant in the arts." Student 40 said the week brought him/her closer to art, and "I love the idea of taking a break from our regular writings and trying my hands on some arts; it was a great experience for me." Words used to describe the week with their artist included: "diversity," "more life," "vibrant students," "fun experience," "fun and excitement," "appreciation," "creativity," "positive vibe," "more energy," and "togetherness."

Students who worked with the artists experienced a break from the traditional curriculum of the college's first-year courses in which they were able to become participants in an area of study rather than passive recipients. As much as we try to do the work of active and engaged learning in our other courses, it is apparent that the actual practice of *making* art sparked a possible world of fun inside the classroom for our students. They were engaged in learning differently, and they noticed this. Again, as their faculty, this is an important lesson for us who teach the more traditional academic courses as well. How can we include opportunities for creative work, for fun, in our curricula?

Conclusion

These examples from student voices attest to our pedagogical belief that participation in the arts is educative in possibility and that all students, regardless of socioeconomics, have a right to envision and experience what is possible. While many feel the arts are an educational elective—that they are not a necessary area of academic study—our data show that a mere week, only six hours, of class dedicated to a creative, artistic process allowed community college students to embrace the radical possibility that the higher education classroom was a space where their multiple ideas were valid, where they belonged, and where they could have fun while learning. Access to creating art led to ideas about learning that could then transfer to other courses of study. As lifelong educators, these are the possible worlds we want our students to experience in the classroom.

In *Art on My Mind*, bell hooks opens the first chapter with a paragraph recalling her high school art teacher, Mr. Harold. She remembers how he made the Black students feel like, "we had a

How can we include opportunities for creative work, for fun, in our curricula?

right to be there" in, what she called, "the free world of art." She explains, "And in that world we were, momentarily, whatever we wanted to be" (1995, p. 1). We saw similar feelings emerge from our community college students after only one week of artmaking. If we can make space for that possibility, for that radical revisioning, through bringing creativity and art into the curriculum—both in art courses and other courses—perhaps we can begin to re-calibrate the equity divide in the arts and emphasize that creativity is not an elective, but essential to a student's sense of their full humanity in the setting of higher education and beyond. ■

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Endnotes

[1] For a more comprehensive look at the three artists-in-residence mentioned in this article, or the Arts in New York City course overall, please visit Professor Ungemah's ePortfolio where you can find class descriptions, photographs, videos, additional data as well as syllabi and assignments: https://guttman-cuny.digication.com/arts_in_new_york_city_ungemah/Welcome

[2] Student surveys collected were anonymous. Because of this, we do not know the gender of each respondent and assigned numbers to the students in lieu of pseudonyms.