

## **Introduction**

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*Re-Presenting: An International Exchange of Youth-Created Self-Representations* or “*Who We Are, Where We’re At*” (as named by the youth participants) was a five month after-school program connecting ten, sixth and seventh grade girls from Chicago’s West Side with ten girls of the same age living in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, West Africa. Over the course of the project, each group created multimedia representations of their personal and collective experiences with the intention of sharing their work with the partnering group. While I will further describe the *Re-Presenting* project later in this document, I feel it is important to, first, describe the experiences that have shaped this project as well as my lifelong commitment of working towards increased understanding, compassion and social justice, especially with young people in school and community-based settings.

I have long been interested in multicultural education and the development of constructive, cross-cultural relationships. Growing up in Seattle, WA I participated in various “multicultural” school activities that included making tortillas for Cinco de Mayo, constructing masks modeled after those used by Northwest Coast Native American groups, and learning to play the Civil Rights anthem, *We Shall Overcome*, on the recorder. While these activities increased my awareness of people different from my own European background, they also normalized a Eurocentric worldview by treating non-white and marginalized groups as “others” whose traditions and struggles should be celebrated but while existing in an ambiguous past disconnected from contemporary realities.

As a teenager, I attended a large, ethnically and economically diverse urban public high school. Despite this diversity, there was little integration among the student population. The school helped structure this segregation through tracking: the small academic “honors” program catered primarily to middle-class white students, the “remedial” classes to students of color and low-income backgrounds, the English as a Second Language (ESL) program to international students, and the Special Education program to students with developmental disabilities. During my senior year, I grew increasingly concerned about the violent conflicts that often erupted between members of these different groups and, in response, established a student-run conflict resolution program as an alternative to suspension. The program failed, however, because although I had faculty and district support, I couldn’t engage my peers. As a product of the honors track, I had spent most of my secondary years with the same small group of people and, as a result, was profoundly disconnected from the majority of the student body.

I left high school to attend a small, predominantly white liberal arts college in Minnesota. While I appreciated the cause, I was turned off by courses that espoused racial and economic equality but were grounded in theoretical discussions taking place in a classroom among mostly white, upper to middle class people. Such conversations accompanied by required papers on the discussion subjects felt overly idealistic and profoundly disconnected from the realities I had known in high school. These experiences compounded my cynicism of academia, a system that I felt reinforced a perceived superiority of Western<sup>1</sup>, patriarchal forms of knowledge and learning. My dissatisfaction with making sense of the world primarily through reading and academic

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<sup>1</sup> I am not entirely comfortable with using categories such as “Western” and “non-Western.” In order to clarify these terms as they appear in my thesis, I borrow Lutz and Collins’ (1994) definition of non-Western as “awkward” but representative of “the world outside the boundaries of the United States and Europe” used for the purposes of discussing “how these powerful world areas . . . have construed other peoples” (p. 371).

writing led me to the arts. In the art department I observed the same reverence of Western, male perspectives but also found loopholes where I could resist and make meaning of my own experiences through various mediums I felt to be less rigid and confining.

As a printmaking student I worked with Ruthann Godollei, a feminist printmaker who taught her students about the utilitarian and political history of printing. In her class, we learned multiple techniques and were encouraged to use them in ways that made the most sense to each of us. As a teacher, Godollei challenged us to identify what ideas we wanted to communicate or convey and consider why we would use printmaking to do so. This was a very different experience than learning to write research papers in a specific format or learning to make images in the style of Picasso or Warhol. For me, the print studio became an exciting and meaningful place brimming with possibility.

Perhaps even more significant than printing was my three-year intensive study of the traditional music of Ghana with ethnomusicologist and Master Drummer, Sowah Mensah. In order to learn and perform this music I had to *unlearn* much of what I'd been taught in my previous fifteen years of training as a classical pianist. Rather than reading sheet music, I learned parts by listening and watching how others played them. Instead of performing by myself on a stage (petrified of missing a note!) I played as one part of a 40-piece ensemble, often obscured by dancers whose role in each "piece" was as important as any of the instruments.

Unlike in Western culture, Ghanaians traditionally do not distinguish separate categories such as music, art and religion (Bebey, 1990; Ross, 2004). Because it is integrated into all aspects of life, studying music also required learning about Ghanaian dance, rites of passage, customs, politics, and history. Studying with Mensah marked the first time in my academic life

that I had to identify and change beliefs that I'd previously assumed to be universal. Unlike the pluralist multicultural lessons of my childhood, my worldview was not normalized but called into question. Similarly, as a result of frequent inquiry and, at times, confrontation by others wanting to know how I, a white woman, could possibly understand the music of Western Africa (I can't, fully), I was forced to examine my own position in relation to the historic and contemporary ties between Ghana and the United States.

For example, Ghana is located on the Western coast of Africa and was one of the primary locations of human export during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. High demand for slave labor by European-run plantations in the Americas made the trans-Atlantic trade highly profitable. Unpaid labor of enslaved Africans contributed to the development of the United States status as an economic global giant. As a white, middle class American, I have benefited from this status and, as a result, have routinely had access to resources that others have not.

In 1998, I spent my final months of college with a study-abroad program in Accra, Ghana where I planned to further my music study and complete a self-designed independent project. Painfully aware of the inhumane and exploitive history of European colonization of Africa, I was leery of designing a project that might position myself as an "objective" researcher there to study the "natives" or their customs. Having just finished a yearlong course in photography, I proposed a photographic essay of my experiences in Ghana as my independent project. I felt this would make clear that the only subject I planned to study was myself.

Shortly after arriving in Accra, however, I began to question the significance of documenting yet another Western perspective of "Africa." I knew that such practice was rooted in a history of visual representations created to dehumanize colonized people in order to support

or justify colonization (Fusco, 2004). Knowing that whatever I submitted for this independent study would be bound and shelved for reference in a North American University, I began to think about alternative ways of using that space. I wondered if photographs made by people who actually lived in Accra could challenge Western understandings of who documents and who is documented? Would such images counter or reinforce dominant representations of African people as created and perpetuated by the West through its colonial history and contemporary media?

I quickly shifted the focus of my project in order to explore possible responses to these questions. I was specifically interested in working with young people, something I loved and had done throughout my life in the United States. I had many young friends in the neighborhoods where I was living and studying and asked three of them if they would be willing to work with me and make photographs about “what is was like to be them” that I could bring back to the U.S.

They agreed and I began holding informal photography classes in which participants learned to operate a 35mm manual camera, discussed subjects they would like to photograph, elements that they felt made certain photos “successful” and, later, how their actual photos differed from their expectations. I was aware that photography was a Western medium and was, therefore, cautious not to teach notions of Western aesthetics. Rather, I taught participants how to load film, focus, measure light levels and described how images were created by exposing the film to light. Like my printmaking professor had directed me, I encouraged each participant to use the camera in a way that was personally meaningful. For their final project, each participant took my camera home for a weekend to photograph the characters, activities and places of their

everyday lives. The images they created were thought-provoking, beautifully descriptive, and have inspired the work I've done with young people since.

In developing the *Re-Presenting* project, I drew from my previous experiences of working with young people in different parts of the world. Specifically, I wanted to build upon a similar project I facilitated over the 2003-04 school year in which elementary school students in Oakland, CA and Accra exchanged visual (primarily photographic), written and aural self-representations. Crucial to the development of these exchanges has been my growing concern not only of how “Africans” but also how “Americans” are represented globally. Specifically, how are such groups represented, who controls, creates and disseminates these representations and for what purpose(s)? These larger questions led me to the more specific questions addressed in *Re-Presenting*.

My primary research question in this thesis is what possibilities and challenges does the *Re-Presenting* project present for cultivating greater cross-cultural communication and understanding among young people? I define meaningful “cross-cultural understanding” as enabling one to locate personal experiences, and the experiences of others, within and in relation to the greater contexts of history and systems of power. My interrelated sub-questions are as follows: How can young people relearn what has already been taught by mainstream media and, therefore, produce self-representations that don't reproduce dominant imagery? Is engaging in the *Re-Presenting* project meaningful for the participants and, if so, how does one measure meaning created by others? And, finally, what elements are necessary in initiating such a project in a previously unstructured, after-school setting?

Questions such as these have shaped and continue to influence my philosophy and practice as an ever-evolving educator and learner. I believe it is necessary to engage young people in projects that promote understanding across local and global borders. Such understanding is essential in facilitating critical citizenship and potential alliances for peace and justice. It is also my belief, however, that building meaningful relationships with others begins with valuing and understanding one's personal experiences and potential agency as both an individual and as part of greater communities. Therefore, in addition to determining how they wanted to document and communicate their experiences, the *Re-Presenting* participants in both locations also studied the historic and contemporary links between the United States and Ghana and considered how these existing relationships might affect their interaction. In this way, it was my hope that this exchange would recognize and value the experiences of each participating community while developing an understanding of the greater socio-political context that shapes our lives and the nature of how we can and cannot relate to one another.