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Labyrinths as Ritual Art: A Pedagogy of Inquiry/Witnessing/Listening to the Sacred^[i]

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Abstract



image from Labyrinth video



[Video Essay](#)



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[Videotext](#)

Video Introduction

Drawing from the intersections of feminist performance art, ritual practice, and the field of arts-based research in education (i.e. a/r/tography, Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Springgay *et al.*, 2008)), we explore the *labyrinth* and *ritual* as artistic and *visceral, tactile, verbal, aesthetic* spiritual practices of identification of, and inquiry into, the ‘self’ as spirit, soul, and sacred. By re-working ritual art within embodied scholarship, by attending to a hermeneutics of the ritual body in education, we would transform and re-write the social body, our bodies, as text.

The video images are the result of a four month collaborative project on “labyrinths as ritual art and sacred inquiry.” Within this inquiry we witnessed each other making, walking and experiencing the mystery of the labyrinth. We documented our labyrinth making and walking, as well as shared reflective responses to the process in six locations around Vancouver British Columbia’s lower mainland. Both indoors and out, these labyrinths were inscribed onto floors or into the earth with diverse materials; sand, earth, grass, stone, rope, and cement.

The labyrinth is a unifying symbol to learn/teach and inquiry within and from. The labyrinth has activated and served as a multi-layered guide for our collaborative project. We thank and honour the land that we walked upon, its ancestors: human, spirit, plant and animal.

Keeping the presence of a creative ritual practice alive we combine video documentation of our labyrinth makings and walkings, with Barbara’s oral text of trance, our oral scholarly text, and a sound trance collaboratively created between ourselves and healing sound artist Wende Bartley in the center of the labyrinth walked on Barbara’s birthday.

The interactions between the multiple sound and video recordings were not pre-scripted and are mostly random dialogic happenings that occurred during the editing process. Similar to theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh Ha (2005) we experience the digital making of video as ritual making.

The multiple layers of trance that weave through this walking journey enable a multi-sensory experience of labyrinths as ritual art. Trance can be described as a waking dream state and when transcribed becomes what Helene Cixious (1997) and Luce Irigaray (1997) would call a “female sentence.”

This female text is unaided by grammar and traditional sentence structure. Through trance we enter a rich and provocative awake dreaming state that allows us to step outside of our “normal” selves, and enter into an imaginal realm that is full of new possibilities.

We invite you to listen and witness with all of your senses. Walk with us, with open and soft focused attention as you join us in this digital ritual experience.

Terms of Reference

Sacred Epistemology

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define a sacred epistemology in writing of the seventh moment in qualitative research: “We imagine a form of qualitative inquiry in the 21st century that is simultaneously minimal, existential, autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical.... It seeks to ground the self in a sense of the sacred, to connect the ethical, respectful self dialogically to nature.... It seeks to embed this self in deeply storied histories of sacred spaces and local places, to illuminate the unit of the self in its relationship to the reconstructed, moral, and sacred natural world.... This model of inquiry seeks a sacred epistemology that recognizes the essential ethical unity of mind and nature.... A sacred, existential epistemology places us in a non-competitive, non-hierarchical relationship to the earth, to nature, and to the larger world...” (1052).

Ritual

Ritual is as old as humanity (Grimes, 1995) and can be used for good or evil purposes. In its transformative aspects it can suspend ordinary time and immerse one in sacred time (Eliade, 1959). Victor Turner expanded the entrenched liturgical definition of ritual by recognizing it as the crossing of a threshold (Grimes, 1995).

Spiritual Feminist

A spiritual feminist is one who, according to bell hooks (2000) is on a spiritual quest to unite spiritual practice with restorative justice. Who restores our understanding of the sacred and creates spaces for all to critically delve into outmoded belief systems, broadening our understandings of god/dess and divine wisdom. Rooted within a sacred understanding of female embodiment, she seeks to unite the wisdom of inner and outer experience.

Trance

Trance as we work with it is a performative ritual that takes place within an altered state of consciousness. It is an active form of meditation that is not focused on the concept of stilling the mind, which predominates in most traditional Eastern meditation (Suzuki, 1975). The active meditation/performance of trance is a place of expanding the mind’s imaginary; where as Thomas Driver observes “[w]e perform our becoming, and become our performing” (1997, 114). Jean Houston (1987) in her work within “sacred psychology” teaches trance as an inquiry method of “gaining... knowledge from... states of consciousness that are deeper than your ordinary state... that can avail you of more subtle and comprehensive knowledge” (173).

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[i] "Labyrinths as Ritual Art: A Pedagogy of Inquiry/Witnessing/Listening to the Sacred" was performed by Barbara Bickel and Nané Ariadne Jordan at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference 2007 within an ARTS SIG Symposium entitled "Art making as sacred inquiry and pedagogical practice."

In this performance ritual presentation Nane unwound a ball of red thread as she moved through the room. Following the rooms shape, its contents and the location of audience members, she unraveled, lay and draped thread within the space, while the video played and Barbara spoke her trance. She re-wound the thread back onto the spool as the trance completed, as if the room itself were a labyrinthal path that unfolds and folds in again....weaving space like a spider being blown by the wind.

About the Authors

Barbara Bickel is an artist, researcher, educator and independent curator. An Assistant Professor in Art Education and Women Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Bickel teaches courses in art education and studio art. Her arts-based Ph.D. in Art Education from The University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada, focused on women, ritual, spiritual leadership in multi-faith contexts, collaboration, and restorative and transformative learning. It was awarded the Arts Based Educational Research Outstanding Dissertation Award from the American Educational Research Association (ABER SIG) in 2009. Her MA in Education at UBC, which inquired into the body as a site of knowing -- performing itself as text was awarded the ABER Thesis Award in 2004. She holds a BFA in Painting from the University of Calgary and a BA in Sociology and Art History from the University of Alberta. Her art and performance rituals have been exhibited and performed in Canada since 1991. Her articles on arts-based inquiry and a/r/tography have been published in numerous journals and book chapters. To view her art portfolio and arts-based research on-line visit <http://www.barbarabickel.com>.

Nané Jordan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry in Education at the University of British Columbia. She holds a BFA in photography from the University of Ottawa and an MA in Women's Spirituality from New College of California. She has a working background in pre-regulation Canadian midwifery, and education research interests in midwifery, women's spirituality and health. She continues her art practice in photography, textiles and performance work. Her feminist, organic and arts-based dissertation study explores the lived experiences of faculty and student alumni who worked

and studied within the New College Women's Spirituality program.