Foreword

Pamela Osmond-Johnson*, Memorial University*

Chronicling the experiences of academics, community partners, and youth in co-creating *Blackout*, a musical theatre production that explores the complex dynamics of safety and survival for neuroqueer youth, this special issue arrives at a critical juncture in the academy. On the one hand, there is increasing recognition of the possibilities that arts-based methodologies offer as a space for social and political transformation (Triggs et al., 2008/2024). On the other hand, institutional structures within universities continue to be restrained by traditional, exclusionary, and marginalizing research paradigms (Smith, 2021).

Consequently, one of the many things that makes *Blackout*—and this issue—so powerful is its refusal to be contained by traditional academic boundaries. Through essays grounded in poetry, narrative, and collaborative autoethnography, the contributing authors illuminate the critical potential of co-created community-based research while simultaneously broadening frameworks to challenge normative approaches to educational research and public engagement. In this manner, the issue not only offers a model for research as art and art as activism, but it also lays bare the formidable institutional barriers that such work must confront, and the burdens placed on those who make it possible.

Institutional Inhospitality and the Myth of Inclusion

While universities often espouse values of diversity, inclusion, and community engagement, the administrative and policy frameworks that govern research funding, ethics review, and scholarly dissemination are not neutral. Rather, they reflect—and often reproduce—assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge, who counts as a legitimate researcher, and how impact is defined and measured. Ahmed (2012) and Phipps (2022), for instance, have documented how institutions profess to perform inclusivity while maintaining deeply exclusionary norms in practice. For queer researchers and researchers working with queer and neurodivergent youth, these exclusions are often compounded by intersecting forms of marginalization and systemic gatekeeping where performance-based inquiry, poetic and narrative methodologies, and arts-informed approaches often remain peripheral to what counts as 'real' research (Denton & Cain, 2023; Ellis et al., 2019). As a result, researchers who engage in community-based or arts-informed work must constantly navigate systems that were not designed to support, recognize, or reward the academic contributions of their shared labour. Indeed, as Smith (2021) notes, "the academy is still profoundly shaped by colonial logics that define knowledge production as a detached, technical, and elite endeavor" (p. 22).

Subsequently, as Cahill (2007) and Fine (2018) have argued, participatory and critical youth-engaged research must challenge institutional norms that render community collaborators invisible or 'non-academic.' These include policies that do not recognize youth and community collaborators as legitimate co-researchers, that limit expenditures on collaborator travel, or that restrict capacity-building ventures that are essential for trust-based partnership development. These approaches also reflect the ongoing corporatization of the academy amidst the continued influence of neoliberalism on funding structures for post-secondary institutions, narrowing possible futures under the guise of objectivity, accountability, and compliance.

The Leadership Challenge: Moving Beyond Rhetoric

Academic leaders, including Deans, are uniquely positioned to resist norms and practices that discourage and devalue projects like *Blackout.* This means pushing institutions to move beyond rhetorical commitments toward systemic change, including revising ethical review protocols to better respect community-based co-authorship, reallocating funding to performance-based research dissemination, and reconsidering tenure and promotion frameworks to recognize non-traditional forms of research and research engagement. More importantly, leaders must create protective architectures within faculties and departments that affirm and sustain researchers undertaking high-risk, high-impact scholarship with equity-deserving communities. Leadership, in this context, must be understood as advocacy; grounded in a political and ethical commitment to transform the conditions under which knowledge is created and shared. In essence, we must be willing to embrace what Ryan (2015) describes as social justice leadership, harnessing the power of one's position to enable the voices of those who do not share in that power to be seen, respected, and heard. This kind of leadership, however, is not without its own complex tensions, and in the absence of astute political acumen, leaders may find their efforts stymied and their influence. Understanding the delicate nature of this work is therefore imperative to moving the needle, without breaking the dial.

The Promise of *Blackout*: Toward a New Vision for Educational Research

We need more projects like *Blackout.* But more than that, we need university systems that render such projects easier to initiate, sustain, and scale. The academy continues to define legitimate knowledge production in narrowly bounded ways. Despite this, *Blackout* has emerged as a transformative site of learning, performance, and resistance; a testament to what becomes possible when we rethink how we define research impact and excellence and how we make space for affect, community, and art in scholarly ecosystems.

To the youth of *Blackout*: thank you for your courage and creativity. You have created something that will have ripple effects far beyond that which you may ever see, shaping hearts and changing minds.

To the researchers, community educators, and artists who made this issue possible: thank you for your refusal to settle for what is, and your willingness to imagine what could be.

To the readers of this issue: may you be challenged and inspired to see the possibility of an academy that celebrates and supports projects like *Blackout* as a vital component of its research mission.

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