

# A MULTISTORIED ARTIST: HOLISTIC SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN CHILDHOOD STUDIES

**KATE MOO KING-CURTIS (MA IN HUMANITIES)**

*Kate (she/her/ella) is a recent MA in Humanities graduate with extensive experience in the arts and film industry in Canada and the United States. She is affiliated with the Robarts Centre's 'Children and Young People Interdisciplinary Research Network' (CYPIRN) research cluster as an External Associate. In it, she looks to engage in meaningful collaborations to build knowledge with, for, and about diverse young people in a Canadian context, while completing a post-graduate program in Art Therapy.*

## **Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.**

Majoring in Children, Childhood and Youth Studies, coming from an interdisciplinary perspective and using art methods in research have been the intersecting point of several aspects of my life. My life's passions and professional experiences have involved art, peer facilitation, and working for and with children, youth and their communities in Venezuela, the US, and Canada. From literacy, mentorship, and responding to issues like grief and marginalization, my passion has been building collective care.

With over 20 years of experience at the highest levels of the animation industry, I worked as a layout artist at Fox, DreamWorks and Warner Bros., contributing to films such as Anastasia (1997), The Prince of Egypt (1998), The Road to El Dorado (2000), Osmosis Jones (2001) and Curious George (2006).

Upon my return to Canada, I taught at my first alma mater: Sheridan College. In 2004, I became a founding member of House of Cool, a boutique pre-production studio in Toronto, where I shaped my approach to production, training talent, building community, and managing projects at the studio until 2017. After many years in the animation industry, I decided to carve a path toward art therapy. The first steps of this path took me to York University, where I earned an Honours BA in Children,

Childhood and Youth Studies, and an MA in Humanities. Here, I discovered my love for research. As I immerse myself in a post-graduate art therapy program, I continue to nurture my researcher-practitioner role through collaborations with the Robarts Centre's 'Children and Young People Interdisciplinary Research Network' (CYPIRN) research cluster.

## **Tell us about your dissertation work and how it relates to the study of Canada.**

My Humanities MA's MRP (major research project), titled "A Multistoried Artist: Holistic Self-Reflexivity in Childhood Studies," explores creative reflexive tools and key sources to understand our positionality as researchers or practitioners working with young people. Using a feminist research perspective to understand the impact of my work on those I study, and a conceptual framework that advocates for visual and textual content experimentation, I uncover internal and external factors that influence my work in a field such as childhood studies.

Through a self-reflexive 'art artifact analysis framework', and qualitative creative methods such as auto-ethnography, childhood art artifacts, and artwork production, I integrate a multilingual approach to explore positionality using my "holistic self-reflexivity" model.

Two questions are the focus. On **self-inquiry**, how can we use art-making to deeply reflect on our life experiences to better understand our positionality in fields such as childhood studies?

On the **transfer of knowledge**: How can art methods and self-reflexive practices help scholars and practitioners advance healthy youth-adult partnerships?

As a diverse society, Canada requires professionals such as researchers and practitioners working with young people and their communities to embrace self-reflexivity. As an essential tool to deeply explore positionality, it allows us to navigate with humility the many intersectionalities our complex society embodies and the issues that impact diverse communities in Canada.

### **How did you come to choose this research topic?**

My MA's supervisor, Prof. Cheryl Cowdy, indicated there was not enough time in a few months to work with participants for my MRP. From a childhood studies perspective, a youth-centred approach was at the core of my work. Having young people absent from the project turned my focus to how I can be a better research collaborator. This led me to focus inward and explore my positionality as a researcher-practitioner through self-reflexivity.

Searching for a more holistic and creative approach, I became curious about a) using a multilingual method through art and text to express and explore fully, b) being aware of how young people naturally communicate through art, visuals, and words, and adopting this multilingual approach for my project. Learning how to communicate and express myself through drawing and writing as a child made me curious as an adult about how integrating art and words as a scholar would enrich the process of self-reflexivity.

### **Tell us about what you enjoy the most about the work you do.**

I enjoy co-creating knowledge with young people through meaningful conversations

around research and providing a space where they exercise agency!

### **Tell us about the challenges that you, as a researcher, are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.**

There have been many challenges that I have faced as a scholar and researcher. From a positionality point of view, my intersectionality, including age; gender; ethnicity; racial identity (who I am vs. what people want or need me to be); family dynamics; motherhood; and experience level; it affects how I critically present qualitative work by:

- Navigating what is considered 'rigorous' work.
- The impartiality one must justify when critically analyzing issues or aspects of the work that are close to lived experiences.
- Facing the dilemma of authenticity in theory and practice.
- Debating theoretical work vs. lived experiences as knowledge.
- Lastly, but most importantly, witnessing the emotional and mental impact and breakdown that some people's scholarship can have on them behind closed doors, and seeing how isolating that can be.

Doing the uncomfortable work of self-reflexivity, whether through formal explorations as I did during my MRP or in casual conversations, can bring to light the importance of self-care and of building a community of support that keeps us healthily building on scholarship as researchers or fieldwork as practitioners.

### **What are 3-5 main takeaways from your research you want others to come away with?**

1. The importance of self-inquiry; to deeply explore art methods that involve childhood cultural artifacts, such as art, and use a framework (like the one I created in my MRP

called “Holistic Self-Reflexivity”) which gives room for critical analysis and reflection. This also requires awareness of one's positionality as we research and practice and how this impacts how we see, feel, conceptualize, and analyze topics.

**2.** Art disrupts the mediation of pre-assigned narratives through an individual's symbolic language. It transcends language and cultural barriers in a diverse society such as Canada.

**3.** Art allows the exploration and understanding of human experiences, such as identity, belonging, and what we see and feel in our worlds, through a childhood studies lens.

**4.** Genuinely observing, listening, and advocating for equalized youth-adult partnerships can minimize research barriers and improve how one processes and disseminates research insights or findings.

**5.** The practice of self-reflexivity can reveal that exploring issues interconnected with our personal experiences, whether through childhood artifacts or autoethnographic work, can involve unexpected twists and turns. In the article, “Researcher Self-Care in Emotionally Demanding Research: A Proposed Conceptual Framework,” Indian scholar Smita Kumar and American Navy scholar Liz Cavallaro investigate the challenges to the health and well-being of researchers from demanding issues (p. 648). This topic is not openly discussed in the academy and must be taken more seriously.

### **What advice/lessons/tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?**

- Do what you feel most passionate about.
- Be willing to be courageous through your scholarship.
- Know how to navigate boundaries.

- Stay true to your authentic self, and let it evolve with the incredible discoveries you make as an individual and a collective (classmates, colleagues, etc.) through research.
- Surround yourself with authentic people who align with your core values and will open possibilities for you, not close doors.
- Don't suffer in silence. Build a community of care inside and outside the academy.

### **What are the next steps in your research?**

As an Art Therapy advocate and an emerging researcher-practitioner, I am taking a postgrad program in Art Therapy to do practice and participatory-based research with young people and their diverse communities in Canada. This would be through languages native to young people, such as technology, visual culture, and social justice. And I hope also to continue collaborating with the inspiring community at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies!

<sup>1</sup> Kumar, Smita, and Liz Cavallaro. “Researcher Self-Care in Emotionally Demanding Research: A Proposed Conceptual Framework.” *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 28, no. 4, Mar. 2018, pp. 648–658, doi:10.1177/1049732317746377.