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The yellow crayon: rhetoric, mental disability, and art education

Jennifer (Eisenhauer) Richardson

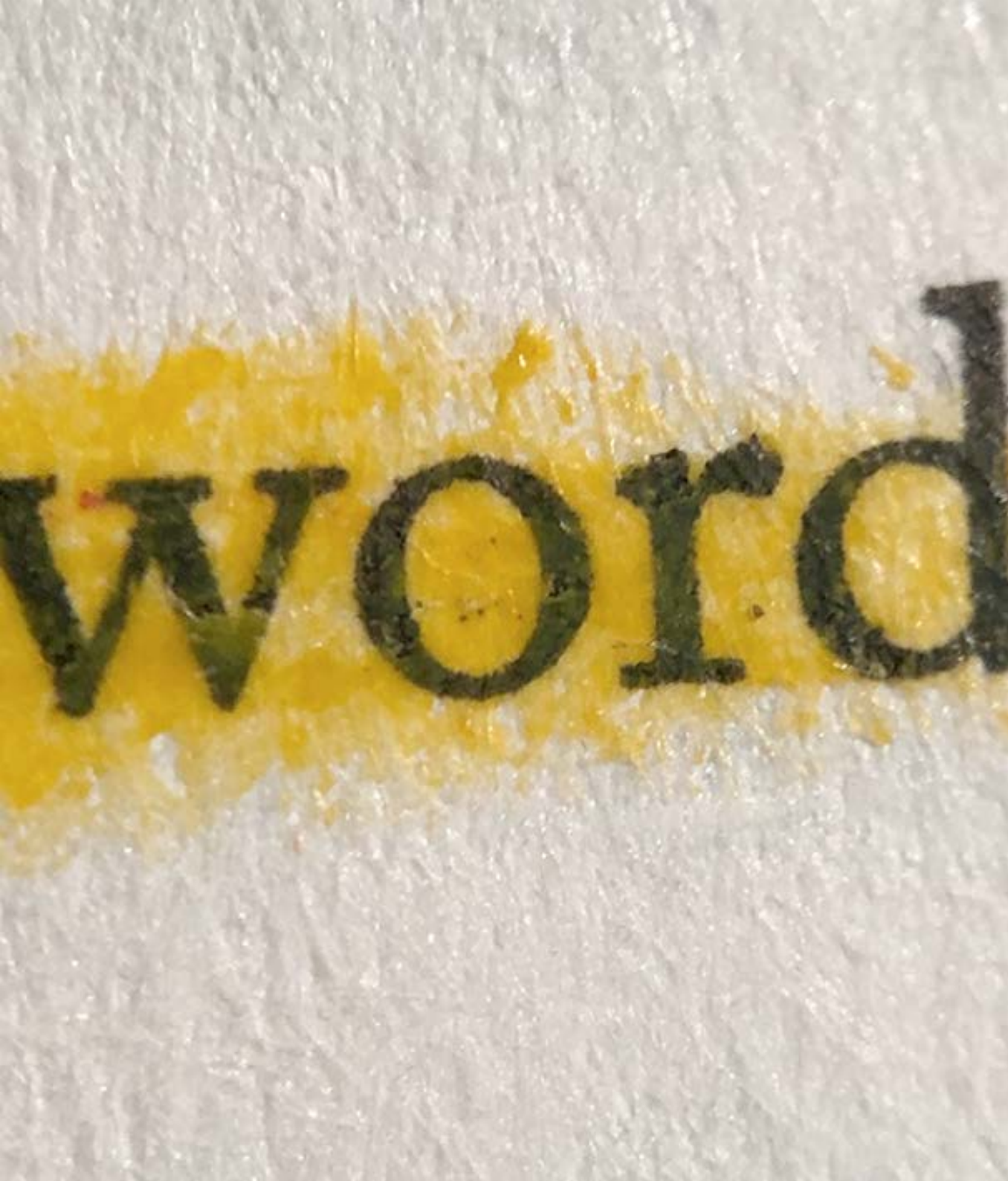
Associate Professor
Arts Administration, Education, and Policy
The Ohio State University
Columbus, OH
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Jennifer (Eisenhauer) Richardson is an Associate Professor in the Arts Administration, Education, and Policy Department at The Ohio State University. Her research, which is situated at the intersections of critical disability studies, Mad studies, arts methodologies, and art education, engages questions surrounding the practices of disabled, Mad, and neurodiverse artists and writers and the historical and contemporary discourses and ideologies that frame the ways in which their creative work is understood and approached in art education. Her research has been published in journals and books including *Studies in Art Education*, *Visual Arts Research*, *Art Education*, *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, *Contemporary Art and Culture in Disability Studies* (Wexler and Derby, Eds.), *M/othering and a Bodied Curriculum* (Springgay and Freedman, Eds.) and *All about the Girl: Power, Culture, and Identity* (Harris, Ed.) among others. Her prose and poetry have been published in *Rogue Agent*, *Wordgathering*, *Connotations Press*, *DSQ*, and *South Loop Review*.

Abstract

In this visual essay, I begin with a short piece of creative writing through which to first reflect upon discussions within disability studies about the construction of Mad and neurodiverse subjects and subjects with mental disabilities as not being rhetorical, and subsequently non-human (Price, 2011; Prendergast, 2001; Yergeau, 2018). I explore the importance of first-person representations of mental disability for art education as integral for the critical investigation of the social, cultural, and political ramifications of sanism and ableism as they intersect with other forms of oppression. I consider found poetics, not simply as a form of writing, but as a theoretical engagement with the ways in which I have been previously storied in social, cultural and psychiatric discourses.

Keywords: mental disability, mental illness, art education, rhetoric, Mad studies, disability studies



In an isolated room in the psychiatric section of the emergency room, the gurney beneath my body is hard and uncomfortable. Two disgruntled men, a police officer and medical technician, sit outside the door serving as guards and mumble about “these patients” who I know they see most definitely as Other than themselves, as Outsiders.

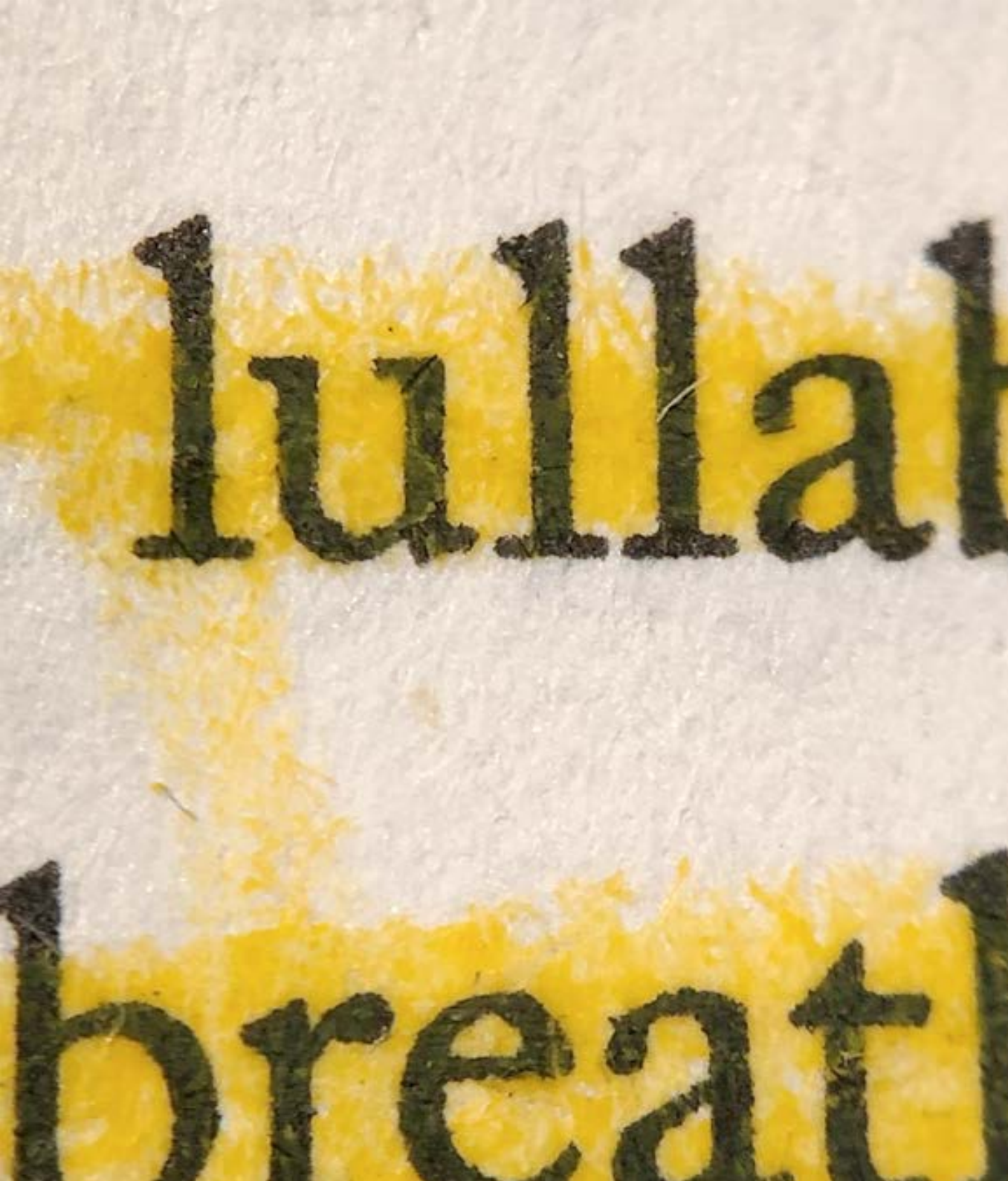
I say that I want to write and the hospital technician gives me a recycled piece of paper and a yellow crayon. So, I lie back down and grab my copy of Terry Tempest Williams’ (2011) book *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations of Voice*, a book I asked my husband to bring me. I take that yellow crayon and highlight words to create a found poem.

The first voice

*my mother
womb from
world*

*before the umbilicus
she cradled me*

*a lullaby
breathing.*



The psychiatric emergency room is a separate, but not equal space in which people labeled “psychiatric patients” become positioned as both not being rhetorical and non-human. Within a discourse that works from a presumption of what is in the “best interest” of a person, framed through a biomedical approach, experiences of exclusion, dehumanization, marginalization, and trauma are often perpetuated. One experience of violence is to know that you have lost all power to be heard and that ultimately you are presumed to not even be speaking. When a woman with a mental disability is handed a yellow crayon with which to write, an assumption is made that both a woman and a person with a mental disability has nothing to say. As Margaret Price (2011) writes:

We speak from positions that are assumed to be subhuman, even non-human; and therefore, when we do speak, our words go unheeded.... In concrete terms, this means that persons with mental disabilities are presumed to not be competent, nor understandable, nor valuable, nor whole. We are placed in institutions, medicated, lobotomized, shocked, or simply left to survive without homes. The failure to make sense, as measured against and by those with “normal” minds means a loss of personhood. (p. 26)

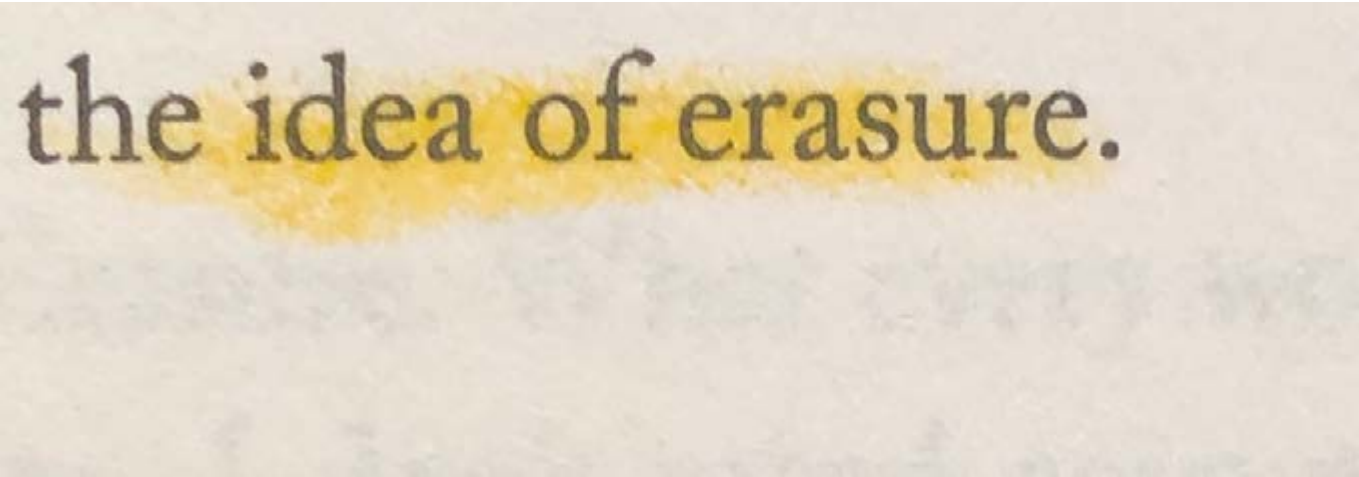
As Melanie Yergeau (2018) critiques in relationship to autism, a designation of not being rhetorical results in being defined as not human. Her argument can be applied to the experience of mental disability.

- One must be human in order to be rhetorical.
- Autistic people are not rhetorical.
- Autistic people are not human. (p. 11)



As a woman, artist, writer, professor, educator, and a person with a mental disability, I wonder if I am writing with a yellow crayon in the field of art education. To identify as a person with a mental disability or as Mad is in a sense to lose one's position as rhetorical, to have one's attempts to call into question sanist¹ practices within art historical and educational practices marginalized as "personal" problems rather than to have sanism recognized as a cultural and social issue that has consequences for everyone. In regard to artists and writers who identify as Mad, psychiatric survivors, as people with mental disabilities, and/or as service-users, there remains a struggle to remove the stigmatizing bright blue hospital gown of psychiatric discourse. It becomes difficult to situate not only myself, but Mad cultures more generally not on the periphery in an isolated ward at the edge of the hospital and the field of art education, but as an integral part of discussions of equity and diversity. Tobin Siebers (2008) wrote, "Closeting involves things not merely concealed but difficult to disclose—the inability to disclose is, in fact, one of the constitutive markers of oppression" (p. 97). However, even in speaking to one's experience, artists and writers with mental disabilities continue to experience the oppression of being positioned as not being rhetorical. Extending Catherine Prendergast's (2001) question, "Does some kind of al/chemical transformation need to occur before the mentally ill can be heard? And in whom does it need to take place?" (p. 203), Price (2011) asks: "What transformation *would* need to occur before those who pursue academic discourse can be 'heard' (which I take to mean 'respected'), not *in spite of* our mental disabilities but *with* and *through* them?" (p. 8).

¹Sanism refers to types of discrimination and oppression of people who are either diagnosed with "mental illnesses" or perceived to have mental differences or experiences of mental distress.



the idea of erasure.

A yellow crayon would seem to be one of the most useless crayons with which to write. When I was handed a yellow crayon, I did not view it as a sign of “respect,” but rather as laden with assumptions that I was too dangerous to yield a pen or pencil, that I was a child, that I couldn’t be trusted to communicate, and that I didn’t have anything to say anyway. However, I deployed the crayon as a highlighter and approached the task of writing through found poetry. I was not aiming to demonstrate that I had the capacity to write nor that I was “competent.” I wanted to write about what I was experiencing and crayons are not generally useful for writing prose. Therefore, it became more about how I *could* use a yellow crayon as a creative tool. Found poetry, as a collage process, is a practice based on the simultaneous deployment of emphasis and erasure. Typically, an author writing found poetry only uses words in the existing text. Found poetry is a process that recycles parts of an existing text, through a decision-making process that doesn’t *dismiss* a prior text, write a completely new text, but converses with a prior text to produce poetic form. The resulting poem was not really an account of the emergency room. However, I do briefly characterize the emergency room in the prose above to provide some context for writing the poem. Rather, the poem was an engagement with writing through the experiences of my bodymind, while subjected to psychiatric incarceration.

The social and cultural delineation of the mental institution and the academic institution is emblematic of a particular construction of rationality presumed to be inherent to the academic institution and an irrationality presumed to be inherent to the mental institution (Price, 2011). However, even within both

rational and irrational spaces the intersections of gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religion, culture, and other identities further impact constructions of rationality and irrationality, as well as participation in academic institutions. Likewise, the intersections of gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religion, and culture with mental disability further marginalize and dehumanize individuals and limit access, including access to health care. Therefore, to consider the potential of those with mental disabilities, as Price (2011) suggests, "to be 'heard'... not *in spite of* our mental disabilities but *with and through* them" (p. 8), it becomes important to consider how the intersectionality of mental disability identities results in different social and cultural experiences of dehumanization and non-rhetoricity (Prendergast, 2001) themselves.

In art education, it is important to consider and challenge the ways in which we approach students with assumptions like those who hand out a yellow crayon, investigate barriers that impede the participation of researchers and students in university settings, and reflect on what narratives pertaining to mental disability experiences are shared and missing. Some individuals never have the opportunity to become educators, university students, artists, and/or writers because of systemic barriers, biases, and discrimination that prevent their full participation. Likewise, the inclusion of artists with disabilities in curriculum often remains either a blank page, by which I mean not even included, typed as a footnote, relegated to a "special" chapter or an entirely different book, or only included within a particular narrative arc. These texts in art education can result from positioning disability within a medical model, through a limiting storyline, and from the intersections of ableism and sanism with other systems of oppression. All of these issues impact how we prepare future teachers. We must ask ourselves, as a field, if we have yet to view disability as integral to discussions of marginalization, equity, and diversity.

The image shows the word "voice" written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The text is positioned on a horizontal smudge of yellow crayon that has been applied to a white, textured surface, likely paper. The smudge is irregular and extends slightly above and below the letters. The background is a plain, off-white color with a subtle texture.

Terry Tempest Williams' (2011) book, which I responded to with my found poem, is her own response to finding that all of the journals her mother bequeathed to her after her mother's death from cancer were blank. Throughout Williams' text, she returns to the sentence "My mother's journals are....", each time completing the statement differently. At one point in the text she restates these sentences fifty-four times, line after line, complicating any ability to arrive at one conclusion, adding further depth to her meditative text and perhaps disrupting the temptation to speak for her mother even as she navigates telling her mother's story. In a sense, the blank journal may have been, as Williams suggests, an act of defiance about the expectations that her mother, as a Mormon woman, should keep a journal. However, she still does not arrive at one simple interpretation within her meandering prose.

To reflect upon the ways in which first-person narratives are integral to discussions of marginalization, equity, and diversity, is to begin with the presupposition that Mad and disabled subjects represent an innumerable number of diverse voices characterized by the many ways that they creatively engage and represent experiences of social and cultural disablement. Just as Williams' writing about her mother's blank pages disrupts a singular definition of her mother's experience, how and why artists and writers engage with experiences of marginalization and oppression in their work does not have singular answers. The intersectionality of first-person narratives by Mad and disabled subjects can contribute to discussions of diversity and equity in art education when understood as reflecting numerous voices, forms, and purposes. Following Williams' engagement with her mother's journals, I can only begin by characterizing these creative works in the statement: *First-person narratives are...* knowing that each completion of this sentence will arrive at a different conclusion. These narratives can contribute to art education's continuing engagement with disability beyond medicalization. A consideration of both the process and content of first-person perspectives offers possibilities to highlight issues of social and political exclusion and bring attention to a political and pedagogical rethinking of the intersections of ableism and sanism with other experiences of oppression.

I am left to consider how my use of a yellow crayon and found poetry can inform my ongoing consideration of the interrelationship between the ways I write about my own experiences and the ways in which experiences of mental disability have already been storied in popular, literary, psychiatric, and art historical discourses. There is the temptation to state: *These stories result in x*. This would define this variable with a degree of certainty in how they impact my experiences. However, what if these become the texts with which I am having a conversation? What if I engage these texts through found poetics? Through found poetics, I would not dismiss these prior texts, write a completely new text, but rather converse with these prior texts. I explored this possibility in my conversation with a historical psychiatric text through found poetry (Richardson (Eisenhauer), 2018). Mikko Koivisto (2018) discusses how rap musicians' engagement with stereotypes of race and disability moves "beyond the binary notions of resistance and submission, or rejection and acceptance" (para. 3). Found poetics can become a theoretical approach that results in forms other than poetry, with "poem," "words," taking on other connotations. The "poem" I find, the way I order "words," their selection, articulation, and potential meanings remains contradictory and plural, just as Williams' mother's journals are.... These texts are.... My story can do this.... My story is....

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