What does holistic education mean for those of us with queer bodies, queer lives, and who identify with queer communities? I playfully spin out scenarios of my child self in a queer holistic education bliss, being encouraged to explore my potential to the fullest. I wonder who my teachers would be? Two spirited elders and trans folks? Would we do queer art? Would I be lovingly nurtured through puberty blocking therapy? Can we articulate a queer holistic education imaginary?

I teach a graduate course in a community development stream of an adult education program. The title is “Embodied Learning and Alternative Models of Community Development”. In developing the course, I did not set out to create a “Queer Holistic Education” experience for graduate students. However, the course has become queerly popular. Each offering over the past three to four years has attracted many queer and queer positive graduate students, including a large number of trans students, as well as students negotiating ‘trans’ issues, such as having children or parents or partners who identify as trans. I also teach a course entitled Queer Interventions for Community Organizers, and while queer students seem to appreciate it, it is not nearly as popular as the embodied learning course. The attraction to the embodied learning course is its fierce commitment to holistic pedagogy and an opportunity to explore what a holistic approach to community organizing might look like. The course affords an opportunity to articulate ‘embodiment’ in ways that challenge western academic knowledge and to forge innovative spaces for personal and collective growth.

As a gender queer myself, in my community development practice I have worked with street level sex workers, youth who have been exploited in the domestic sex industry, and LGBTQ+ communities. There are significant overlaps among these three communities in that queer/trans youth are often beaten and thrown out of their family homes. They learn to make their way on the streets, sometimes turning to sex work and/or being exploited within the sex industry. In Canada, up to 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ+, and similar statistics are reported for the U.S. I work within a community program that endorses harm reduction, and I do a considerable amount of harm reduction outreach. Practically speaking, this entails developing and encouraging strategies for safer sex work and safer illicit drug use. Harm reduction is in contrast with programs that insist that “clients” are drug free and not working the streets prior to accessing resources. After outreach and a hearty breakfast, and in the spirit of harm reduction, I offer qigong and self-defence training to whomever cares to join.

Qigong is a Daoist practice involving breath work and the set I teach is a martial qigong. The qigong teaches how to bring one’s mind to the body-breath, and stay in the moment. The self-defence I teach flows from the qigong movements. It is a perfect practice for street warriors.
I also offer a similar kind of training to LGBTQ+ communities through a program I initiated called Fighting Out (Magnusson, 2018). Given my community, incorporating qigong and meditation into a course on ‘alternative perspectives on community wellness’ seemed natural. It felt ‘real’ to the kind of work I do.

**Situating the Course, Situating Me**

The course is taught in an Adult Education and Community Development graduate program in the faculty of education (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, or OISE) at the University of Toronto in Canada. In its first offering it was entitled ‘Qigong and Embodied Learning’, but I redeveloped it, changing the title to “Embodied Learning and Alternative Approaches to Community Wellness” (see Magnusson, 2016). However, Daoist and Buddhist perspectives continued to be an organizing theme, as will be discussed later. I am a longtime practitioner of martial arts, and a Full Instructor in a Tai Chi and Meditation Centre. I present as gender queer and teach in a graduate program entitled Adult Education and Community Development. My graduate courses on community development lean heavily towards urban grassroots community organizing and activism. The students in my courses have different kinds of undergraduate experiences, but most of them have found themselves working for the non-profit sector as community organizers and activists. They may have backgrounds in social work, community health, nursing, medicine, or they may be artists who are community engaged. The kinds of agencies they work for include Women’s Health in Women’s Hands, Street Health, Rainbow Health, youth programs, Anishnawbe Health, centers for refugee and undocumented people, immigration centers, and so on. The kinds of community-engaged artists I have worked with include writers, dancers, visual artists, musicians, photographers, poets, videographers, et cetera. Most of the students live and work in the city of Toronto.

**First Day of Class and Description of Assignments**

The first session of “LHA1181: Embodied Learning: Alternative Approaches to Community Wellness” is about to begin. The large classroom is chaotic and overflowing. Students are chattering and laughing as if they’re in a bar rather than a graduate seminar.

I bring the class to order by walking up to a device on a table beside the audiovisual equipment. It’s a digital theramin. It looks like something from the Jetsons. I begin playing.

The chatter quiets and students watch as my hands wave through the air, creating ethereal sounds as only a theremin can. My playing is rough. I don’t sound at all like young Gregoire Blanc playing *Claire de Lune* on a classical theremin. Students are nevertheless captivated.

“Why are my hand motions in the air creating music?” I ask.

Initially, no one answers. I am expecting them to speculate on bodies and energy interactions.

Kate, a beautiful trans woman who stands 6’2”, is furiously googling the question. She hates any kind of references to “energy” that are not grounded in Western physics or evidence-based medicine. Intrigued by practices such as meditation, she is known to chase down evidence based neuroscience research linking meditation to plasticity of brain.

“Essentially the human body serves as a grounding conduit,” she blurts out.

“According to Wikipedia”, and she quotes from her iPad, “The theremin is distinguished among musical instruments in that it is played without physical contact. The thereminist stands in front of the instrument and moves his or her hands in the proximity of two metal antennas. The distance from one antenna determines frequency (pitch), and the distance from the other controls amplitude (volume).” So, it seems the hands serve as grounding plates, and the human body is a conduit connecting to the ground.” That science rules victorious is written all over her face.
Oddly, her ultra-scientific explanation did not take away from the magic of the moment. Many of the students are ‘millennials’ and have never heard about theremins, an instrument whose existence is now a mere footnote in the history of contemporary music synthesizers. They loved witnessing the energetic interaction taking place between a body in motion and a musical experience connecting all of us.

I now turn on the projector, taking students via the internet to what I consider to be an astonishing video of a multi-media art installation developed by Jo Simalaya, a Toronto-based artist identifying as a member of the queer Filipino diaspora. The installation is entitled “Singing Plants Reconstruct Memory”. The centerpiece to the installation is a “diasporic” banana plant brought over by Jo from the Philippines.

The plant has been wired to function as a theremin. A small portion on each leaf of the plant has suffered an injury, and the hole sutured with a conductive thread. Through her research in the Philippines, Jo has gathered digital recordings of Hudhud chants of the Ifugao People, and other Indigenous music. When participants touch the plant, it “sings”. Although the participant and plant create new music, the sound vocabulary is formed from the digitized Indigenous music. The singing tells “a story of Paalaal/Remembrance”. As the plant sings, the sound is translated into moving colors that are projected onto a screen. Sound and colors reflect the moment-by-moment energetic interchange between a participant and the plant.

When I initially witnessed this installation in person, my young adult son interacted with the plant by hovering his hand over the leaves. The interchange between plant and this autistic young man produced music and images. Normally overwhelmed by human-to-human interaction, he was thrilled to be communing energetically with the plant. Jo explained to me that initially she touched the wire mesh to produce sounds, but discovered she could touch anywhere on the plant. Later, she realized, she need only hover her hands over the leaves to engage with the plant.

According to Jo’s artist’s statement:

**Singing Plants Reconstruct Memory** is an interactive installation in which living plants are keepers of story, cultural history and memory. The intent is to reconstruct what has been lost and repressed through trauma: the unspeakable.

Each Banana Leaf plant bears scars and soul wounds at different stages of healing. These physical wounds are sutured together with conductive thread. When participants touch the plants, they sing Hudhud chants of the Ifugao People, play instruments indigenous to the Philippines, and tell a story of Paalaal/Remembrance.

This project emerges from my personal experience of indirect witnessing. My great-grandparents lived in the Philippines when it was a Spanish colony, my grandparents experienced the shift to another colonial power during the Philippine–American War, my father grew up during the Japanese occupation of Manila, and my immediate family immigrated to Canada to escape Martial Law.

These events have different resonating points for each generation. As a child, I learned to be a silent witness to these stories of our family’s roots of resistance. As I got older and started asking questions, I learned that adults have the prerogative to forget.

While doing research in the Philippines, I listened to our family stories unfold again. My Ninang (godmother) said she could hear the voices of our ancestors during those times, as those who reside in the spirit world are present when we include them in the telling. While these reconnections across time bring a deeper understanding of my family and homeland, they also bring a longing to make meaning from traumatic history.

The goal of Singing Plants Reconstruct Memory is to bring the story into the room. The participant acts as an indirect witness – one who did not experience the trauma, but whose engagement makes it possible to reconstruct the fragments left behind.

*(Simalaya Alcampo, n.d.)*
This installation introduced students to the ‘idea’ of art-as-public-pedagogy and the potential of art as a community organizing tool to create politicized spaces for pedagogies of healing, solidarity building, and participatory action. It also primes and feeds the ‘holistic imaginary’. The holistic imaginary consists of practices that academia is designed to ‘gate’, and even chase down, expulse, or destroy.

Holistic imaginaries encourage relational practices of mutual nourishment and a collective responsibility to develop life to the fullest. ‘Life’ here does not mean ‘individual life’, but planetary life in a relational sense. Holistic imaginaries can be fed by communities whose knowledges and life practices have been systematically devalued via cultural genocide enacted by the Western academy. Holistic imaginaries are not built on cultural appropriation of Indigenous knowledges, but rather are vested in decolonizing community spaces, and providing opportunities to explore the vast repertoire of life pedagogies afforded by these knowledges. In a queer friendly course filled with students from various diaspora, as well as students who are First Nations, this can mean acknowledging the radical implications of a term such as ‘two spirited’. Specific holistic imaginaries do not necessarily need to be spiritual—there must be space for holistic secular humanism. Holistic imaginaries, secular or otherwise, can feed into community organizing, creating spaces of belonging and community life that is in stark contrast with, say, the global financialized imaginary.

Following the video presentation of the Singing Plant installation, I drew students’ attention to the section in their course syllabi on “assignments”. I explained that one of the major assignments for the course was to work in groups to produce an “art-as-public-pedagogy” installation to take place the final evening of class. The Singing Plant installation was an excellent model of how to engage themes emerging from queer diasporic experience, and produce decolonizing, interactive art-as-public-pedagogy. The installation emerges from a holistic, queer diasporic place.

The course assignments unfold in three stages. In the first assignment, students submit a proposal for using embodied art forms as vehicles for community organizing. Examples can include theatre-of-the-oppressed, slam poetry, dance, singing, drumming, dub poetry, experiential outdoor education, meditation, and so on. Students are asked to organize the proposal into three themes. First, they are to describe how their activity would build community. For example, some of the communities students worked in included an Iranian queer diasporic community, Muslim-identified women experiencing Islamophobic violence, South Asian women who had recently immigrated, men in a compulsory domestic violence program, Indigenous urban youth, Afghani refugee women, Asian queer diasporic youth, undocumented youth, and so on. Second, students were to think through how to organize activities such that the program they were proposing not only built community but “hooked into” social movements. For example, the person developing a program for Iranian queer diasporic youth thought through how to do theatre of the oppressed work such that queer youth would begin experiencing the excitement and safety of meeting up with one another, forming friendships, intergenerational mentoring relationships, and a sense of community. Hooking into social movements could involve having the youth initially meet to work on theatre, but later focusing on a collective project in conjunction with Pride Week. They could also spend an afternoon creating posters together, arranging to meet up as a contingent for one of the Pride marches (Trans, Dyke, Main Parade). Third, community proposals were to demonstrate how to organize pedagogies of solidarity building. For example, the queer Iranian community could support Black Lives Matter-Toronto (BLM-To) at a coalition-building rally organized by BLM-To. They could support a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) event by showing up to a December 6 Anti-Violence Vigil with placards and posters that state their group is there in solidarity with MMIW. As will be discussed further on, time is set aside in each class for students to work through these discussions. Pedagogies of solidarity can be very exciting but is also a complex topic.

The second assignment, related to the first, is to work in groups to produce an ‘art-as-public pedagogy’ installation. The first two years I ran the course, an M.A. fine arts student facilitated a session on ‘art’ as public pedagogy and community engagement. We were very fortunate that...
during the first year she became excited about the ideas coming from the class, and she volunteered her time toward helping the class learn how to set up installations, from conceptualizing to advertising to the actual installation event. I learned much from her during those two years, and in the third year, when she was no longer available, I could apply my practical experience to helping students organize themselves.

The art-as-public-pedagogy project was connected to the first assignment in the following way. During the first few classes, a period was devoted to students sorting themselves into groups based on their community organizing interests as reflected in their proposals. There are no rules regarding group sizes, and so I’ve seen an assortment of sizes that seem to work for the participants. Although the timing, duration, and venue of the art installations have always been up for discussion and negotiation, the students have thus far opted to have one large, multi-installation event in a venue booked through our university, and it has been held on the last day of class. Without exception, the art installations produced by each group have been magnificent. Each one has had an interactive component, and has been transformative for participants. The event is advertised as a public installation, and it seems to draw a nice number of people.

The final written assignment is to produce a final document of the community organizing proposal. Throughout the term, class time is set aside to workshop ideas connected to these assignments. My experience has been that by the time students work up a proposal, receive my written feedback, and workshop their ideas in class, their final proposals are of exceptional quality. Moreover, they have something in hand that they can mobilize within their community spaces, and use as a funding proposal to submit to a non-profit organization. Over the past few years, several of the community organizing proposals from this class exercise have made their way into community spaces.

For example, the ‘art-as-public-pedagogy’ installation has sometimes had an inspiring life beyond the confines of the course. One installation pertaining to violence against women has been reproduced in at least one other community space, and contributed to a pedagogy of solidarity building. Hosted by communities of Indigenous women, the event was held in the Native Center of Toronto, and designed to foster solidarity across many groups of racialized women involved in anti-violence work. Violence experienced by transwomen was included in the installation, and helped consolidate the connections to be made across a diversity of women—from refugee to Indigenous women—in terms of multiple and interlocking systems such as white heteropatriarchy. The inclusion of transwomen was a significant historical redress in that a great deal of work in the feminist anti-violence movement had excluded transcommunities. The installation featured a video documentation of women’s violence, and several stations where different modalities of holistic healing could be experienced. The holistic healing modalities were inspired by spiritually centered healing practices familiar to diasporic/Indigenous groups of women. For example, at one station, participants were given materials to create a sand art mandala, giving a feminist spin to a certain kind of spiritual practice familiar to the South Asian women who created the installation. Their idea was that healing from violence can borrow from some of the spiritual traditions they had grown up with as members of the queer South Asian diaspora (see Walcott, 2017).

To summarize, the course assignments were designed to nurture a holistic imaginary that could be useful in community organizing. The ‘embodied learning’ theme is especially interesting to students who embody difference in the context of community organizing, including queer diasporic students. The holistic approach creates room for a range of ways of thinking and working with the body. These include alternatives to Western academic ontology that presumes and encourages a schism between mind and body, and that refuses any kind of understanding of energetic, spiritual existence. One such alternative is the idea of ‘two-spirited’ existence, which simultaneously interrupts Western hegemonic gender binaries, heteronormativity, and introduces an integrative, relational understanding of mind, body, and spirit. South Asian students will often discuss the culture of hijras, and the spiritual and community organizing implications of understanding ‘third gender’ in a historically
situated diasporic cultural context. Mati-ism is acknowledged throughout certain African, Caribbean, and other global South contexts, and is a culture wherein women have ‘official’ relationships with men, and raise children with them, but their most intimate relationships are with other women. In certain cultures, gender binaries are very fixed, but the communities are very accepting of ‘trans’ people. For example, one of my friends from a certain culture was accepted as a boy very early in his development, with the proclamation from the father “Oh good!! I’m so happy to have another boy!!” Now a young, fully transitioned and married man, the youngster was simply raised as a boy. This practice, culturally accepted within this particular diasporic community, is very controversial within the context I live and teach, and is only now receiving attention as a “new” development in the social spaces I inhabit. The controversy is framed as a question: at which age are children allowed to transition? These are only a few examples of what students bring to a class on community organizing based on leveraging the cultural richness of their queer diasporic lives (Walcott, 2012, 2017).

Qigong and Slam Poetry

The previous section explained how course assignments are used to nurture a holistic imaginary vis-à-vis community organizing. The other significant holistic feature to the course involves ongoing, class to class qigong practice and vipassana (or, mindfulness, or insight) meditation. As mentioned, these are practices that I have found extremely useful in various community organizing contexts, and which are an integral part of my own life. I have been training in martial arts for over 20 years, in recent years turning my attention fully to Daoist internal martial arts and vipassana meditation through the Toronto Tai Chi and Meditation Center (TCMC) where I am a Full Instructor.

Students’ introduction to these practices are through my own teacher, who is the founder of the TCMC, and head instructor, Andy James (the Shifu, which means someone who has become adept in all these arts and who also teaches). He comes to one class session and does a wonderful workshop on qigong and vipassana mediation. Because he also writes on these topics, making connections between market driven society, environmental crises, and the benefits of more holistic ‘ageless spiritualities’, he is a welcomed guest in a course on community development. Students are assigned some of his writing prior to his class visit.

I then continue the qigong practices for the beginning portion of each class throughout the remainder of the term. We end class sessions with a relatively small session—five to ten minutes—of vipassana mediation. By the end of the term, students know how to perform the entire series of what is termed the ‘Five Yin Organ’ qigong exercise, and they gain a rudimentary understanding of vipassana practice. Each class is three hours, once a week. The qigong exercises take up about half an hour of each class. I cannot go into too much detail about the Five Yin Organ exercises, except to say that they are used in qigong as exercises to address stagnant or aberrant qi in the yin organs, which include the lungs, kidneys, heart, liver, and spleen. There is a great deal of Daoist theory, including yin–yang theory and five-element theory, that is relevant. For purpose of this chapter, it is very important to understand that bringing harmonious balance to this system of organs involves a profound emotional detoxification. Mind, body, emotions, and energy cannot be separated. Detoxing the liver will dissipate anger, improve the health of the liver, and promote overall physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, for example.

In addition to the qigong exercises, I have students work on two different embodied arts, namely theatre of the oppressed and slam poetry. I assign several graduate level readings on how to use embodied arts in community organizing contexts, and, during the most recent course offering, we worked on these two embodied arts. These two arts were chosen based on previous course feedback where I initially tried a new art form each class, and students felt overwhelmed, preferring to concentrate on only two art forms in depth. For each of these classes I bring in guest instructors. For the theatre of the oppressed classes, various experienced instructors do workshops with the students. For
the slam poetry classes, the guest instructor is a gifted drama coach who does an amazing workshop on connecting ‘voice to body’, but who also is an expert on holistic education. In fact, she is one of the editors of this volume . . . Kelli Nigh. Two class evenings are chosen as Slam Poetry Night. Before throwing down their ‘Slams’, Kelli’s workshop helps students ‘connect’ in a profound way to the embodied spoken word aspect of the poetry. By the end of the workshop, they can truly embody their performed spoken word, and the Slam Poetry Evenings prove to be amazingly powerful events. By experiencing it themselves, students gain an understanding into why Slam Poetry is used extensively in community organizing contexts (e.g., Chepp, 2016).

Here is how the qigong aspect of the course works with the embodied arts aspect of the course, using slam poetry as the example I will work through. As soon as students know about Slam Poetry Night, they begin working on their poetry. I do not require students to participate as a performer, and there are always two or three students who choose to watch rather than perform. However, after the first Slam Poetry Evening, some of the watchers are inspired to become performers at the next Slam.

There is a noticeable queer theme to the classes, and this queer theme is part of what makes Slam Poetry Night fun and powerful. For example, one year a fairly large group that emerged to work together for their art assignment simply called themselves “The Queens”. They were brimming with energy, making the classes fun for everyone. Not everyone in The Queens was queer. One student called herself “Queer Spawn”, because she was raised by a lesbian couple. Another non-queer student had two mothers, one of whom was trans and the other a cis woman. Many of the students in this group explained to me that they have never in all their university experiences had such an affirming bonding experience in a course. I believe my own gender queer politics may have contributed to a certain extent.

In my experience, the non-queer students self-selected into equally affirming themes that reflected their life passions and activism. Some were working on environmental activism, anti-Black racism, or violence against women, for example. Non-queer students cheered The Queens on during various classes, including theatre of the oppressed workshops and Slam Poetry Nights. This kind of queer affirmation from non-queers was seldom experienced in other courses.

Students will have been working on the emotionally detoxifying Five Yin Organ exercises for several weeks prior to the first Slam Poetry Night, and will have bonded over pulling together their art-as-public-pedagogy installations in their themed groups. They will have had significant affirmation of their queer lives from within their own group, and from the other students who make their love and support for their queer course mates apparent in each class. They will have completed and processed several graduate readings on topics pertaining to critical pedagogy, politics of community organizing, and working with diverse communities, including queer diaspora. By the time drama coach and holistic educator Kelli Nigh comes in to run a workshop connecting ‘voice to body’, students are primed for a spectacular evening of Slam.

Without exception, each slam poetry performance to date has been some of the most powerful embodied art I have experienced anywhere. The poetry is skillful and intelligent. The delivery has been brilliant. Kelli and I have been thoroughly impressed by how emotionally deep the poetry reaches. The emotional depth is skilfully tempered by insight and wisdom. The Queens slam down innovative verse that bear witness to the diversity of queer lives: two-spirited, diasporic, trans, etc., and the intentional communities we seek to build—a queer holistic imaginary.

The rest of the narrative is a leap of faith. I do not expect all readers to follow me in making this leap. Nevertheless, I am very sincere in what I am about to write. I believe that the energy work we collectively undertake in the course is key to the transformative, collective healing and community building we all witness. The qigong and the slam poetry work together in a holistic interchange. The qigong opens students in an energetic sense, and provides them with tools for energetic emotional detoxification. Vipassana meditation cultivates loving wisdom. Personal healing and collective
transformation nurtures powerful art that speaks from the heart and soul. In their course evaluations, almost all students have provided feedback that the course was one of the most powerful and transformational learning experiences in their extensive university experience. I have no doubt that the course inspires skillful and creative community organizing once students leave the classroom.

Notes
1 The course involves working through issues of cultural appropriation, and I follow guidelines to ensure that when incorporating practices from my internal martial arts teachings, I acknowledge and fully communicate the historical and spiritual context of these practices. In my community work, I offer my expertise free of charge to communities who would not otherwise have access. An example of an excellent discussion on cultural appropriation can be found here: http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/05/yoga-cultural-appropriation/
2 I am deeply indebted to Dr. Ana Jofre, a brilliant physicist, artist, and educator for her unsurpassed work on the art-as-public-pedagogy projects.

References