Society bonds over arts experiences that help us create shared social and cultural meanings. We often think of creative performance as a mode of entertainment or education; however, I argue that performing arts can also spur people to social action and play a crucial role in resistance efforts by encouraging empathy. This article is written as part ethnography and part autoethnography. Thus I use first-person pronouns. I am speaking of my own subjective interpretations and situating myself as a participant within my research (see Denzin, 2013; Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Performance can help to engage us in social action and increase our ability to relate to others as a means of building coalitions and resilience. During the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020 that saw more than 2.6 billion people confined to their homes (Jankowicz, 2020), musicians, actors, painters, and all other types of artists shared content online in order to help us cope with rising death tolls, social isolation, and extreme levels of uncertainty. An influx of internet traffic caused Netflix and YouTube to lessen the quality of their streaming services in Europe in order to preserve internet integrity, demonstrating that in times of crisis, we rely on artists and performances (Porter, 2020). Online content aimed at bolstering coalitions revealed the value of social services, free redistribution of goods, and social movements such as caremongering—networks of people who work to support their communities through mutual aid. These networks may distribute food, complete errands for those who cannot, etc. The proliferation of arts content that helped people cope with the pandemic shows the importance of performance as a means to help us build resilience and finds ways to relate to one another.

In this article, I describe how I transformed my PhD research interviews about queer antiracism in Toronto into a series of successful community theater performances. I focus on my experience writing and producing a stage production entitled *We without You* (see poster, Appendix A) as a form of public sociology that strengthens scholarship and public engagement. *We without You* was funded for performances in Toronto and Kingston by the Queen’s University Department of Sociology, Queen’s University Society of Graduate and Professional Students, Queen’s University Experiential Research Grills.
Learning Project Fund, Queen’s University School of Graduate Studies, The 519, and Queen’s University Department of Gender Studies. I created a stage production partially in response to Michael Burawoy’s (2005) argument that professional and policy development are often dominant over reflexive forms of knowledge generated through critical and public work, which subordinates a vital part of sociology. Academic knowledge can be socially and politically powerful when it is part of a conversation in which both researchers and the public educate one another. Public work is particularly important to maintaining sociology’s primary concern of engaging with society and the social. Burawoy (2005) notes that “in times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—defends the interests of humanity” (p. 24). Buroway argues that knowledge dissemination in conversation with the public is vital but underrepresented in sociology. We without You addresses this gap by contributing to reflexive knowledge mobilization.

For 6 months in 2017, I lived in Toronto in order to interview people who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit, and/or asexual (LGBTQQIP2SA) about race and antiracism and engage in participant observation at LGBTQQIP2SA-focused events. I will refer to LGBTQQIP2SA collectively using the terms “queer” or “rainbow community.” The term “rainbow community” stems from queer-focused social organizing as a way to avoid using acronyms that cannot fully represent the diversity in queer descriptions of self. I also sometimes use the term “queer” because I find the term empowering and I support efforts to reclaim the term “queer” for the rainbow community.

I interviewed people from two categories: those who self-identify as part of the rainbow community and those who work for queer-focused organizations in Toronto, such as Pride Toronto. The interview data from people in the first category directed the organizations examined in the second category. In total, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews for my study. All 17 participants self-identified as part of the rainbow community and 5 participants had experience working with queer-focused organizations.

Interview questions for queer participants included the following: What words do you use to describe your sexual identity? Have you attended any events that focus on the intersections between race and sexual identifications? These questions attempt to document practices in the rainbow community to build an understanding of the diversity and social relations in Toronto. Questions for organizational representatives included the following: What are your most common events? How and where are events advertised? Can you recall whether people of color generally attend your organizations’ events? Does your organization hold any events or provide any services oriented toward queer people of color? These questions are designed to generate data on organizational practices and how they might support or exclude queer expressions and/or people of color. My interview questions were designed to capture the relationships between queer representation and practices in relational, internal, and community-based terms.

I invited people to participate in my study through public advertising and recruiting at public events and organizational meetings. People who were aware of my research informed their friends and acquaintances, some of whom also participated. Thus, information about my project spread beyond initial recruitment sites. Word-of-mouth advertising through local networks of individuals helped with recruitment efforts, and working with local community members helped to establish trust with participants (Brotman et al., 2002). I recruited a diverse sample of participants who range in age from 18 to their late fifties, with various sexual identifications, races, ethnicities, genders, educational backgrounds, and economic positions. Participants were asked to choose the interview location because people are usually more comfortable speaking in a place with which they are familiar than going to a place chosen by the researcher (Agar, 1996). Almost all of the interviews took place in coffee shops in different locations around Toronto.

Early in my fieldwork, I began to question the value academic articles would have for many of the participants in my research. As Patricia Leavy (2015) notes “The average academic article is read by only a few people, and those folks also have highly specialized education . . . Moreover, I had learned much more than was revealed in those articles” (p. 2). Like Leavy (2015), I had many of the same frustrations and skepticism about the limited reach and capacity of academic writing to communicate the depth of what is learned doing qualitative fieldwork. One way to bridge the gap between academic research and public engagement is to create projects that speak to people where they are socially and materially located than from the relative safety and seclusion of academic publishing (Burawoy, 2005). I wrote and produced We without You because many of the participants I spoke with would not have access to academic publications. Arts-based methods were the best way to share the opinions and experiences of community members in a way that would encourage conversation and social action at the local level. As I gathered data, it became clear that the story participants were sharing with me should have a non-academic outlet that focused on how their experiences and opinions shape queer politics and antiracism in Toronto.

In this article, I ask: How do sociological methods compliment arts-based knowledge mobilization? How can people who do not work in the arts engage in playwriting and stage production? How do the arts mitigate some of the methodological and ethical challenges faced by contemporary sociologists? I contextualize my responses to these questions within a larger conversation about the importance of bridging the gap between academic work and public engagement. I begin with an analysis of arts-based methodologies and public sociology as it relates to critical resistance. I address the first question regarding how sociological methods compliment arts-based knowledge mobilization.
through my review of public sociology and sociological research methods. The second question—how can people who do not work in the arts engage in playwriting and stage production—is answered in the section “Playwriting as Method” in which I discuss the processes and collaborations involved in producing We without You. After describing the processes involved in playwriting, I discuss the public impact of my project in relation to pedagogy and critical resistance efforts by analyzing audience comments from performances. In the section “Playwriting as Community Engagement,” I discuss the participant responses that led me to playwriting in answer to the third question (how does playwriting mitigate some of the methodological and social challenges faced by contemporary sociologists). I show that performance is a powerful way to challenge perceptions of elitism in academia. I conclude with suggestions for further work related to my project. Playwriting is particularly valuable in qualitative social science research, which represents a range of social locations linked to economic status, education, wellness, and ability.

**Arts-Based Method**

Although the development and use of arts-based methods are commonly linked to the 1970s and the emergence of arts-based therapies explored by health researchers and health care professionals, the groundwork for arts-based methods was laid much earlier (Leavy, 2015). The establishment of arts-based methods was made possible by early challenges to positivism and empiricism. The primary challenge to empiricism concerns the language of knowledge production; historically, disciplines that rely on what is assumed to be objective language are given dominance over arts language, which is imaginative and subjective (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Gergen & Gergen, 2017). Research demonstrates how language is socially negotiated and studies that analyze the social production of scholarly questions and findings challenge our understandings of disciplinary authority (Gergen & Gergen, 2017; Haraway, 1988). Separating knowledge production from the languages of objective truth and accuracy opened up a space for describing and explaining the world in ways that are not governed by empiricism alone. Researchers can make use of a multitude of communicative possibilities in order to engage with the complexities of the social (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Having access to arts-based methods, therefore, can increase cultural sensitivity and our capacity for relating to social worlds.

In addition to linguistic shifts, an intellectual movement made the development of arts-based methods possible and challenged the assumption that knowledge is produced primarily through unbiased and dispassionate observations. Social constructionism helped develop an alternative to empiricism by theorizing that knowledge claims are socially constructed and socially agreed on. For example, Thomas Kuhn (1962) demonstrated that scientists who work within shared paradigms produce social agreements about how scientific studies should be carried out and what counts as useful knowledge. Kuhn argued that when a paradigm shift occurs we are not moving toward a greater understanding of objective truth; we are shifting our understanding to resemble something that more closely agrees with the social and cultural circumstances in which we live. Shifts in knowledge production diversify communication and increase the potential for social action. Artistic modes of communication are vital to moving the social sciences beyond traditional ways of enacting research and increasing our understanding of knowledge production.

In conjunction with these two intellectual developments, a large cultural shift at the end of the 20th century helped make the proliferation of arts-based methods possible. Notably, there was rising distrust of and protest against the existing forms of authority in areas of government, religion, and science (Gergen & Gergen, 2017). This distrust is inseparable from social struggles for civil rights, human rights, gay and lesbian movements, and labor-focused movements. Through these cultural tensions, policy and social organizations that favored inclusion, accommodation, and collaboration emerged (Gergen & Gergen, 2017). Such cultural shifts affect academic research, and as Mary Gergen and Kenneth Gergen (2017) note, at the end of the 20th century, “within the various academic enclaves nurtured by pluralism, there was a pervasive eagerness to link the personal, political, and professional” (p. 58). Arts-based methods allow researchers to bridge divides between academia and public engagement in order to commit to solidarity with those who share our struggles and concerns. Academic work is inseparable from the social and political structures in which it is situated and research shapes the social world. Arts-based methods help further projects that seek to better address people’s needs and experiences.

**Public Sociology and Critical Resistance**

How do sociological methods compliment arts-based knowledge mobilization? Situating research in terms of doing public sociology complements arts-based methods because they share central tenants of collaboration, they disrupt the primary of empiricism and the concept of objective truth, and they broaden the scope of effective methodology and communication (Agger, 2007; Gergen & Gergen, 2017; Leavy, 2015). Sociological methods (e.g., statistical analysis, survey, observation, content analysis, and interviews) are both quantitative and qualitative, and they can be used toward an infinite number of inquiries and aims. When the method is combined with an interest in conversing with the public, social justice, and meeting public needs, we can refer to it as public sociology (Feagin et al., 2009).

Similar to arts-based methods, critical public sociology helps cultivate nontraditional forms of academic engagement and this approach can act as critical resistance against some
disciplinary norms. These endeavors often produce tension with traditional sociology—sometimes called academic, professional, or policy sociology—that does not rely on public input or engage with social justice (Eisner, 1997; Feagin et al., 2009; Helmes-Hayes & McLaughlin, 2009). Traditional sociology, as Ben Agger (2007) argues, follows a scientific model first proposed by Comte, which obscures power relations in knowledge production and aims to reproduce present society rather than challenge inequities (see also Haraway, 1988). Public sociology helps disrupt disciplinary conventions and broaden sociologists’ capacity to impact the society. Agger notes that “public sociology is activist in its orientation to the social world” (p. xvii); thus, the lines of inquiry and methods used to produce and enable public sociology should be concerned with social action. Contemporary work on public sociology observes that traditional and activist approaches need not be in conflict. Those working mainly in academic capacities can cultivate projects and collaborations aimed at social action and public engagement (McLaughlin et al., 2017). The struggle for institutional legitimacy and social relevance, rather than conflict, can be furthered by public sociology (Nichols, 2011). Public sociology and arts-based methods can demonstrate the importance of sociological practice to both academic and public audiences (and I further discuss how arts-based methods can help sociologists deal with contemporary challenges later in this article).

One of the primary ways the arts are complementary to public sociology is that they both share in the tradition of the public intellectual. Early definitions of public intellectuals include those who contribute to issues and discussions in the authoritative role of scholar in a way that challenges conventional understandings (Helmes-Hayes & McLaughlin, 2009). When a contributor to public debate no longer presents themselves as a scholar working in academia, they cease to be defined as a public intellectual. However, one does not stop being a scholar when they are not working in academic capacities. Rick Helmes-Hayes and Neil McLaughlin (2009) argue one should retain the title of public intellectual should they occupy roles outside of academia that is enriched by their academic skills and knowledge. Using social science to inform and shape public work at any level (from community-based engagement to international collaboration) qualifies one as a public intellectual.

Artists and arts-based methods are uniquely suited to public work. As critics and mirrors of the social world, artists may be understood as public intellectuals—those who believe in and take seriously the importance of the public sphere and who put out into a shrinking collective arena, one increasingly unable to house real debate, work to which they expect the world to respond. (Becker, 1995, p. 389)

I argue that the work of artists as public intellectuals is vital to the current political moment of polarization. Art enables critique and empathy by making the views and experiences of others more accessible. Public sociology, artist collaborations, and arts-based methods of knowledge mobilization are complementary to one another, and they help us gain a more critical understanding of the social world and the role of intellectuals as contributors to public life.

The current political moment is one of the polarized opinions related to racism, sexuality, immigration, climate change, and wealth inequality, which exacerbates existing divisions between groups. Tensions between scientific experts, social scientists, medical professionals, politicians, business owners, and workers are also strained, and the production of knowledge is suspect. Experts in all knowledge areas are positioned as deceivers, elitist, irrelevant, or trustworthy in relation to competing for political discourses. Current modes of anti-intellectualism are rooted in the suspicion of anything that does not seem to have an immediate use or value (Peters, 2018). In today’s political climate, sociologists are challenged to increase public engagement in order to demonstrate our value and have an impact on the social. Arts-based methods and public sociology can help us meet this challenge and engage in critical resistance against anti-intellectualism by promoting nontraditional forms of academic literacy. Researchers can build knowledge in different “shapes” that act differently in the world than written words in academic languages (Leavy, 2015). Through the arts, academic rigor and the relationship researchers have to their work are displayed in public and tangible ways. Arts-based methods adapt creative processes in order to support social research in holistic and engaged ways that combine theory and practice (Leavy, 2015).

**Playwriting as Method**

In this section, I address my second question, concerning how people who do not work in the arts can engage in playwriting and stage production. Prior to *We without You*, I had never written a script or produced a play. This section focuses on playwriting as knowledge mobilization in order to show why performance is important for academic development and how I was able to produce *We without You* despite not having had more experience in theater production.

First and foremost, my desire to produce a stage production put me in the position of having to cultivate interdisciplinary collaborations with artists and community organizers. I knew that my expertise as a queer scholar focused on antiracism would not ensure a high-quality stage production without some help. Through producing *We without You*, I was able to develop collaborations with students of sociology, philosophy, and Indigenous studies, as well as student directors, visual artists, actors, and community programmers. These collaborations led to a wealth of interdisciplinary education and scholarly development.

Writing a script for knowledge mobilization and community engagement allowed me to analyze interview data in innovative ways. Instead of only coding data for the sake
of finding commonalities and links to theory, I was able to situate responses and stories in conversation with one another. *We without You* puts queer political negotiations and conversations on stage for people to experience and listen to rather than read. The stories I chose focused on the main themes from the interview and observational data: diversity and difference within queer labels, safety and exclusion/inclusion in queer spaces, race and antiracism, and coalition. Performance increases access to these important stories and conversations, but it also helped me know my data better and learn more about the complexities of the rainbow community in Toronto.

One of the challenges of playwriting is the tension in combining individuals’ words into composite characters. The first iteration of the script had 12 characters, which was not feasible in relation to cast size and it was not desirable for clear communication of ideas. Creating composite characters that made use of participants’ actual words required me to pay more attention to the commonalities between conversations and combine similar experiences and opinions into six characters. Although I narrowed the cast to six, there were still positions that were difficult to cast. I had to omit an Indigenous nonbinary two-spirit character and a Middle Eastern gay male character because actors’ embodiment was important in casting decisions (Pelias, 2008). The presence of actors’ bodies argues for or against particular ways of being, as Ronald Pelias (2008) states that “across various forms, performance is an embodied practice, dependent upon participatory and empathic skills and situated politically, that trusts the body as a site of knowing” (p. 192). Because the identity categories occupied by characters are central to their experiences in *We without You*, I had to omit some stories from the script used in the Toronto and Kingston performances. I decided it was important for the script to remain as true as possible to the source material of interview transcripts, therefore I did not add stories to the script after the characters were omitted.

I initially found it difficult to write in a creative way than an academic way. Although most of the script is taken from interview transcripts, many participants spoke using academic language. An early collaborator who helped me refine the script once said that, at an early point in the writing process, the characters used language that would require a degree in gender studies to understand. In order to make the script more accessible to a range of audiences, I added two slide presentations to the performances. A slideshow before the performance began displayed a loop of pictures I took during my fieldwork, along with moments of celebration and struggle in the rainbow community. There was also a slide show presentation during the performances that used memes, definitions for key terms, queer symbols, and pictures of events that affect the rainbow community. The slide presentations helped to add levity and context to the performances. Nevertheless, I think it is important to address the use of academic language by participants. Many of the people I interviewed spoke in academic or gender studies languages, which could be explained by the self-selected sample used in my research. I would also argue that, for many people, the language of gender studies, political science, and sociology is also the current language of activism and queerness. Regardless of whether or not someone has a degree, if one lives in a world that marginalizes their sense of self and experiences, they may be more analytical and reflexive. If one is engaged in activism, they may be more critical about the world and seek out academic languages in order to communicate their ideas and effect social change.

The experiences participants spoke of in our interviews could be upsetting for audiences regardless of the language with which the play was presented. In order to address my concerns about exposing people to the upsetting subject matter, I used a content warning on all promotional material for *We without You*. The production deals with living with HIV, rejection in the rainbow community, and racism, among other potentially upsetting topics. The material is potentially harmful to audience members who may have experienced similar events, and the material can be upsetting for research participants who are unaware of how their responses sound in conversation with other opinions and experiences in the rainbow community. The production may also be in conflict with audiences’ views of the rainbow community. For example, people may be invested in promoting the rainbow community as antiracist or inclusive, and they may be upset to hear stories that challenge those ideas.

**Measuring Impact**

In order to demonstrate the effects *We without You* had on audiences and support my argument that public sociology helps scholars resist and challenge perceptions of academic elitism, I will discuss audience comments that were submitted anonymously at the end of performances. In line with using performance and public sociology to strengthen scholarship and public engagement, I felt it was important to develop and incorporate a feedback mechanism into performances (see Kukkonen & Cooper, 2019). I distributed anonymous comment cards with programs to every audience member before performances began and additional comment cards were made available at an unmonitored table outside of the performance spaces. Audience comments show the importance of bridging the gap between academic work and public engagement from the perspective of audience members.

In Toronto, *We without You* was performed for approximately 35 people at the 519, and I received 13 comments speaking to how relevant and important the performance was. In Kingston, the performance of *We without You* filled our venue, the Baby Grand Theater, to capacity and we performed for 77 people (Appendix B). After the Kingston
performance, I received 52 comments from audience members. Many of the comments expressed how people felt seen, heard, and appreciated. The 65 comments mainly relate to three areas: race, racism, and antiracism; comments related to queer politics and representation; and support for public sociology and performance as methods of knowledge mobilization.

*We without You* centers the intersections of race, racism, antiracism and queerness, and the audience comments reflect this focus. Most of the comments that discussed race emphasized representation and pedagogy, some of those comments include: “I was extremely moved by this performance as I am a woman of color who struggles with sexual identity.” “Lack of coverage of missing Indigenous women is something I already knew, but I didn’t know it’s the same for people of color and LGBTQ+ people.” “Powerful performance, real perspectives from POC in our community,” “I really liked the conversation starters on racism within the LGBTQ community!,” “Black Lives Matter should always have a place at Pride! We are in this together!,” and “It made me reevaluate the paths I’ve taken in life and how those paved roads that rose to meet me may be treacherous, dangerous, wild, bucking & unpaved for someone who isn’t white.” These comments provide some indication of the potential for antiracism and critical resistance against the erasure of people of color from queer social organizing within *We without You* and similar projects that use arts-based methods in order to bridge the gap between academic work and public engagement.

One of the audience comments related to race and racism was an outlier within this subset of comments. Someone responded that they “prefer humor and funny stories to speak about serious things such as racism and homophobia.” This comment might reflect deeply engrained racism and emotional regulation that serves to disappear the suffering of those experiencing oppression (Ahmed, 2008). Sara Ahmed (2008) notes that “uncomfortable” topics and experiences are sometimes reframed in order to center the comfort of others, which produces community exclusion for those deemed improperly emotional. Although humor can be an effective way to discuss racism and homophobia, I felt that aiming to be humorous about some participant experiences in the script would be disrespectful.

The second main area of focus related to audience comments is queer politics and representation. These comments show some audience members’ thoughts on aspects of queer politics and they demonstrate shifts in how audience members think about the rainbow community as a result of watching *We without You*: “Thanks for bringing up the fact that Pride has turned into a party rather than a protest,” “[I] loved the comments that tried to elucidate discrepancies of power within the community,” “I’ve learned a lot about the rainbow community. . . and [the performance] helped me better understand problems Canadians still need to overcome,” “This show helped me broaden my understanding and comfort with the LGBTQ+ world,” and “I cried so much. . . so much being said about not feeling part of a community all about love & acceptance. . . I feel those things.” The audience comments related to the queer content in *We without You* show that performances had a positive impact on how people viewed queer communities and their relationship to queer social organizing.

Some audience comments did not explicitly name race or queerness; however, they are related to themes of social justice within the performances, of which race and queerness are a part. Some of these comments from audience members include the following: “I was delightfully squirming in my privilege,” “I feel this is the exact type of conversation that society needs right now!,” “Thank you! Maintenance of the mainstream = violence,” “[the performance] opened my awareness of intersectionality and made me think of the communities in my life,” and “[the performance] builds empathy and understanding.” It is important to include these comments as they further support my argument that performance and public sociology are powerful methods for pedagogy and social action related to critical resistance. Performance ethnography is a powerful pedagogical method that brings participant experiences to the forefront of knowledge mobilization in order to make material realities and social outcomes more relatable and actionable for audiences (Hamera et al., 2011).

The third main area concerning audience comments is support for public sociology and performance as methods of knowledge mobilization. Audience comments that discuss performance as knowledge mobilization include: “I like how you made research accessible to a wide audience!,” “You brought the issues to life. . . much more tangible,” “the academic world needs more accessible research,” “Love that the researcher’s reflexivity was woven in throughout,” “Sometimes research/academia can be inaccessible—but this made things easier to understand,” “I wish I could see my research presented in this way,” “I love this way of presenting research, it personalizes the stories beautifully.” These comments related to knowledge mobilization demonstrate the demand for projects that bridge the gap between academic work and public engagement. Other supportive comments that demonstrate the impact of *We without You* on audiences include: “I felt like there was a way every person in the audience can personally connect to [the performance],” “I was absolutely blown away and I wish I could see it 10 more times!,” “The conversation starts here, aka more showings of *We without You*,” and “You will need to make more plays like this and cater to a bigger audience!” In the weeks after the Kingston performance, the cast and I were publicly recognized by audience members who commented on how *We without You* changed how they think about racism, antiracism, queer social organizing, and performance as knowledge mobilization. The support for *We
without You and arts-based knowledge mobilization speaks to the transformative potential of using the arts in collaboration with academic research.

In addition to increasing the reach and relevancy of research findings, performance-based methods can encourage people to see the importance of participating in research. Some audience members for We without You commented that they would have liked to have seen more views represented. Someone mentioned they wanted to see a black gay police officer, and someone else wanted to see a transgender person of color. However, I could not ethically write characters that were not supported by participant responses. If performance or other forms of public knowledge mobilization are more common, this may ease the recruitment of research participants because people may think their experiences will be shared in more meaningful ways. For my project, knowledge mobilization was shaped by participant responses, queer and antiracism theories, arts-based methods, and the material realities of people in the rainbow community.

**Playwriting as Community Engagement**

In this section, I address my third research question, regarding how playwriting mitigates some of the methodological and social challenges faced by contemporary sociologists. I have already discussed how theater production helps to challenge political polarization and disciplinary convention by aiming to make academic work relevant and accessible. Here, I discuss the participant responses that led me to playwriting.

Public knowledge dissemination was a central part of writing We without You; however, the production also responded to the needs of research participants. When asked how queer politics can incorporate principles of antiracism, participants referenced arts-based activism as an effective way to raise awareness of social issues and encourage social change. The conversations I had with participants led directly to the development of a script that focuses on rainbow community experiences. To protect the confidentiality, participants are only identified by pseudonyms and some demographic details have been changed. When I asked Zayn if there was anything that he would like to see happen or that might lessen the racial tension in the community, he answered:

Yes, talking about race. I feel—North America is going crazy over political correctness, so you cannot discuss race or use certain words comfortably, and that has really contributed to the separation of people. We’re all nice to each other, and, “Hi, hello, thank you, sorry,” all the time. But deep down—I would never be able to just tell you what I’m trying to do to—Maybe there are groups that talk about these things, but—There is also the shame. I would feel ashamed to speak about it more publicly because racism is shamed here and I feel like we all have some sort of inadvertent racism.

Zayn’s comments about discussing race indicate that arts-based methods can be particularly useful as a catalyst for having important conversations about race. Research participants and audiences are protected through arts-based methods because comments can be shared without revealing one’s identity.

Particularly for my project, there was the issue of linking participants to a stigmatized racist identity. Conversations about race and structural change can be derailed when people are concerned with avoiding being labeled a racist (Srivastava, 2005). The racist is often taken to be a particular type of person with limited capacity for changing racist behavior rather than viewing racism as a structural issue that affects everyone’s actions, beliefs, and life chances (Srivastava, 2005). Zayn elaborated on barriers to communication for gay men:

I think, specifically with gay guys, there’s always the sense of extra defensiveness with each other because image is very important. They have to be very careful how they say things because it could get very offensive. No one would want to be called racist. The last guy I dated . . . he likes Arabs. He told me that should be viewed as a compliment to me.

Zayn is referencing racism combined with fetishism, which he says is prevalent among gay men. His experience of being objectified is indicative of how racism and essentialism in the rainbow community works to erase the agency and complex emotional responses of people of color. The direction given to Zayn to interpret fetishism as a “compliment” displaces responsibility from the commenter unto Zayn to produce the “correct” emotional response (see Ahmed, 2008). Arts-based communication can help people process information about racism while keeping some personal distance to protect their image in the rainbow community. Thus, performance, as a method of knowledge mobilization, can encourage honesty and conversation.

Andy mentioned the positive impact conversing with members of the rainbow community had on him. He spoke with me about some of the community programs he would like to see that might help people of color who immigrate to Canada. He said that he would like to “hear more about Canada because I’m here, so my focus is Canada. [I want to know] what’s happening, especially any true stories that people shared.” Andy would like more open communication in the rainbow community. However, open communication carries some risk, as mentioned by Zayn. Arts-based methods can help mitigate the risks involved in disclosing personal experiences. Alex observed that the arts are being used to effectively facilitate communication and support within the rainbow community when another programming is not available:

There aren’t necessarily services that are addressing, directly addressing people of color and Indigenous individuals but they
are saying, “Okay, let’s give you a voice.” That’s the way people are starting to use their voice, is through art. Arts and music are very much liked.

As demonstrated by Alex’s comments, the arts can help to empower marginalized people. Similar to how Alex names arts and music as effective ways to support people of color, Emily mentions entertainment as an engaging way to generate awareness about social issues. Emily spoke with me about how fundraisers that were focused on fun encouraged her to be more socially active; she suggested “a band or an event or a performance or silent auction” as the most effective ways to raise awareness about social issues. In relation to Emily’s observations, Sunshine elaborated on the importance of arts as a means of entertainment and activism:

I would say getting back to activism, I think music and art is a great place to do this. Going back to my friend in [East Africa] who said music is the way to change youth. It’s open, it’s honest, and it’s a safe place to get these ideas out and perhaps as a society we [should] embrace more art and forms of expression that actually promote these [queer positive] ideas.

I wrote We without You partially in response to participants’ comments, such as those of Zayn, Andy, Alex, Emily, and Sunshine, which indicated the importance of the arts in social organizing. Participants articulated the need for safe spaces in which to talk about race, antiracism, and homophobia. The rainbow community does not always provide spaces to have difficult conversations that are critical of community politics. Some participants spoke about the arts and communication-based programs as being particularly effective for building coalitions in the rainbow community. Through interviewing participants, it seemed that communicating my research findings in the form of a stage production would be a more effective way for my work to be in service to the people I work with as compared with publishing reports and articles.

### Methodological Tensions

Contemporary sociologists face unique challenges in relation to producing accessible knowledge. I argue that social scientists should embrace the role of the public intellectual to increase the relevancy of our work. The arts and performance, as method and social engagement, are parts of our history and should be parts of our disciplinary future. The social sciences have cultivated and relied on arts languages to communicate ideas about social interactions, the self, and institutions for many years. Theories about social construction, role-taking, and dramaturgy use arts languages to describe and theorize about social processes and social interactions. Sociology has helped cultivate life/drama analogies. In the social sciences, arts metaphors are used to understand humans as performing beings who are created and maintained through curated presentations of self and the doing of social life through repetitive stylized acts (Butler, 2002; Goffman, 1959/2002). Understanding the social as a performative achievement has powerful explanatory potential (Pelias, 2008), and Johnny Saldaña (2008) further notes that “performance” as a construct is applied quite liberally in the social sciences today: Culture and gender are “performed,” teaching is “performance,” we live in a “performative” society. If these theories are substantive, then theatre is not just around us, theatre is within us. (p. 196)

It is logical, then, to propose that people may find art content about the doing of social life more relatable to their experiences than written reports and articles.

Although one of the primary values of arts-based methods lies in their ability to challenge disciplinary convention, this is also a major source of tension. Arts-based methods often place research in conversation with the public, which encourages public renegotiations of disciplinary practices. Through public engagement, arts-based research advances critical conversations about research practices and broadens methodological possibilities. The critiques offered through arts-based methods can strengthen public engagement and scholarship, but these methods can also be unsettling. If knowledge is viewed as a process that changes over time than as something that is stable and based on firm analysis, it can be challenging to some researchers who rely on empiricism and objective truth as a basis for research (Eisner, 1997). In contrast to the demands of empiricism to report objectively on unbiased observations of the social, arts-based methods often reveal and are supported by the values and preferences of researchers (Gergen & Gergen, 2017).

There are significant tensions in academia about the legitimacy of arts-based methods (Boydell et al., 2016; Saldaña, 2008). Performance can encourage coalition and social change, but the effect on audiences is difficult to measure and quantify. In academia, we typically measure knowledge production in terms of publications. However, similar to measuring the effects of performance, it can be unclear if publications affect our ability to relate across categories of difference or social action outside of educational settings. The effects of journal publications are measured through impact factors and a number of citations and academic publications are often viewed as the main products of knowledge production and applied to career advancement (Vannini & Abbott, 2017). However, these products of research are not guaranteed to act in the world as we would like them to. Arts-based methods, however, can be more accessible to those who develop policy and community programming, which makes the arts important to knowledge mobilization.

Research on the relationships between whiteness and exploitative storytelling led me to develop a theater piece
rather than a focus group, storytelling workshop, or some other type of outreach that focuses on personal disclosure (Srivastava, 2005; Srivastava & Francis, 2006). Sarita Srivastava and Margot Francis (2006) argue that storytelling spaces are linked to power relationships and marginalized peoples are often asked to tell potentially distressing stories about their experiences of oppression and discrimination with the expectation that sharing these narratives will produce more equitable conditions. However, lasting social and institutional changes rarely occur as a result of storytelling workshops, which reproduce marginalization. Participants whose interview data helped create the script for We without You were not required to engage in public storytelling, which allowed me to avoid further marginalizing vulnerable peoples. In the play, research data are communicated through composite characters; this protects participants’ identities and ensures that they are not answerable to audiences for their opinions and experiences.

Audiences for We without You could have become upset over the play’s material, which addresses racism in the rainbow community. Srivastava (2005) notes, in her research, that when people become informed about instances of racism, they can become uncomfortable and defensive about how their practices may contribute to racism, rather than focusing on institutional change. I argue that this emotional response is related to the emphasis on personal disclosure in storytelling workshops. Audiences who attended We without You performances were not required to disclose information about themselves, which may have helped to limit unintentional emotional responses and promote social action (Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008). Presenting potentially upsetting research findings in the form of performance offers a space in which audiences can process information through theater (Gergen & Gergen, 2017). Performance, as a method for distributing sensitive information, is an effective way to direct people to focus less on their emotions and more on the subjects at hand because audiences are not asked to vocally interact with performers.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article makes an argument for arts-based methods and public sociology as tools for critical resistance and pedagogy that strengthen scholarship and public engagement. I have discussed how sociological methods complement arts-based knowledge mobilization through my review of public sociology as it relates to critical resistance. I demonstrated how I was able to engage in playwriting and stage production despite not having experience working in the arts. Through my discussion of public impacts and methodological tensions, I show how arts-based methods help mitigate some of the methodological and ethical challenges faced by contemporary sociologists. I expect that this article will help researchers see the value in arts-based methods and public sociology and lessen some of the barriers associated with bridging the gap between academic work and public engagement.

If I were able to revisit We without You, I would add performances throughout southern Ontario and workshops at which the public could interact with the cast and crew. The workshops would ideally take place the day after performances to spare actors from having to confront the immediate emotional responses of the audience members. While working on this project, some actors spoke about it as a transformational experience that was emotionally moving. To capture some personal journeys of the cast and crew, future revisiting We without You would likely entail qualitative semi-structured interviews with collaborators. I hope to continue cultivating creative community-based collaborations to help assess and address the needs of marginalized peoples.

Staging academic knowledge mobilization in the form of a socially engaged dramatic performance strengthens community engagement and scholarship. Performance-based methods challenge methodological convention and extend critical conversations related to research practices. We without You brought participant opinions and experiences to the foreground of my research in ways that are not always possible in traditional academic methods of knowledge mobilization, such as publishing in academic journals and conference presentations. It seems clear to me that to make social science more relevant to the public, researchers must forgo the relative safety of academic publishing and cultivate generative, reflexive, public knowledge. The arts can be a critical part of combining theory and practice to make academic work more publicly accessible and broaden our concept of effective knowledge mobilization.
Appendix A

Poster for *We without You* designed by Mark Lazaro (2018). Permission to reproduce granted by Mark Lazaro.
Appendix B

The Kingston performance of *We without You*.

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**Ethics Statement**

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