

ROOMS THAT AWAKEN US: A POETIC INQUIRY OF MULTIPLE SELVES

Rawda Harb

Abstract

Using poetry as a research method, the author wrote for self-expression, self-discovery and self-healing during the pandemic. As she wrote, she realized that she is a different person in different settings with different people. Without intending to ever share this work, she then examines her multiple selves' learning-teaching dance with life using literature by Aoki, Leggo, Dewey, Tajfel and others. She even discusses the notion of multiple selves in life with her young children and is fascinated by their artistic response.

Bio

Rawda is a racialized, queer, neurodivergent woman, mother, adult education teacher and PhD candidate at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, who's passionate about life and building communities. She never had less than two jobs at the same time, she thrives in chaos, feels too much, hasn't learned how to censor, and will never stop being a dreamer. Contact: rawdaharb@gmail.com | www.rawdaharb.com



Prelude: Shedding Masks

It might be disconcerting to some if we say that we are different people in different situations. This is not about behaving in ways appropriate to the environment; this is about identifying differently in different settings. Our entire complex identities might sometimes seem governed by an overarching personality, but we each are multiple selves. This idea is not a new construct. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how our self-concepts are determined by us depending on our social groups. People's attitudes and behaviors towards their ingroup and the outgroup are influenced by social identities. Although we can switch between our different identities or selves seamlessly (Zinn et al. 2022), this is not an act of deceit that we can conjure up on a whim. Having those multiple identities that together make up the entire person is a complex notion, and the identity switch is triggered by external cues, or rooms we walk into—not by choice.

Every person in our lives knows us in a certain capacity, perceiving a snapshot of the immense, magnificent artwork that is our multiple, ever-evolving personalities. As we grow older, our connections and experiences mold us a little each time; hence adding to the art piece. Being an ever-evolving art piece means learning more and as a result, we are both empowered and empowering, by witnessing—not just listening to—our and others' experiences (Nock, 2014).

Every time we truly witness a story, we are changed by it, and it is changed by us. When we retell a story we heard, we make it ours. We modify it, even without intention (Andrade, 2022). With each connection, we learn new stories about others, of their growth, pain, love and so on. We also share ours. The dialogue between different storytellers is a form of *métissage*. *Métissage* in a literary context is the authentic, barrier-free exchange of ideas between writers as well as between writers and their audiences to create a new blended, braided idea (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009).

Stories extend well beyond the verbal. They can be, but are not limited to being verbal, written, musical, physical, emotional, mental and artistic. Stories can be represented and shared in myriad ways, as they are communicated in the teller's way and have to be accessible for everyone. History and education are transmitted through storytelling (National Geographic, 2022; Chancellor & Lee, 2016; Mendoza 2015). Stories, poetry, verse, dance, drawings are examples of how we knew some prehistoric information about ancient aboriginal tribes in North America, Africa and Europe (National Geographic, 2022; Chancellor & Lee, 2016; Mendoza 2015), how we transmitted biblical stories through thousands of years, and how we could enjoy watching Italian opera even if we don't understand the words, or better yet, can't hear them—if we had a hearing impairment, for example.

With every cycle of story-listening or telling, we learn something new upon receipt and we teach when we transmit. Education is storytelling (Scalise Sugiyama, 2017), and I would like to argue that the opposite is true, since storytelling is a form of communication of information, i.e., education. Unbeknownst to us, we teach each time we learn (Aoki, 1993). Education, like growth, like energy, is a cycle of give and take. If we submit that education is like energy, then the first law of thermodynamics—which states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed but can be transferred from one form to another (Chemistry Library, n.d) applies to education. We might lose some to inefficiency of translations, learning issues, distractions or troubles, but the bulk of it is transmitted between us and our surrounding communities. This creates an endless, symbiotic relationship of teacher and student, where the roles are reversed depending on the direction of information travel.

The key is knowing when the right timing is for education transmission. By being receptive, we listen, feel, learn, then by intuitively knowing the right time for the recipients, we also transmit knowledge (Aoki, 1993). When following our intuition, learning and teaching become student-centric, as they can only take place when the student or recipient is ready to listen, witness, learn, and evolve, as a result.

In a classroom, students thrive when they feel that they are heard and respected, and that respect is a two-way street, where nobody has a monopoly on the right of way. When we give them our attention, they give us theirs. Same with our children, our lovers, and our entire surroundings. It is via reciprocal sharing that we create more empathic, more connected communities.

Students also learn better when education takes different forms, which brings us back to storytelling and its myriad artistic forms. We need to build a community (even in the classroom), we need to choose the right time to transmit information, and we need to do it in different ways so it reaches all types of learners. Why? This is the way to teach, and learn with equity, diversity and inclusion. As educators, we talk about leaving no child behind. This is the way to do it. There needs to be art, creativity, writing, reading, singing, and listening; the senses need to be drenched in knowledge in order for both the brain and the heart to be engaged in the cycle of education. The passion for receiving education is only ignited by the passion given while providing

it. When wearing teachers' hats, we can only be passionate when we allow ourselves to open up and express what we love in our way, when we unburden our souls without fear, when we link curriculum to real life and spark that larger-than-life light bulb moment we see in our students' eyes.

Parker Palmer (1997) paints a beautiful picture of how teaching is sharing from one's soul, from one's inwardness, and how we can only teach if we follow the steps of knowing ourselves, knowing our students and then opening up. Palmer's pedagogy is an anti-conformist love affair between teaching and learning. Contemporary [formal] education has become so dependent on rigid curricula, exams, regurgitating information and standardized tests to maintain the conveyor belt of professionals thrown into the world. However, education is energy and storytelling, i.e., art, and art cannot exist without emotions. How can it? If that gorgeous magenta doesn't flirt with your soul or that smoothly balanced chemical equation doesn't tickle your ego, then why would you go back to class the next day? How else would you remember what you learned that day? Whether you are a teacher or a student, in an art class or a chemistry one, it is the same thing. Art—in its different forms—is the thing. Art is in all of us, as teachers, students, dancers, scientists, children, older people, neurotypicals, neurodiverse, able-bodied and disabled. Art knows no limits. It is ubiquitous and inclusive. Art goes well beyond a brush or a pen. Palmer's pedagogy is a descriptive performance, and it aligns perfectly with Aoki's teaching and learning time-sensitive, symbiotic education cycle (1993), which also links beautifully with Leggo's artistic expression leading to self-discovery, self-sustenance as well as teaching (2006). It's simple: we learn when we are wooed by what we are learning, we learn when we are safe, we learn when we are loved, and when we learn, we can teach. Art is the tool, the medium that homes teaching and learning, as they cannot exist in vacuum.

The focus here is two-fold: on the community and on the creativity. In this fast-paced, North American world of ours, we no longer have that "village" that connects us, that helps us raise our kids, and gives us security and certainty in its education methodology. In the absence of our "village", our connections with our surroundings need human investment and creativity which supersede any language (and therefore, its limitations). This is where art comes in. Art creation is the culmination of what we have learned in life so far and what we are teaching, by transmitting knowledge about things as superficial as the art technique, and as deep as about us and our identities, insecurities, and vulnerabilities. Storytelling via art is the way to connect and communicate with the masses, to connect with other like-minded people, to witness our own souls' expressions, so that we are not screaming into a giant void. After more than two pandemic-ridden years of restrictions, curfews, illnesses, losses, loneliness and death, I can certainly say that for me, there are things worse than death. While death is final, it is quiet. Whereas living means having feelings that are lingering, deafening and quite difficult to navigate at times. In *The Heart of Pedagogy*, Leggo (2006) opens his heart about the relentless pressures faced by educators, how he feels about war, losing hope and getting older. Leggo (2006) tells us how weary his soul is, and how he has decided to "live poetically" (p. 441), because "poetry does not describe. It is the thing" (Griffin 1995, as cited in Leggo, 2006, p. 440). Poetry is the thing. For some of us, poetry is a connection to others beyond that void of silence surrounding us during our solitude. Poetry is our way of survival. Poetry is our connection, our type of communication, no matter when, how, or why. It simply means we are not alone. It means we are alive. If words can create a larger community across barriers, then art can create one without any [barriers]. A drawing speaks more than a thousand words, a poem is more potent than a thousand stories; creative self-expression is more alive and healing than a thousand therapy sessions.

This is why the suite of poems were written. It was self expression, self discovery, self healing, and a learning experience. It was creating art with the intention of publishing anonymously online to create connections with others who might have been feeling similarly. Art is inclusive, yes, but it is expensive. This is not about the cost of materials; this is about the personal stake, the time, the energy, and the vulnerability invested. When art is created, the emotions and thoughts that mothered it take a physical form in reality. The product can no longer be ignored or undermined. Publishing this suite of poems will forever, for better or worse, be linked to the writer. In a sense, it's as if she shed a layer that had covered all her different parts, her personalities that she had worked so hard to mask most of her life. As she gave birth to her art, her art gave birth to her true Self. What triggers art creation is similar to what triggers identity change: external cues or rooms, rooms of life. We walk into a room, and the identity that can expand in that space at that time will shine. Dewey (1934) wrote about rooms as well: "Room or roominess, is a chance to be, live and move" (p. 212). He continues, "lack of room is denial of life, and openness of space is affirmation of its reality" (p. 212). Every space we walk into in life is another room, and we are transformed into a particular personality in that room. Whom we become is dependent on how we feel in that room, and how much space we have to be ourselves. When we take the time to realize that we are different people in different rooms, this is when we open ourselves to learning, and by being ready to learn, we are then ready to teach.

Seven Rooms: An Introduction

The following is the story of one woman's experiences in seven different "rooms" in her life. The story is of self discovery, learning and healing through art creation, that she then shared with her children who then proceeded to create their own interpretive art. Each room signifies a role that she plays, which triggers an entire life she lives in that role, with those people, in those circumstances. These roles are all part of her selves. Like a mosaic, she is all of them and they are all of her. Transitioning between her roles is smooth but complex, because it requires vulnerability—a courageous, continuous openness to give and receive (to teach and learn) from oneself, from everyone. Like a rechargeable battery, like an ecosystem: a true living curriculum. She wrote because, as Carl Leggo (2006) put it, she was trying to "sustain [her] spirit and energy" (p. 439) through writing poetry, as it brings "wisdom, sustenance and hope" (p. 439). With such openness, there is risk of heartbreak, failure and disappointment, but there are also great rewards of connection, achievement, evolution, and emancipation.

Some rooms are more pleasant than others, but when she is open to embracing the experience, each teaches her something about the beauty and resilience of the human spirit as well as the power of the cosmic spirit, even in things around us, and allows her to contribute to its growth in return. What happens in every life "room" calls upon one of our identities that needs to engage at that moment. Oftentimes, we may need to wear "masks" as we are not ready to show our self that has arrived. I mentioned earlier that the identity that shows up isn't falsified on our behalf. The "masks" we may choose to wear are, however. A different, true self comes out in different rooms (despite us), even if we choose to mask it. There is such beauty and freedom in being different selves in different rooms connected with different surroundings and different people in each. There is always so much potential in rooms that we like more, but the ones we don't like teach us as well. Dewey (1934) wrote about the potential and kinetic energies of rooms, time and space and quoted Keats's beautiful imagery: "When I am in a room with people, if I am ever free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then, not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me" (Keats, 1818, as cited in Dewey, 1934, pp. 262)

Art as an accessible teaching and learning tool

To test the theory of artistically teaching and learning with her very young children, the writer spoke to her children about these “rooms” to explain acceptable behaviours in different places. Unsure if they could understand the difference between behaviour and personality, the three of them slowly broached the topic. The different personalities awakened in different rooms, and how they are perceived and changed by oneself as well as by others made sense to the children artistically. A surprising post-discussion act of *métissage*ⁱ came out of this woman’s children. This sparked a discussion about a mosaic body, and that body painting can be used to represent each of their selves in different rooms. They decided to artistically represent what they understood from the discussion by painting some personalities that they have witnessed: mother, teacher, cyclist, activist. Furthermore, they went into more detail representing the loving, cuddly mother differently from the strict one, for example. Then, they chose the colours representing the emotions, and decided on the locations and designs without their mother’s input while still communicating those choices with her (for an exercise on consent). The end result is the mosaic of people she is as her own children see her. Her favourite is a green heart that they placed on her throat; it represented, in their own words: “a super Mama full of love that heals” (Ordonselli & Ordonselli, 2022), because Mama’s kisses heal wounds.



Fig 1: Mama’s body as a mosaic of her personalities, body paint, 8 May 2022, [video still].



Fig 2: William and Sage painting Mama's personalities on her body the canvas, body paint, 8 May 2022. [video still]

The blue heart on her forehead represents her “special brain”, as they call it, since their mother is neurodivergent. The stick figures on her right cheek represent the students (or their mother being a teacher). The orange heart on her left cheek represents her activist self. Her cyclist persona—yes, the outdoors is a “room” too—was represented by a green stick figure on her neck. There was also a smaller, brown heart to represent the strict mother when they misbehave.

As they painted, they talked and discussed their mother's different personalities and which ones they liked more and why. They discussed each other's designs as an exercise in peer-review. As the body painting continued, the children were able to communicate their thoughts and emotions not only about their mother, but also about their own personalities and their own rooms, more deeply, openly and eloquently.

* Artwork courtesy of William Farés Ordonnellie and Sage Yasmina Ordonnellie. Video Still by Rawda Harb

Rooms That Awaken Us

Welcome to my rooms: *Zenith*, *Skein*, *Leather* and *Salt*, *Heliopolis*, *14*, *Yasmina* and *The words we don't say*. *Zenith* talks about how I feel as a racialized, queer, neurodivergent woman in academia, *Skein* about how I feel when I am in my classroom, *Leather and Salt* is about my leather couch that has travelled to five homes with me, *Heliopolis* is my current, dream living room, *14* is the birth day of my son, *Yasmina* is my daughter's middle name, and *The words we don't say* is about being with my partner. I am trustingly placing my seven babies in your hands due to the importance of telling stories for growth, for education, and for birthing communities of solidarity.

Zenith

How could a room at the top of the world, full of people, words and sunlight be so devoid of warmth?
She wonders
She plays with her pen, takes a few distracted notes to look present
While colouring window panes in her head
She's almost as inconspicuous as cobwebs under clutter...

It's like stepping into a different portal
She sets one foot inside this room,
and she transforms from a joyful monarch into a caterpillar scurrying ever so slowly for cover...
With a ladybug on turbo at its tail.

It's like dying of hypothermia with water-filled lungs
On a sunny, summery beach.
Inexplicable. Silent. Solitary.

Yet, she sits there head up high until the end.
She knows she has more to offer, but not in here.
(She looks at her name in the Zoom room,
Glances at her skin colour
Remembers what's between her legs
Then looks around the room)
Yeah.
She's invisible in here
But.
When the "clock strikes midnight"ⁱⁱ,
she flies out the door
Because that's where the real magic is
That's where she soars
Outside of this room...

*Skein*ⁱⁱⁱ

She's the one standing at the white board
But they're the ones teaching her
Who knew that a bus ride to school
Is sometimes as difficult as moving a mountain with your bare hands?
The odds stacked against them:
Poverty
Hunger
Orphanhood
Race
Gender
Trauma

Their dreams hiding in their heels drag them to the classroom
While life drags their eyes the other way
Nonchalantly they walk in
(hopeful and fearful)
Blankly they examine you

(still hopeful and fearful)
Are you going to let them down?
(they wonder)
Are you going to raise them up?
(they hope)
Yet. They come.
Every morning, they come.
And it feels like welcoming geese in the North
Every
Single
Time

They come
With their smiles
(hiding their heartbreak)
and their big hearts
(hiding their baggage)
They come
Eager to learn
Eager to belong
Even when they tantrum
They come for love
(and hot chocolate)
They come for safety
They come for community
Then...
Then, they come for academics

Leather and Salt

This room revolves around this brown leather couch
Every room revolves around this brown leather couch
Sticky in the summer, cold in the winter
But the most comfortable bed
It's her safe spot
It's her desk
It's the favourite
even for guests

It's their fourth when she giggles with her children
Her magic carpet when she flies in her world of books
Her confidant when she mutters with frustration
at her students' wrong responses on a test

It hugged her while she healed from surgery
And stayed strong when, on bad days, she cried
Quiet and trustworthy
Even when it hid treats for the Easter egg quest!

The crumbs under it tell the whole story
Of last night's dinner
Or the midnight snack that we won't talk about
But its face
Its face resembles that of an old traveller
There are wine stains from last semester's sleepless nights
There are paint stains made by the two year-old who's in grade 2 now
There are tears proudly acquired during the move to the new house
Their first house!
One or two scratches made by the oldest baby,
the old cat that's now gone and dearly missed
If you look closer, you might even find some dried up tears
From the long nights of loneliness and uncertainty

Just as life would have it
This couch also chaperoned their relationship
It witnessed their adulthood
It was bought during their first break up
They were on it when she proposed to him
They've slept on it
They've made love on it
They also decided to divorce while sitting on it
It was also the safest place
To tell the kids about the split
It was THE place
To give them a softer landing without dishonesty

Heliopolis

The number of times she's changed the furniture in this room
needs a multiple regression analysis
It's full of books, music, colour... and piles of laundry
She keeps trying to fit more things in here
To create a happier, bigger harmonious space in this mad world

If love could be a place
This room would be it
It's the warmest
It's the loudest

It's the Eid room
It's the Christmas tree room
It's the banana tea and meditation room

Too bad the carpet can't hide the toy car tracks
Like it hides dried up play doh pieces
(which are better landmines than Lego!!)

It's where movie nights flourish
And weekend camping nights cuddle
It's the birthplace of her independence
And her thesis proposal
It's also where she modified her will
After discovering that scary-looking lump

She pretend competes over her favourite spot with her children
It's the perfect angle for stretching in the sunlight
While supporting your back
And hiding snacks (shh!)
It's the sunniest room in the house
With its large bay windows
And white curtains dancing in the breeze
Cacti and flowers smiling on the window sill
Greeting guests and mail carriers
Eagerly waiting for the summer to return
(just like she waits for the kids to return every week)

14

Nurses, monitors, beeping, snacks, blankets, spills, ice chips, socks,
bag of clothes, recliner chair, curtains, blue...

So
Much
Blue
(too much blue)
(are there no other colours?)
It's a room of action
The room of the supernatural

Did he really come out of her?
Or was she just re-birthed?
She brought a boy into the world
But he birthed her into Mamahood
And became her world...

The man who will hold her complete heart in his eyes forever, arrived
In. That. Room.

Yasmina

You stumble into my bed like a drunk
And demand to “cuddle on Mama”
At “sunrise”
(the sun is barely out yet)
And yet, at my bedside,
I have a ball of fire
That could outfire the sun

A rumbling tornado across the sleepy hallway
A dancing wave (of hair)
And stretched out arms
That are stronger than vine on an old stone house
Forgotten in the forest

The whole world knows you're here

That sweet, sweet face
That resembles a much younger me
In looks, and spirit (unfortunately?)
Demands that I assume the position

I lay on my back
With your head on my chest
I struggle to fall back asleep
While you kick me accidentally a few times
I try not to complain
And cherish the moment

As you fall back into deep sleep
I hug you like my life depends on it
And feel like I own the world
“How can a 5 year-old be SUCH a pain in the force of nature?”
I wonder (and try not to think of genes at this point, because I would certainly be to blame)

And although I keep thinking that I can't possibly love you more
In that moment, in that bed, in that room,
I fall in love with your gentleness
And your fierceness

A little more
And...
I'm ready to conquer the day

The Words We Don't Say

(Intro)

Words aren't always spoken,
For they have a life of their own
A life in which they dance naked without judgement
And that dance creates more life...
And love
And light
In this life (read: room),
People aren't invisible,
Walls are.

The words we don't say
Erupt passions in our eyes
Rain jasmine petals on us
Draw blankets over our cold feet
And place the kettle on the fire.

The words we don't say
Plant dreams on our lips
Create new lines in our palms
And weave our bodies with one another
So we can hear them giggling...
Whispering...
Dancing to the rhythm of our breath
Softly in each other's veins

The words we don't say
Launch us into love
A thousand times deeper
Than the words we do say...

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Métissage in this context is the hybrid between conventional and alternative classroom discourse, where the conventional method of teaching and learning would be conversation whereas the alternative one is artistic creation.
- ⁱⁱ Reference from Cinderella, clock striking midnight and the spell is then broken.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Referring to a skein of wild geese flying in V formation, as that is the position in which they have the best synergy. V formation is parallel to each classroom being full of connection, understanding, empathy and community-building towards a common goal.

