Art: a skill as a result of learning or practice, from Old French art (10c.), from Latin artem (nomina
tive ars) “work of art; practical skill; a business, craft,” from PIE *ar-ti- (cognates: Sanskrit rtiḥ “manner, mode;” Greek arti “just,” artios “complete, suitable;” artizein “to prepare;” Latin artus “joint;” Armenian arnam “make;” German art “man-
ner, mode”), from root *ar- “fit together, join”
Submissions

ARTIZEIN welcomes submissions addressing the significance of understanding the roles of teaching, learning and inquiring through the arts, relative to the arts themselves. We publish articles, artworks, poems, visual essays, book reviews, digital media and other materials:

• To deepen perceptions about the creative capacities of all people, and how this ability, that is innate to all, unfolds and develops in a wide array of ways, tempos, and settings,

• To inform and engage readers in expansive thinking about what the arts are and can be, and how to teach, transmit, and facilitate their emergence, where it might take place, and how to recognize its impact on those that make and those that experience the arts and their effects,

• To expand possibilities for how the arts as inquiry can contribute to the learning and unlearning of ways of being and knowing for just and sustainable societies (communities),

• To direct attention to instructional approaches (some new and innovative, others neglected or forgotten) that are currently restricted by an emphasis on normalized arts instruction in public schooling and higher education

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Artistic practices are essential and unique opportunities for broadening human perspective and meaning making and contribute to a vision of, and indeed the making of a world. Art engages us as active participants in the shaping and reshaping of our experience, “enabl[ing] us to see more in our experience, to hear more of normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured, and what habits and conventions have suppressed” (Greene 1995, p. 123). Artistic research practices engage us in a dialectic interplay of the visible, sensorial, textual and yet-to-be known. This “multi-textural dialogue” (St. Georges, 2019), is a poetic and visual metaphorical dialogue that embodies perception, intuition, and cultural and metaphysical phenomena to contextualize human experience; producing knowledge through a type of sensory modus operandi (Barrett, 2013). This is an epistemological process for exploring and coming to know the self and the world and for exploring nature and its meaning. These encounters—the images, experience, perception, memories, and intuition are a dialectically complex and critical engagement that are a metaphorical correspondence of our relational selves, situated in archetypes of human experience. Artistic inquiry, found in its many shapes and forms in this issue, are performative modes of knowledge production that give rise to multiplicity, ambiguity and indeterminacy (Boutet, 2013). These encounters interrupt singular perspectives on research and learning and teaching, pulling us out of a moment, an activity, or way of being—perhaps jarring—allowing us to encounter anew.

This issue’s open call has brought thoughtful, critical, and needed interruptions and encounters to the fore that include a diversity of experiences and issues that delve into hegemonic and marginalized spaces. The visuals and poetic articles invite readers to reflect upon trauma, reconciliation, and healing relationships, drawing from family, children, and ancestral teachings found in classrooms, homes, preschools, studios, and in books, nature, and silent spaces. The artist-authors offer us multiple ways to envision research and teaching as gateways to being, belonging and becoming.

This issue opens with a surprise ecstatic dance encounter with Sandhill Cranes proceeded by a decades long interruption caused by an ill-fated encounter with a tic. Through expressive arts therapy pedagogy Alexandra Fidyk draws the reader into a centring dance “to let the centre of the dance meet the centre of you with the centre of your work” (p. 13). Her dreaming ruminations lead the reader to question “How might our pedagogical practices centre, round, call upon the unconscious, image, sound, storying, silence, movement, rhythm and synchrony as ways of being-becoming and knowing?” (p. 14).

Two correspondences of diffractive analysis on a radically relational arts-engaged participatory research project called Life Lines by scholar-artist Kelly Clark/Keefe transports the reader into a middle space of entangled analysis. The reader is pulled into an undertow, gulping for air alongside the author while she decenters self-consciousness and researcher exceptionalism. Data’s entanglements are visually offered in the turquoise water saturated front cover image.
A healing autoethnographic and a/r/tographic inquiry. Barbara Bickel’s article interrupts time via a long-forgotten prayer book that belonged to her deceased father. In this prayer book her earliest drawings are rediscovered and she embarks on an historical arts-centred life-inquiry into her relationship with her father that draws her (and perhaps him) into a place of reconciliation and interconnected presence even in death.

Jeff Horwat introduces wordless narrative research through the ethos of a wordless novel. His dystopian narrative entitled Living with the Living draws on the power of silence and “disrupts the status-quo and creates space for other ways of knowing” (p. 51). In this narrative the main characters reflect with poignant silent visuality, philosophers and critical theorists Mari Ruti, Slavjo Žižek.

A feminist poetic inquiry next takes the reader into critical ways to teach and learn about rape culture, sexual assault and Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement in Amber Moore’s article and poetry. The poetry cluster includes found and line poetry that disrupts resistance to facing sexual trauma through raw representation of data bits from secondary English pre-service teachers in a “study on the very raw topic of sexual trauma” (p. 78).

Trauma is transformed into a creation story in Darlene St. Georges’ creation-centred research. The story of Skyward is in-process and an embodiment of the “creative-experiential-engagement and interaction” of métisage and storying. It unfolds with mystery and wonderment, remembering and reclaiming the uniqueness and intra-connectivity of our subjectivities.

Telling stories of ancestry through autobiographic life writing and poetic inquiry Maya T. Borhani lovingly and honestly encircles herself with the mystery of her father’s life in Iran. A suite of exo-autoethnographic poems open her to what she names “urgent learning” in the face of generational trauma, disrupted sense making and unanswerable questions. The poetic inquiry brings to her an enduring sense of legacy rested within a mosaic made of scattered pieces.

Restricted by covid-19 lockdowns in 2020-2021, Alison Shield’s article re-imagines the studio as a collage, based on her research travelling across Canada to visit artist studios. In an imaginative act she makes fully present the objects that became her companions in a unique creative space of intimacy.

Kate Wurtzel’s creative essay moves from “points of disruption to points of harmonizing with material and material bodies” (p. 119) through a relational dance of becoming on canvas with paint, colour and form between mother and young daughter. In a process of becoming artist the self is decentered and reformed educationally through trust in emergence; a concept Wurtzel embodies and relies upon in her own art teaching practice.

Story-listening and telling becomes a creative teaching and learning practice within communities of solidarity in Rawda Harb’s poetic inquiry. In this context creating together becomes a journey of “self expression, self discovery, self healing, and a learning experience” (129). In this experience she enters seven different “rooms” of her life with her children who create and share in response. Together they disrupt and awaken deepened understandings of her ‘personality’ as roominess enables her to fully feel and be in each room.

An aesthetic and ethical principle of ‘minusio’ is explored by R. Michael Fisher during a site-specific artist
residency, premised on “less is more.” His article shares insights into being an artist in an educational setting (the struggles and the gifts), with a daycare and kindergarten and larger community. His intervention transports people into an empathetic relational engagement with the material of every day gravel (preferably called stones). Ultimately an experience of ‘art-care’ between humans, nature and the elements emplaced and nourished both artist and the community.

The simple committed practice of journeying to the ocean at sunrise every day opens the possibility for powerful healing dreams to come into being. In this visual-poetic essay Diana Tigerlily shares the learning, healing and growth she was gifted with from this practice that was a collaboration between “the light, the water, the clouds, the reflections, the wind, the sand—[as] they all distinctly come together each day delivering a spectacle unique as a fingerprint. Every day. Tirelessly.” (p. 156). We have the opportunity each day to creatively interrupt our lives and to learn anew...

We thank the authors for their rich and inspiring contributions that engage us in aesthetic ways of knowing and becoming in the world, which is integral to our wellness and holism as a people.

With gratitude, we hope you enjoy this issue.

References


. . . entering a field of memory
carried across hills, valley, and corridors
silhouettes of lucid dreams
unfold before our eyes
transfixed and unbound by time
we skim waters and an abundance of blue skies
where a new horizon emerges
calling for the metaphors
in our hearts

eternity flickers . . .
The Way of The Crane

Abstract

Using pastiche, a dreamscape and reflection upon it, offers entry to a centring practice. In holding both, a new image emerges. The dreamscape—an unexpected scene of cranes in joyous dance—unfolds as actual dream and offers a metaphor for understanding the dreamer’s life. By extension, the dream returns practice as a syn-aesthetic engagement, which she calls expressive arts pedagogy. In this condensed yet nuanced rumination, personal and professional, poetic and haptic, participating and witnessing blur. This practice, the way of the Crane, is timely because it introduces, by embodying its own phenomena, a relational pedagogy for our troubled times—a pedagogy that integrates image, movement, storytelling, silence, sound, rhythm, and synchrony, while touching the pulse of life beyond human. As an intrapsychic and interspecies image, the dream symbolizes the richness that breaks forth when holding complementary opposites in tension. It privileges somatic, intuitive, creative, and contemplative processes. It, too, signals the centrality of testimony and witnessing—potential companion enactments. This earthen practice calls us to lean into the ancient wisdom of centring—illustrating the way the centre of the dance entwines with the centre of oneself and one’s work and the centre of the world. It is an old wisdom reconfigured for contemporary challenges.

Bio

Alexandra Fidyk, professor, philosopher, and poet serves the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, Canada. She engages with youth and teachers on issues of wellbeing through body-centred and creative-centred processes. Her transdisciplinary scholarship integrates her background in poetic inquiry, hermeneutics, process philosophy, and life writing. She has won awards for her research, scholarship and teaching at institutional and national levels. Balancing these domains, she is a Jungian somatic psychotherapist; Integrated Body Psychotherapist; Somatic Experiencing Practitioner; Sandplay Therapy Trainee and Expressive Arts Therapy Trainee. Contact: fidyk@ualberta.ca

Dreamscape

I was near the shoreline—where grasses reach waist-high; young blades sway in the breeze, their warm bitter fragrance rides the wind. It was near dusk, when twilight begins to transmute all things. I had been walking for hours through native grassland, adorned with wild flowers, when I ascended a slow sloping knoll. I had a feeling, before seeing, that something extraordinary was near.

Initially, I was struck by the subtle verdant shades of parakeet, olive, and pine, which differentiated grasses—bearded wheat, foxtail, sweet grass, fringed brome; and then, the buzz of flying life among stalks and leaves; the blue of Old Man’s Lake—a true mirroring of the early June sky of northern Saskatchewan: Australian opal.
Soft trumpeting in synchrony with prancing, an almost indiscernible sound now dominates my senses.

As my eyes adjust, it takes a moment to comprehend the scene, as its rarity makes it unimaginable. It might best be described as ecstatic dancing. Agile bodies adorned by exquisite feathers—cool slate, soft steel, muted silver—gorgeous wings, extending several feet in all directions and directing the evening air; fine boned legs prance, defying their appearance; bodies sweep; wings arc; wryly necks bend as if independently partnered. Each element fraternizes with the other. Each in harmony as a whirling whole. Sufi dervishes dancing.

The scene must reflect the origins of ritualistic dance. Raw energy. Trance. Youth in the woods, discovering the rapture and disorder of bodies edged to the limits of endurance and desire. Dust kicks up, ancient sand lands lightly upon feet and legs. White and black blur—a mass of goose grey throbbing. Red flashes through jetés, assemblés and temps levé. Sunrays pierce wet amber; radiate gold. From this centre, the eye focuses the whole. One dancer.

---

Dreamscape Rumination

This dream symbolizes my current situation. External elements conjoining—teaching, writing, research, psychotherapy, reading, and training after a decade of intense treatment for tick-borne illness. Bodies of theory and practice, defined by distinct fields, requiring years of focus, dissolve once-enfleshed-
by-living. Internalized, their borders grow porous, not only by somatic, intuitive, and contemplative processes but also by testimony and witnessing. A process of nearly two decades reappears as flash synaesthetic images. Joy resounds because each touches the other, amplifying capacities and softening boundaries, including my own. Just as each crane leaps, sautés, spins—following its own heart—they marry in rhythm and breathe as one.

This movement offers a kind of testimonial. I sense that the culmination of years of discipline, sacrifice, suffering, and loss has stilled. From its elongated, slow undoing, a seed has birthed. Almost imperceptible, almost unbelievable, a seed, a hybrid, takes centre. A centre we cannot go beyond. We can only go through, and down, down, down, as a 20-year descent with chronic illness required. Only now has a long blackening silvered—a movement of other directions. Blackening describes a time when light and fire disappear and all things move with unbearable slowness. Where earth encasement by coldness and isolation numbs, and the life force can dissolve.

Of this placement, Jung (1989) says, “the center is the goal, and everything is directed toward that center” (p. 198). Through the dream, I understand that through dance—authentic movement governed by instinct, attunement, and adherence to an ancient call—comes freedom. “Everything in the world has its own centre, that place where the sacred manifests itself in totality,” whereby “to overlook the archetypal world is to dismiss the possibility of healing. Psyche must include the entire spectrum—from instinct to archetype” (Harris, 2001, p. 22). Feather with leg, bone with wing, loss with acceptance, suffering with attendance. In this dance, the definition and contrast of white and black lose their edges. They round; they blur; and in time, if grace appears, there can be a centring.

To go into the dance, we must be able to let the intensity—“the Dionysian rapture and disorder and the celebration of chaos, of potentiality, the experience of surrender—[move;] we must be able to let it live in our bodies, in our hands, through our hands into the materials” with which we work, including psychic material (Richards, 1964, p. 12). “We must be steady enough in ourselves, to be open and to let the winds of life blow through us, to be our breath, our inspiration; to breathe with them, mobile and soft in the limberness of our bodies, in our agility, our ability, . . . to dance, and yet to stand upright” (p. 12). To go into the dance is to let the centre of the dance meet the centre of you with the centre of your work. Centre to centre—guides our movement. It keeps us out of binaries and in paradox and synergy with the mystery of existence.

To go into the dance, the way of Crane, is kin to the manifestation of a union of the complementary opposites, a coniunctio, felt as “an unstruck sound beyond the realm of the senses—silence” (Markell, 1998, p. 107). As in the relationship between parts and whole, sounds and silence, movements and stillness, we see the Eastern understanding of the “fullness of emptiness”—an experience of “being a witness in the body itself” (Markell, 2002, p. 111). This paradox is the centre. In many cultures, the centre is the eye; the eye symbolizes the Self, wholeness. And, the eye bears witness to the peculiar and spontaneous creative activity in matter; the primordial image expresses the intrinsic and unconditioned creative power of the psyche” (Jung, CW6, para. 748). Long revered, the eye is associated with second sight, prophecy, and visions. Eye images sculptured in wood, metal, and sand as play or therapy, “most frequently appear after the constellation of the Self, as the process unfolds at the vegetative level of the natural, instinctual life” (p. 110). Importantly, eye renderings “indicate that the transformation itself is being perceived by the receptive mind, revealing at the deepest level that the body-mind has been openly and directly present. This in itself is a wordless or preconscious process” (p. 110).
As in the symbolism of Crane as waterbird, equally agile in air, water, and earth, I am reminded of the years attending illness, trauma, and psychological complexes whereby the dream evidences integration underway between upper and lower, thought and feeling, air and earth—the intertidal zone where “consciousness and the unconscious meet concretely” (Weinrib, 1983, p. 69). As I am learning further in my sandplay process, letting my hands work in earth loosens unconscious material to form images and scenes of importance to my consciousness. This unfettered play—as I did in my youth with sand and clay and today gardening and writing—mediates between complementarities, such as “horizontal and vertical dimensions, the mysterious and the concrete, matter and spirit, conscious and unconscious” (Markell, 2002, p. 108), in the same way that dance unites.

How might the way of the Crane renew our teaching where we grow more conscious of the ways our practices are always already rooted in ancient images? Where word is always tied to the body? How might we hold tension, with complementarities, that breaks open, offering us new directions? How might our pedagogical practices centre, round, call upon the unconscious, image, sound, storying, silence, movement, rhythm and synchrony as ways of being-becoming and knowing? And, how might we invite dreamscapes to crystallize into new practices for artful teaching?

References


Endnotes

iThis dreamscape offers a pastiche of an excerpt from Jung’s (1989) Memories, Dreams, Reflections. Pastiche is a literary technique that leads to the creation of an original work yet in the style of another author and the structure of the text. Imitating the authorial choices of a writer can be an effective way to demonstrate appreciation of their artistic work. This technique encourages close attention to rhythm, form, and affect; as well, it pays homage to Jung’s art by writing of the very thing of his life’s work: dreams, symbols, and psychological maturation. Of relevance, this dreamscape imitates structure and syntax as a way to illustrate that even form is rooted in synaesthetic image.
While this movement focuses on dance, it becomes more complete with a vast sensorial interplay of colour, light, texture, image, sound, silence, rhythm, synchrony, and its unfolding story and meaning-making. The dreamscape impacts deeply because of its synergistic relations that extend beyond any one element. The combination of these elements embody the substructure of Expressive Arts Therapy which utilizes various arts that transition from one modality to another, unfolding as a composite through imagination and play. Expressive Arts Therapy is a “circumscribed form of psychotherapy grounded in arts-based methodology and ‘bottom-up’ approaches that [accentuate] the sensory-based qualities of movement, music and sound, visual arts, dramatic enactment, and other forms of creative communication” (Malchiodi, 2020, p. xi). I use this therapeutic modality to introduce “expressive arts pedagogy,” which engages learners in multiple conjoined arting processes and practices within a lesson as a teaching-learning strategy.

Five types of ballet jumps include: 1) Sauté is any jump from two feet landing on two feet; sometimes, one foot to the same foot; 2) Temps Levé is a hop from one foot to the same foot; 3) Jeté is any jump or leap from one foot to the other; 4) Assemblé is a jump from one foot landing simultaneously on two feet; 5) Sissonne is a jump from two feet, landing on one foot (Hungerford, 2016).

There is one more layer to reveal in this dreamscape, one that also centres the eye. In 2005 at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, I met with a Blackfoot shaman who initiated a vision quest. Sitting upon his enormous buffalo hide with sweet grass burning, we journeyed into the past. . . . When we returned, I carried a shiny, wet amber eye, framed by sleek grey-brown feathers, capped with white and red. As visionary, seer, he saw me dancing with cranes. It was on this day that I was gifted with and by Crane.

Here, “synaesthetic image” conveys a multi-sensorial experience where seeing, hearing, orienting (balance, temperature, etc.), and feeling for example. “Image” is not meant to mean visual only.

Revered by many First Nations across the Americas as a storytale bird, as one of the oldest living bird species, the Sandhill Crane claims the longest successful tenure on earth, a pre-eminent position in the world of birds. The Sandhill stands “as an emissary from an ancient and largely unknowable age” (Grooms, 1992, p. 39). “We owe it the respect due a time traveller, whose eerie yellow eyes have witnessed the birth and death of glaciers and the innumerable scramblings of the North American species” (p. 39).

The Crane Dance has been performed at fertility rituals since pagan times. According to myth and historical accounts by Plutarch, and described in detail by Homer in The Iliad, this is the dance that gives meaning to dance as ancient ritual, possibly one of the first where men and women danced together (Price, 2001).

This 20-year descent does not contradict the ten years of intense treatment stated earlier in the paragraph. I lived and suffered nearly a decade (September 2001-December 2009) with undiagnosed lyme disease and multiple co-infections, manifesting as separate illnesses such as gall bladder attacks (removal) and ovarian tumours. Once diagnosed and confirmed via Canadian, American, and German testing, aggressive treatments took an additional decade before the spirocete entered remission (April 2019).

By “work,” I do not mean job, task, or externally required responsibility. Rather, I mean a calling, a thing-ing which gives our lives joy and purpose.

Across cultures, children begin drawing with circles, vertical and horizontal lines. When drawing what can be likened to a face or person, the eyes are large spherical shapes. The eye has been associated with the third eye, healing, medicine wheels, mandalas, circles, and soul as well as transformation and wisdom.

As a requirement for Sandplay Therapy training, I amplified a symbol of importance to me and drew connections between it and my therapeutic practice. I amplified Crane. In doing so, I found significance not only in therapeutic terms but also philosophic and pedagogic. That is, the ancient presence of Crane speaks to resilience, evolutionary adaptation, and the power of eco-education. The symbol amplification brought to the foreground the complexity of specie longevity as well as impact on personal life though studying an image in depth through multi-modal means (sonic recordings, documentaries, lived experience, myth, story, archival documentation, and so on).

Dora Kalff, out of her own personal analysis and analytic training in addition to her work with Margaret Lowenfeld, child psychiatrist and developer of the World Technique, created Jungian-centred Sandplay Therapy. Sandplay Therapy is a nonverbal, therapeutic modality that uses sand, figures, and water to create images, scenes, and miniature worlds that reflect a person’s state of being—thoughts, struggles, concerns, challenges. Free and protected space is central to the player being able to drop into their inner worlds and recreate them in the sandbox.
Abstract

This essay invites readers into two creative correspondences that emerged during the author’s involvement in a participatory arts-based research project called Life Lines. The Life Lines project aimed at engaging a small group of young adults alongside researchers in their use of multimodal arts practices to inquire into what makes young adult identity work the way that it does. In Life Lines the phenomenon of identity and the approaches to inquiry used to explore it were conceptualized through a material feminist framework that proposes the co-constituting nature of meaning and matter (i.e., bodies, atmospheres, and objects of all kinds). Diffractive analysis practices were adopted, creating the conditions for theorizing to become infused with artistic practice, resulting in a series of correspondences that took the form of back-and-forth dialogues between artful images and creative prose. The two correspondences shared illustrate the author’s attempts at staying with what Life Lines data were doing as they became mobile, transitive, and unpredictable in their patterns of entangling meaning and matter during diffractive analysis.

Bio

Kelly Clark/Keefe is Associate Professor at the University of Vermont in Burlington, Vermont, USA. Her research brings theories of affect, art and subjectivity to bear on topics including the role of bodies, movement, and emotion in shaping educational identity and analyses of epistemic injustices in contemporary schooling and higher education. Kelly is on the Editorial Board for the book series, Springer Studies in Arts-Based Educational Research. She authored the book, Invoking Mnemosyne: Art, Memory, and the Uncertain Emergence of a Feminist Embodied Methodology (2010), and co-authored the book, Humanizing Methodologies in Educational Research: Centering Non-dominant Communities (2021).

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I want to watch watching arrive. I want to watch arrivances.

—Hélène Cixous, 1997, *Rootprints*

Work as a scholar-artist feels most fruitful and respectful for me when it involves creatively joining with the liveliness of things’ and thoughts’ *arrivances* (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997), attending through artmaking to a range of sensorial influences before they settle into or onto something I think I know (my identity, your story, that mountain). Dwelling through art as inquiry with and in an animate middle space of knowings’ travels, textures, and intonations feels a practice of patience and heightened awareness. It requires a type of decentering of self-consciousness in favor of a stance of humility and porosity to the range of life’s enigmatic forces and forms as they gather, assemble, and reassemble along lines of instigation. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) forewarn however, “It’s not so easy,” this thinking and conversing with “things from the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below” (p. 23). It involves facing some very old and powerful habits, including habits of research that crave the reduction of complexity pulsating through life’s *arrivances*, determining their unity, and claim staking their pattern’s resemblance to models of thought that inscribe, predict, and discursively contain living’s secrets and excesses outside of common recognition. If my modes of arts-engaged inquiry are to join *with* the wisdom of phenomena in their becoming knowable rather than eschewing that wisdom in favor of thinking that insists on border-building and joining things *up*, then I must consign to foraging for answers to hard questions like those raised by philosopher Luke Higgin’s (2011), who also endeavors to shift knowing’s modes from a type of command and control, to modes of joining *with* the irreducible “middles” of life’s multiplicities. Higgins (2011) asks: “What would it mean to begin *always from the middle*? To renounce the lure of mastery with which definitive beginnings and endings seduce thought?” (p. 142).

One response to Higgin’s question involves situating my inquiry as acts of what social anthropologist, Tim Ingold (2021) refers to as *correspondence*. Ingold proposes *correspondence* as a way of coming into sensitive and caring relation with knowing-in-being with the world, conversing *with* (not just about) the relational qualities between beings (human and more-than-human), thoughts, and things—including places, atmospheres, actions, and objects of all kinds. *Correspondences* can take many forms and can carry-on between many types of “participants,” whether an improvisational dance between a blossom and the nectar-seeking bumble bee or a handwritten series of devotional letters transmitted between lovers separated by occupation and geography. Whatever brings this type of attuning and responding about, and no matter its forms, Ingold insists the activity shares three distinguishing properties: it is *processual* (it carries on); *open-ended* (aiming for no fixed destination or conclusion); and *dialogical*—it engages with knowing that emerges from the ‘goings on’ between and among participants (Ingold, 2021, p. 11). In this essay, I illustrate two creative correspondences that emerged during my involvement in a participatory arts-based research project called *Life Lines*. These correspondences take the form of a back-and-forth dialogue between two types of ‘participants’, creative prose and drawn images, each coming into dynamic relation and co-producing ideas and actions that came to matter. Before turning to these correspondences as the heart of this essay’s offering, I first share some of the specific methodological and conceptual details of the *Life Lines* project to orient readers as they enter the image-word correspondences that follow.
Life Lines: Co-Creative Speculation Over Identity Work's Workings

In January 2019 at a northeastern United States university, myself and two colleagues, Kelly Mancini Becker and Erika White, launched an arts-engaged participatory research project we called *Life Lines*. Over a 4.5 month period, we came together weekly to work alongside eight young adult co-inquiring participants, engaging in multimodal artmaking practices, which we referred to as maker sessions. Leaning into my training as a qualitative researcher and expressive arts facilitator, *Life Lines* maker sessions were designed as a way to integrate conventional practices of qualitative fieldwork (including interviews and observations) with visual artmaking, journaling, movement, somatic awareness, and mindfulness practices. All of the studio-inquiry practices we engaged supported an open-ended and iterative exploration of each other’s thoughts, feelings, actions, and curiosities about what makes young adult identity work work the way that it does. Put differently, the *Life Lines* project engaged multimodal arts practices as a primary mode for speculating over and creatively experimenting with questions about *how it is* for young adults to travel the felt-thought terrain between common notions of identity premised upon western developmental psychology that emphasize internalized agency and self-construction compared to other, nondominant material feminist theories of subjectivity that foreground non-unitary, nomadic processes of co-creativity between social, psychic, and ecological life forces (Braidotti, 2013; Truman, 2022). At the beginning and throughout *Life Lines*, we (the researchers) were open about our ambivalence regarding traditional psychological models of identity. We spoke with participants about our intentions to condition our inquiry, with their help, as an arts-rich time and space for iteratively experimenting with models of thinking and action that emphasized the co-constitutive entanglements between the social, personal, and material (i.e., bodily, object-oriented, atmospheric, etc.) dimensions of subjective life. We did not ask the young adult participants to read either conventional or material feminist theories of subjectivity as part of their involvement. Instead, ideas from these theories were braided into multimodal expressive arts activities and prompts for guiding the maker sessions, individual interviews, and more independent visual journaling between our weekly gatherings. Overall, *Life Lines* was a project premised upon beliefs in the pressing need for models of subjectivity and its study that are more adequate to the task of understanding the complex processes by which social and material worlds—including bodies, objects, structures, and living systems of all kinds—come together to co-create young adults’ sense of becoming with and in the environs of which they are a part.

Our interest in the influence of conceptualizations of young adult subjective life stretched beyond issuing correctives or trying to fill gaps in theoretical models. Wanting, always, to meet the embedded, embodied, and ethical complexities of our empirical work, *Life Lines* was conceived as a radically relational project. That is, as mothers, scholars, and teachers of young adults, we understood and took seriously that youth today are maturing during complicated times. In our personal and professional lives, we witnessed daily the ways in which the lines of transition from teen-hood to adulthood were unfolding in a historical moment heavily marked by foreboding discourses of, for example, geopolitical strife, environmental degradation, high incidences of national and international violence and human suffering, precarious financial markets, eroding public trust in political, health, and public safety systems, polarizing governmental leadership, and more. Running parallel with these unrelenting and amplified reports of rapidly changing social and deteriorating environmental circumstances, we witnessed firsthand the disquieting statistical picture of sharply increased rates of depression and anxiety among young adult collegians (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019). The conceptual-empirical work of *Life Lines* grew, in part, from our desire and commitment to do research that explores and responds directly to young adults navigating what we registered as a remarkably intense (though not surprising) contemporary moment, along with its very real psychological and physical effects. Given our
inquiry focus on thinking and making between conventional notions of identity work and those that center subjective formations as entanglements of social, psychic, and material life, we committed to engaging fieldwork and analysis practices that decentered researcher exceptionalism (i.e., thinking for the data) in favor of an approach to analysis premised on joining with data’s liveliness. Readings in material feminism and especially writings by Karen Barad (2007) became a useful way to gain a conceptual and methodological foothold in efforts to condition studio-inquiry fieldwork and later analysis practices as the type of middle-dwelling I invoked at the beginning of this essay. This meant producing and working with data that were both conventional (i.e., interview transcripts, observation notes, video recordings of maker sessions, and myriad visual journaling pages) and unconventional, including affective, dream, movement, and emotional response data. These less common or “transgressive” data (St. Pierre, 1997a) moved and produced more data, and also made data behave differently than many qualitative research approaches account for. Data as a doing bely their typical status as something participants ‘have’ or ‘give’ and instead become understood as intra-acting agential participants (Barad, 2007) or analytic forces that can co-produce meanings with, for example, movements between painterly gestures, textural preferences, and discursive compositions. Conceptualizing data through an agential realist framework that proposes the co-constituting nature of matter and meaning meant creating the conditions during Life Lines fieldwork for theorizing to become infused with artistic practice, causing thinking-making to proliferate, become mobile, aesthetically transitive, and unpredictable in its patterns and impacts.

Yet, how to stay with the proliferating and activating forces of data conceptualized in this way, especially when faced with the post-fieldwork task of detailed analysis? Here again, Barad (2007) and other scholars working from material feminist perspectives helped us understand diffractive methodologies and accompanying practices of diffractive analysis as approaches to inquiry that place emphasis on insights emerging within the dynamic and often unpredictable intra-active (Barad, 2007) folds of thoughts’, actions’, and sensations’ arrivances (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997). While beyond the scope of this writing to provide a thorough overview, a basic tenet in diffractive practices of analysis is that ideas and questions get produced (compared to found) from reading different types of texts (i.e., data, research reports, popular media, policies, theory, etc.) through one another, and through the multifarious material entities (i.e., affects, movements, memories, dreams, technologies, atmospheres, and objects of all kinds) with which they are entangled. As the researcher on our small team who took primary responsibility for engaging diffractive analysis practices with Life Lines data, I swiftly became aware of the extent to which analytic attention in this approach would need to center the co-constitutive process of analysis itself; all the ‘goings-on’ between the multiple bodies of thought and thoughtful bodily-object-atmospheric correspondences. Leaning into what diffractive analysis practices were requiring of me at the time (and still) produced a series of intense interferences in my thinking-making, which simultaneously and paradoxically provoked a multitude of unanticipated openings, rearrangements, and exposures of new lines of thought, action, and curiosity from previously unconsidered angles. Attuning and attending to what diffractive analyses were doing to data meant becoming-thought-full with these transitory forms and forces, tracking their sensorial sensitivity and aesthetic activations. It was in the analytical instance of Life Lines, as it has so often been in past inquiry processes (e.g., Clark/Keefe, 2010; 2014a), that this attunement and attention unfolded via artmaking and handwriting. Creative engagement involves with, rather than evolves from, its enacting capacities, becoming an affective-aesthetic force-field for registering the animated suspension (Clark/Keefe, 2014b) between sensorial-intellectual modes of knowing-in-being with materiality and through inquiry’s lively unfolding. It is to two such instances of aesthetic activations and their correspondence that I now turn. The first correspondence emerged while still engaged in Life Lines
fieldwork and early analysis. The second correspondence surfaced while immersed in efforts to tangle with diffractive analyses’ generative and demanding proliferations and their entanglements with my bodymind during later analysis post-fieldwork. Note, the first image that appears (Figure 1.) was created by a Life Lines project participant, Rory (pseudonym), and is used with permission. The remaining images were produced by me.

**Correspondence I. Rising Tides**

Rory is carefully tearing from a magazine the words “THE OPTION,” pasting them to the top of one of her drawings (Figure 1.). Working, unintentionally perhaps, in ways akin to what Barbara Bickel (2020) describes as “trance-based inquiry,” Rory sinks into the Life Lines’ community ritual studio space, where “art is an aesthetic sensorial practice of coming to know and not know” (Bickel, 2020, p. 50). I register with/in my hand her hand’s rhythmic relation with the smooth black ink pen she uses. My head and hips swerve to the curvy moment moving and making what seems to be their co-emerging “vibratory signature” (Turner, 2017), their “energetic stamp… behind every act of creation” (p. 100). This “stamp,” with its rhythmic orienting and atmospheric dynamic, is something and something I feel Rory bringing to make our small circle matter, differently, week after week. In my encounter with watching their choreographed arrivances (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997), I register how it is to become with the lines’ aesthetic activation, making me breathless in the ways they know how to breathe. Entanglements between researcher and researched, art mediums and movements, moods and meanings and more, each immanent and infused lines of correspondence, feels a pulling-together cutting-apart, “one move,” as Barad (2014) would put it, of something of identity work’s workings on Rory and now me.

Being in-relation with Rory’s image is producing meaning-full interferences in my capacities to register the multitude of surrounding energies, each rippling through the inquiry scene at an unfamiliar and hard to fathom scale. Joining with the ambulating and activating forces, my thinking body and bodies of thought are on the move and now making too. How is it to know with such modes of movement and disequilibrium? What can staying-with the

**Figure 1.** Untitled. 8.5” X 11”, mixed-media on paper. Anonymous participant-artist, 2019. [used with permission].

floating and fleeting currents of Rory’s image enable me to make in response to concerns and curiosities about young adult identity work’s workings? There is so much to register with/in these lines’ unfoldings and enfoldings that are making, and making their way through Rory’s memories in response to our research team’s invitation to consider subjectivity’s passages. Lines keep materializing thoughts about change and growth becoming more on-the-move, and less something she has to hold onto and compose on her own. In this provisional moment, Rory’s lines of flight are intra-acting to produce something of my own knowing through not knowing how it is to negotiate identity works’ workings on me. Folding my emerging lines through what is becoming sense-able from Rory’s, holds open, makes spacious, and moves me to take-up less slick, more sticky art mediums than the smooth, dark, and permanent ink companions that seem to keep choosing Rory. For me, more gritty mediums are arriving in unexpected heaps from some deep reservoir of fragmented feelings that somehow connect to felt intimacies of my becoming unwittingly recognizable by my vocational high school shop’s material-cultural milieu. Media from the Commercial Art Trades wing intermingles with my memories of the snarky-smart rhythms of my ‘voc-tech’ peer kin. Even though we didn’t know it in the right moment, or in the right key, we were on the train tracked to some lower-status vocational destination before our modes of knowing ever left the early education station.

How to read the diffractive pattern’s emotionally-imaginative know-how pulsing through Rory’s visual narrative, winding its ways in excess of what it means for me to be doing this inquiry with/in this university milieu? I re-turn—over and over again—to what each inquiry moment and making involves and makes anew. This shifts the early analytic currents coming over the threshold, sending my thinking adrift from data expected to evolve ‘as if’ what was before is now divisible; a static relic of a personal past, cut-off from its intra-active potencies that, in embodied reality, never stopped becoming agentic, even as, or more because, they came through so much else than “me” in the singular now-academic-arrival and at another temporal scale. This image (Figure 2.) is becoming made and meaningful through Rory’s (Figure 1.) intra-actions working to materialize and make sense-able only now as a resistance to imposed benevolence by high school guidance counselors, who balk at the irrational move by any of us “lower socioeconomic” young adults to try and bushwhack our ways to academe. Re-turn, over and over, to follow diffraction’s gritty arrivances; the torn and tossed-off emotional ephemera conversing with a sticky-stale ballpoint pen and its companion run-of-the-mill no.2 lead pencil. All is coming into frictional contact with cheap paper that got stored improperly, for years, in my damp basement. It/I grew lumpy and coarse in the corners without notice. But that surface knows something I don’t about how it is to “negotiate( ) the relations between the various bodies that enable art to come into being” (Bolt, 2013, p. 7). Relations move and make between my body, Rory’s body, the mediums that have come to matter, differently, and the bodies of theoretical contestations between what identity is, how it should behave, when it should progress, where it is likely to lead one body as it is compared to another and another and an-other. All this is becoming-art-i-facts—real and agentic modes that make diffractive agencies send, sort, sift, and scrape the surface in ways immanent to this emotional inquiry event and the weighty wants of data’s entanglements.

Working to stay with the trouble of diffractive practices involving me physically, psychically, and socially, I inquire through and with this intra-active tumble of bodies-thinking-through-bodies-of-thought, registering the affective-aesthetic imprints of pulpy paper in dynamic relation with gritty lines of getting lost, feeling loved, or leaving behind the land-locked high that rises, over there in Rory’s lower left corner (Figure 1.). With Rory’s modes for artfully experimenting in-between how her bodymind knows through identity models that say how it is all supposed to go, and the experiment’s invention of THE OPTION for how it might be otherwise, I feel differently responsible and response-able for bringing curiosity and co-creativity to the
diffractive inquiry event and for what it is now making possible. The material-theoretical currents churn and pull into proximity a way of shrinking a little less under the weight of the industrial research complex that keeps Rory—and us all—striving to be counted. Working in a reciprocal fashion with what is given, I follow Rory’s image-provocation through to her luscious red figuration (Figure 1.), whose lively lines push through the current(s) boundaries, fearing less about leakages and tilting our whole feminist boat into an entire universe of previously unconsidered sea of analytic possibilities.

Figure 2. Untitled. 8” X 10”, mixed media on paper. Clark/Keefe, 2019.

Correspondence II: Diffractive Analysis, or Becoming a Leaky Boat in Stormy Seas without a Compass

It is the semester after the data collection phase for the Life Lines project. I have only just started working with what feels a thick, generative thicket of analytic energy. Hundreds of pages of text from transcribed interviews, hours of video recordings of the maker sessions and file folders of visual journal pages are piling high. Simultaneously, news of an ominous virus is starting to spread across the globe, entangling us in ways we could not prepare for. Digital maps on the Internet are glowing with color-coded maps of where COVID-19 was believed to have “originated,” which (human) groups are (unsurprisingly) being hit the hardest, whether and how much masking and social distancing will protect us from the potentially fatal contagion, and so much more. In this sea of precarity our small research team wonders about re-constituting the relational inquiry activities of Life Lines. As mother-scholars of our own and others’ adolescent and young adult kin, we are wit(h)nessing (Bickel, 2020, p. 10) the already-dangerous and escalating levels of stress and anxiety accompanying the evacuation of on-campus living quarters, mandatory “shelter-in-place” orders, and needing to “pivot” to fully online learning. Gaining swift approval from our institution’s ethics board for
amendments to our research protocol, *Life Lines* re-activates virtually during the final weeks of the Spring 2020 semester and another round of data activation begins (Becker, Clark/Keefe & White, 2022). Meanwhile, the first wave of *Life Lines* data waits for us to take the diffractive analytic bait, some patient, others not so much. Our team’s mounting professional demands meet painful personal experiences with loss, grief, and confusion about how to stay the course with analysis while so much else becomes so slippery. We each do what we can, when we can, to honor all the data waves rolling in. The tide is rising, creating sensations of a state of animated suspension that keeps holding for a type of attention that is hard to come by (Clark/Keefe, 2020). But how to turn and re-turn all that *Life Lines* is producing without capsizing?

I am all in the affective upswells and intellectual disequilibrium that the times intra-acting with what diffractive analyses require of me—now alone—as my research companions attend to unavoidable and unrelenting demands on their personal and professional lives. I read lines in Rory’s transcript (Figure 3.), through dreams of drowning, through statistics on young adult mental health, through worry with my co-researchers, through lines in my morning journal (Figure 4.), through drawing the slippery circumstances of working in the diffractive undertow (Figure 5.).

**Figure 3.** Transcript. 8.5 “ x 11”, print on paper.

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Interviewer: You describe experiencing identity work in terms of a tangle...

Rory: Yeah. I feel kind of tangled. So, feeling pulled—like kind of undulating maybe, but—feeling pulled in many directions and kind of like not knowing how to straighten out and not knowing how to resolve the tangled mess and rolling up, and different things. And then also I remember feeling like I was spinning. It’s like if you’re in a wave and you get caught in the bottom? Like, uh?

Interviewer: The undertow?

Rory: Yeah. And, or, you’re in the washing machine and it’s like, “How do I get out of this? I don’t know where air is.”
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**Figure 4.** Dream Data: Diffractive Drowning. 5.5 x 8.25, print on paper. Clark/Keefe, 2020

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Diffractive Drowning

In the nightscape’s apparatus of knowing, I cannot settle my bodymind. My data-legs are working like an unrelenting metal coil, grooping for the optimum soft spot across the vast sheet surface. Unable to find firm-enough footing, gulps for air fill my analytic bottleneck with liquid memories of near drowning as a young child—twice. Fully awakened in the seafloor of sweat to the data-wave’s entanglements, lines of drift soak my morning drawing habit that knows far better how it is to be in and with the diffractive undertow. Ink, paper, movement, memories help me stay just barely above the trouble of trying to take a diagonal line of drift into the moon’s timing between models of identity that have the capacity to break waves of young adult imagination. Float on artmaking’s forces, draw in diffractive thinking’s wild currents, and correspond with something of another inexplicable plane that moves whatever I keep trying to think-make as analysis. It’s hard to be buoyant in the lashing currents of dominance’s discursive uprush and backwash of unpotable water and dangerous quick-fix sands. A cavalcade of crows are calling me in to lie a spell amidst their murder on the lawn. They ketch over who gets to be the one to tell me of death’s escape through catching my breath. Worn from the sea’s tumult, I listen and sink into the brittle grass of the marsh scratching my back as the moon’s dry light diffraot across the puddle of sweat still streaking my brow.
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As I come up for air, I sense *Life Lines* data and the diffractive practices are not done with me attempting to forage for modes of new knowing. I work to stay with diffraction's diffractions, even as it all proves an unruly travel companion. Rogue and impetuous, it is teaching me much about letting go of mirages of modes of meaning situated in Cartesian beliefs that separate what data are, where they are located, and how I can categorically control where they will need to go to show what I know. As diffraction and I tangle with the wild winds that threaten protocols of procedural fidelity, our correspondence weaves desires to know in tones and textures that make more material the workings of subjective formations. Reading data through theory through memories of young adult epistemic oppression, through movements with ink and charcoal, I feel reverence for the more than metaphorical truth that connects my no.2 pencil to my embodied modes of knowing in ancient relation to the waves of affective and intellectual drift and dreaming during diffractive practices. While still fearful of drowning, I sense I need to lower the data ship’s sails and stretch their canvas containment, working diffracting data's entangling “bewilderment for all it’s worth” (St. Pierre, 1997b, p. 281). Arrivances affecting agents most certainly know something that I don’t about what unexpected materials and modes may be required for becoming more epistemically open and collectively
adaptive. One foot on the boat’s ballast for balance, it is time to enter into relationship with my long-practiced modes for knowing in the world’s ways of diffracting me in multiple directions at once. Like the discursive-material seas that threatened to drown me, multiplicity is indeed a force to be in respectful relationship with; a relation of generative tension and tumult in-between swells well in excess of any one moment’s notice or theory’s capacity for making any of this definitively meaningful. Diffractive patterns of analysis come into contact with matte medium, both priming for whatever this cabal is stirring. … breathe … Things in-between are suspiciously quiet at-first as movement’s making a curious rabbit-like figure, who just yesterday showed up softly at the near-center of a large head’s dizzying dealings with heaps of storied, dream, and emotional Life Lines data. It is not long before others enter the relational-analytic mix, gently yet with purpose, some preening their fragile feathers and causing me to think, and think again, about what models of identity development enable us to know and where those lines of delineation grow thick in their uneven inclusions and exclusions. My boat’s sail is getting more and more crowded as felt-thought-movements enter into relationship with diffractive layer after diffractive layer of medium, making meaning sometimes grow gills to the slippery rhythms produced while reading Rory’s and other participants’ data through theoretical insights from Julietta Singh (2018), who conceptualizes “vital ambivalence” as “a practice of representation that emphasizes, politicizes, and embraces the subject’s contradictions and slippages” (p. 158). These thought-felt emergences during diffractive analysis subsist and insist on modes of knowing through reciprocal generativity. They help me discern what I want, no need, to bring as more-than-human companions to foreground how it is to know in intimate relation with practices, politics, and particularities of thought and feeling. Tilting toward diffractive analyses’ tumult, it is poetics, pigment, bristles, line, and shadow who join thinking-in-being attentive to the art of subjective aliveness. Here lines, forces, and figurations speak nothing yet know most everything according to diffractive affective analyses’ rhythm—its moving, making, and mattering as Data’s Entanglements (Figure 6.).

Aesthetic Arrivances: Meeting and Making More Room for Arts-Engaged Companions

Like many qualitative researchers, I have been taught to want the safety and easy(ier) recognition that comes from traveling with common procedures for capturing, coding, and representing patterns in others’ stories. Yet, in my ongoing process of unlearning certain inquiry approaches that overemphasize the “discoverability” of human experience, I have come to sense the need for modes of knowing in radical relation with what registers, always provisionally and partially, as animating my sense of aliveness (Clark/Keefe, 2010; 2014b). In opportunities to engage qualitative research, I gravitate towards paths that refuse stale routes and potentially harmful routines of detachment and proceduralism (Springgay & Truman, 2018). Middle dwelling while in the grips of diffractive analyses’ currents, even with, or better, because of its demands, is one such path. Owing in-part to the ways my labor-intensive working-class upbringing reinforced my epistemic habits of embodied knowing and communication (Clark/Keefe, 2009), drawing, painting, and prose poetic writing (even while having no ‘formal’ training in any of these) have long afforded an especially important companion for traveling open-hearted through the proliferation of movements and affective frictions, vibrations, relays, and ricochets that I experience as indeterminately of interest and non-exhaustively at play in all qualitative data analysis practices. In my continued efforts to learn to meet and make room for arts-engaged companions, I re-turn, over and over, to Higgins’s (2011) dis/orienting question: “What would it mean to begin always from the middle? To renounce the lure of mastery with which definitive beginnings and endings seduce thought?” (p. 142). In the gift of writing-making this essay, beginning “always from the middle” (Higgins, p. 142) has meant dwelling sensitively with life’s arrivances (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997), joining
with their secrets of becoming and carrying-on in open-ended creative correspondence with knowing that emerges from the “goings on” between all of inquiry’s participants (Ingold, 2021), human and otherwise.

**Figure 6.** Data's Entanglements. 26” x 30”, acrylic on canvas. Clark/Keefe, 2021
References


**Endnote**

Since the publication of Karen Barad’s (2007) groundbreaking text, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, in which she first proposes diffractive methodology as a potentially fruitful alternative to traditional social science practice, several excellent resources for understanding diffraction’s theoretical underpinnings and examples of what social science scholars’ diffractive practices have produced have been emerging. I return often to two sources: Hillevi Lenz Taguchi and Anna Palmer’s (2013) article, *A More ‘Livable’ School? A Diffractive Analysis of the Performative Enactments of Girls’ Ill-/Well-Being With(In) School Environments* and Lisa Mazzei’s (2014) article, *Beyond and Easy Sense: A Diffractive Analysis*. Both offer highly accessible entry points for thinking with Barad’s proposition of diffractive analysis practices during empirical work.
In the Imaginal Realm Before She Could Read: A Healing A/r/tographic Inquiry

Barbara Bickel

Abstract

This healing a/r/tographic inquiry ritually cycles through ancestral time to the present inspired by a book recently found above my dad’s desk—10 years after his death. This article shines light and memory onto spirit infused borderspace(s) through returning to a site where text first met image in the early years of my life. Through an autoethnographic exploration memories are recovered, along with a deepened understandings and encounters of reconciliation with my father and our religious ancestry. I am the young dreaming artist-child and the responsible artist/researcher/teacher seeking embodied relational imaginal knowledge through the light of image and word.

Bio

Barbara Bickel is a writing artist, researcher, teacher and Emerita Faculty of Art Education, Southern Illinois University. A multi-media and performance ritual artist, she practices socially-engaged art with the human and more-than-human world. She lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia on Vancouver Island where she serves as co-artistic director of Studio M*: A Collaborative Research Creation Lab Intersecting Arts, Culture & Healing. She is author of the Palgrave Macmillan book Art, Ritual and Trance Inquiry: Arational Learning in an Irrational World, and co-author of the Routledge book Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal: Education, Co-Inquiry and Healing. To see more of her art and writing go to: http://www.studiom.space and http://www.barbarabickel.ca

Word and Wisdom

Lines pretend across the top of the page mimicking left to right her father’s script.
...grant that Thy Word may continue to be his [her] daily guide and delight. I pray Thee also, grant him [her] a realization of the responsibility that goes with higher education. Help him [her] to view all knowledge in the light of Thy Word.

Excerpt from My Prayer Book, 1957, p. 141, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis MS.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.


In the beginning was the Wisdom, and the wisdom was with God, and the Wisdom was God...and the Wisdom became flesh and dwelled among us.


The Word of God was sacred in the Lutheran minister's home I grew up in. I was the middle daughter of five children and sister to three foster siblings—a preacher's kid or PK. Sacred, as I perceived it as a child for the most part, meant taboo, and I grew up afraid to make a mistake speaking or even thinking words or wisdom that did not align with the great patriarchal God version of the Word taught in my home. I learned it was safer to listen and watch rather than question or speak. I came to love listening and watching and did not miss speaking at all. Yet I found ways to bring my unthought questions and voice silently forward from one world into another through drawing—through the image. As I circle between the present and my early self (image a), I am grateful for the scholars who have brought the writings of Germanic female Medieval mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen and the occluded sacred Christian texts of Mary Magdalene into conversation with the bible and gospels I was raised with.

I am steeped in the rituals and practices of my Lutheran ancestors. I worked hard as a child and teen for my Germanic religious tradition; never missing church, studying hard for my Confirmation, teaching Sunday School and playing the organ for church services at my dad's request. Spending time in nature I also generated my own rituals. In particular, swimming; floating and being immersed in nature's water became a sacred ritual for me. I recognize the sea as Great Mother, called in German meer, in Italian mare, in French mer, and in Spanish mar. All mmmm mama words. In my early twenties I traveled through Europe (where the English language was still foreign to most locals and my communication was mostly non-verbal). I spent many months traveling and living on the Mediterranean coast guided by my intuition, free from my family and North American cultural norms. During this time of travel my spirit opened wide to the imaginal, natural, cultural and eros realms of older cultures and other worlds.

The imagination of my child-self helped prepare me for co-encounters in borderspace(s) of the imaginal realm. When I realized I had a spiritual choice beyond the father's way as a young adult, I left the Lutheran tradition.
It was within the imaginal, mystical and cosmos-centered feminine world of spirituality, unconfined by any religion, that I eventually found resonance with my heart and an authentic home. The imaginal, as I use the term, is distinct from the imagination. I draw from mystical scholars, who describe the imaginal as our real home:

[A] realm that objectively exists (one might think of it as an enveloping matrix of meaning around our own space-time dimension), and it is from this realm that our human sense of identity and direction ultimately derive….it is that elusive “origin” or source”…as “the Aion,” the fullness beyond time. (Bourgeault, pp. 166)

A passage from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, cited in Cynthia Bourgeault, offers a different frame for the imaginal sanctuary doorway I walked unconsciously through at a very young age and more consciously through as an adult.

I left one world behind with the aid of another, and now as Image I have been freed from the analog. I am liberated from the chains of forgetfulness which have existed in time. From this moment onward, I go forward into the season of the Great Age, the Aeon, and there, where time rests in stillness in the Eternity of time, I will remain in silence (2010, p. 67).

This healing a/r/tographic inquiry ritually cycles through time from the past to the present spiraling into the future. A/r/tography is an ontological form of arts-based research drawing from the interconnected perspectives of the artist, researcher and teacher while incorporating artistic sources and theories. A/r/tography...
raphy dialectically inquires through art-making and writing—thus images and words in this article are in conversation, informing each other. I further engage a/r/tography as ritual (Bickel, 2007) —slowing down and centering within a space of the sacred that includes co-encounters with humans, more-than-humans and ancestral teachers. Contemporary artist mystic Meinrad Craighead unwinds the curvatures of time and the stillness at the center, in the passage of time this inquiry dwells amidst.

Revolving at her own center. Changing Woman unwinds the incalculable curvatures of time….Her unity is perceptible in the two moving points of our own spiral dance in time: the journey evolving outward, and the search involving inward. pp. 33

This autoethnographic inquiry aesthetically evolves outward and searches inward, inspired by recently finding a small grey book in a cupboard above my dad’s desk; 10 years after his death after most of his books had been given away. I regretted as an adult not asking for some of the books in his collection to be saved, many of which I knew I had drawn in. This little book—My Prayer Book, remained undetected, storing my earliest drawings inside it for decades. It had not been given away! My joy in finding this book was great. I received it as a belated gift from my father to me.

Drawing Upon Wisdom

My dad was an avid reader, a life-long student of theology and writer fluent in English and German. Growing up in a strict German-American Lutheran pastor’s home in a rural community, he decided to become a minister at the age of 12 because he had doubts about God’s existence. His decision was made, in part, to help relieve his doubts and fears not welcome in his Christian home and Missouri Lutheran community.

From an early age, before I began school full time, I have vivid memories of being with my dad while he worked in his church office—an office that had a doorway opening onto the church sanctuary. In that windowless office we worked in mutual silence for the most part, him reading or writing and me drawing people in the blank pages of books I pulled off his library shelves. A library that did not include the kinds of picture books we had at home. My dad loved books but did not treat them as precious objects. He never stopped me or scolded me for drawing in his books. This special time with my dad is symbolically carried and remembered in my silent child drawing’s relationship with him and the printed Word. This inquiry has led to new understandings about my dad, our shared ancestry and our unspoken relationship. It has brought me into a process of reconciliation for what could not be fully reconciled before his death.

I knew when I found the book that I wanted to create something from it. Simultaneously, I have been dwelling with a photograph of me looking pretty pleased at the age of 4 holding an adult book on my lap (image a). Was it a book that contained some of my drawings? To begin to write this piece, I study my drawings in the small prayer book. Holding the re-found book, in my now adult hands, I see how I created my own front cover by drawing on the back cover of the book (image b). Opening the book from the back and reading the drawings from back to front, I notice how as a child I was unaware of front or back, or whether text was up or down (image c & d). I remember how I longed to be able to write and read as my dad, older sister and brother did. I also recall how, with a sharp pointed lead pencil held firmly in my hand,
I would carefully trace, letter by letter, line by line on top of the script—written-with-fountain-pen, in my dad's notebooks. Through his handwriting I defied time and the limits of my young age and found a way to write in cursive before I could print.

Sitting on the floor of his office, hidden on the other side of his deck, I easily entered an awake dream-like meditative drawing and re-scripting practice—in parallel with him as he became lost in his own study and church work. I was in a place of calm and rapt attention in my self-created learning task. I have no memory of him noticing or commenting on my drawings in the book or me. I am sure he was just happy I was not distracting him from his work.

The quote that opens the article is from a page I drew on in My Prayer Book when I was around the age of 5. The quote is part of a prayer for a child entering higher education. It is reminiscent of readings I heard as a child growing up. The second biblical quote is one I chose to read at my Confirmation, after attending weekly classes taught by my dad from age twelve to thirteen. The third quote is a mystical interpretation of the prior quote, where the Word is traced to its Greek origins of logos that is associated with the feminine/Sophia/wisdom. In this translation Sophia's divinity is made manifest where “Wisdom is about transformation and transformation is about creativity” (Bourgeault, 2010, p.175). Reading the reinterpreted quote helps me make more sense of why I chose it.

**My Prayer Book**

Returning to My Prayer Book has helped me to re-integrate not only the image and Word but also my story with my father's story through our genetically entwined ancestral lineage.
I open My Prayer Book from the back as my child-self did and begin to turn its pages (images e, f & g). These poetic words flow as I try to recapture what my experience at the time of these drawing might have been.

Before she could write or read words
before she could read music
before she could play songs on the piano
before she could swim
before she could ride a two-wheel bike

She could play she could dream
she could love books
especially their pictures
she could sing
she could walk, run, spin
she could listen and observe
and she could draw

She cooould draw
share her world
quietly asks her dad for a pencil from his desk
carefully pulls a small hard cover book off his book shelf
slips her small fingers between its sheets
finds unmarked pages
white space awaiting
her palm gently smooths the first page
deliberately flattens the spine

The pencil finds its starting place on the inside cover
lines pretend across the top of the page
   mimicking left to right her dad's script
spiraling with determination
   across the next page
     in consecutive
        horizontal rows
a smiling sun leaps into the upper right corner
nebulous shapes and forms gather
     jump

a wide toothed grinning face punctuates the story

She turns the page
remembers her mom
misses her mom
draws her just off center
bejewelled and wearing an impressive Sunday hat
crowns her with a sacred title
“dad, how do you spell mom?”
draws dad and big sister Janice into the family gathering
in the borderspace a small head
floats
stares intently at dad
grows larger on the next page
“Time to go home”
reluctantly she returns the pencil to her dad’s desk
slides the book inbetween its siblings on the shelf
til the next time

The drawn story continues, jumps many pages and lands on “Table Prayers,” in the borderspace between “Grace at Meals” and prayers “For the Sorrowing.” I am greeted by a celebratory gathering of women wearing floor length gowns, adorned with beaded earrings, necklaces and elaborate headdresses (image h).
This drawing depicts a joyous event with a perplexed sad looking head floating, its body absent. Re-appearing on the next page alone, inverted, with a scribbled-in body and smiling (image i). The printed words on the page offer clues.

Cause that loss which I have suffered to remind me that the things of earth are as a shadow which continueth not, that I may be inclined to set my affections on things above and not on the earth.
I have great affection for the Earth beings that continue onward in this book. As I flip through more pages I find line drawings mysteriously, sometimes aesthetically, communicating with the printed Word (image j & k).
I take note of the faint figure drawings at the end and start of the book as they retain evidence of attempted erasure (image e, l, m & n). Do they mark a change of heart for the child-artist regarding their presence and relationship with the book? Or has the imaginal world been invaded by outside forces? Words maybe spoken in dismay upon finding them? Had the transgression of the Word realm; of God the father’s territory, been discovered?

The publisher and title of the book are left untouched, framed by lines that have been spared erasure (image l). The erased drawings are faded but still there. The relationship between the realms of the imaginal and the Word is unmistakable and not erasable. They co-exist together in ghostly presence on these pages.
The Alphabet Versus the Image

My elementary school years supported my creativity to flourish at the expense of traditional grammar. I was part of a pilot program in my school that fore-fronted creativity. I received As in my creative writing assignments. I remember one very exciting illustrated story I wrote in one long sentence. I struggled and still struggle with spelling and grammar and have no memory of learning the mechanics of writing. Yet, since I could read, I have read voraciously with high comprehension. As an adult I have come to recognize that I have mild dyslexia in my writing. Words, letters and numbers do not always line up as they should. I see words, numbers and sentences as a whole and not as parts. It allows me to be a fast reader but a slow writer. I am also a slow thinker who takes time to weave and see the big picture.

The struggle to connect with the rational linear Word and being more comfortable within the arational nonlinear imaginal realms has remained with me throughout my life. This conflict, in part, has led me to identify as an earth-centered spiritual feminist. Since the age of 42, I have found myself writing, often collaboratively, with words that continue to surprise me as they teach me about art and healing, and art making's transformative process (e.g., Bickel, 2020, 2012, 2008, 2004; Bickel & R.M. Fisher, 2022, Bickel & V. Fisher 2005; Jordan & Bickel, 2022; Snowber & Bickel, 2015; St. Georges & Bickel, 2022). I loved discovering the mystic, doctor, scientist and artist Hildegard von Bingen (born in Bickelheim) who, like me, began writing at the age of 42. After two powerful illuminations she began teaching and sharing her visions widely as a spiritual leader in her community. It was validating to learn that slowness in coming to writing and teaching was experienced by a woman mystic I have felt ancestral, creative and spiritual affinity with. Matthew Fox (1985), a Dominican scholar of her works writes:

She teachers that it is art … that “awakens us from our sluggishness” and overcomes apathy, that makes cold hearts warm and dry consciouses moist again. The proper context for spirituality and faith is the cosmos—not the privatized, individual soul. And the only way to express the cosmic experience is through art and creativity. Humans become the musical instruments of God. The divine Spirit makes music through us. (pp. 15)

In my late twenties I consciously began following the spirit of art through my visual art practice. I did not know where it would lead me. My masters thesis, that began when I was in my early forties, became my writing initiation and was entitled From Artist to A/r/tographer: An Autoethnographic Ritual Inquiry into Writing on the Body. My dad travelled to attend my thesis defense. I gave a copy of the thesis to him. After he read it, he told me it was his journey too. I remember at the time wishing he could have read it just as my journey. He also came to my dissertation defense; a dissertation entitled Living the Divine Spiritually and Politically: Art, Ritual, and Performative Pedagogy in Women’s Multifaith Leadership. The opening ritual and presentation, was followed by an intense two-hour questioning period. My dad told me afterwards that he prayed for me the entire time. His prayers may indeed have helped, as following my defense I was told by my supervisor that the external reviewer had raised concerns regarding my not adhering to the canons of the field of art education. My passing was dependent on my sufficiently answering the questions of the external examiner (who was not present) at the oral defense. The final decision for passing my examination was left to the Chair from another department in the university and not the committee. I was in my supervisor's office the next day, not knowing if I had passed, when the Chair report arrived in my supervisor's email box, passing my oral defense. Although my dad never shared this, I think he understood the responsibility, fragility and danger of my words and images being accepted, understood and approved in the academy and the world.
My dad loved the study of words and in particular the words that told stories in the bible. While writing this article I found a piece of his writing stored in a file box in my mom's garage entitled “My Journey With the Bible.” Half a century earlier, as a student himself my dad had struggled with traditional Missouri Lutheran educational and institutional practices of teaching religion through doctrine in the catechism and not through the bible itself. He recognized how focus on doctrine limited his desire to study and learn from the bible and its stories directly. It was in fact discouraged. Later in life as a pastor, he was accused twice of being a heretic by church members, based on his sermons that reflected his personal study of the bible.

I vividly remember the large family bible that lived in the living room. I did not read the bible, instead I loved kneeling in solitude at the coffee table and staring, for what felt like hours, at the inner pages of vibrant colourplate paintings of biblical stories found in the centre of it. I was nourished by looking at and creating images. As I identified as a visual artist foremost, as an adult I felt I was betraying art to write with words. My identity shift to a writer was fraught with resistance accompanied by a deeply felt terror. Intuitively I seemed to know there was an ancient and ensuing battle taking place between the Alphabet and the image. An historical battle well-articulated by the writer Leonard Shlain—where the evolution of the alphabet and written word took over the image and came to dominance through the suppression of the symbol-based matriarchal or Goddess-centered cultures. He points out how the first commandment of the Israelite faith in the Old Testament: “I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me (Exod. 20: 2-3), [effectively] announces the disappearance of the Goddess.” (Shlain, 1999, p. 82). The second commandment, Shlain further points out, directly denounces images: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Exod. 20:4).” He asks: Does this commandment, by its placement of order signify more importance then the sixth commandment: “Though shalt not murder”? This disturbingly suggests that suppressing images, and more importantly controlling the human imaginary is more important than the commandment to not kill each other! Sadly, and tragically, this points to imaginal and arational ways of engaging life being the greatest threat in a patriarchal God-fearing culture. My spiritually strong and religiously devout paternal great grandmother, who became an agoraphobic, comes to mind. The grandmother that gave her grandson, my father, his first bible at the time of his confirmation. I often wonder why she did not leave her house and how she became the inspiration for my grandfather, my father's father to become a minister? Did my grandfather, like my father, choose to study the bible and become an authoritarian church leader to dispel doubt—and whose doubt was it? This begins to uncover roots of the ancestral hurt I have had to work through to share my feminine writing voice with the world.

Living life as a woman artist gave me an image-centered voice I was more comfortable with. As a professional figurative artist I was and am passionate about a relational feminine aesthetic, along with embodied and arational ways of knowing through artmaking. I have a deep respect for and love of the human body. Drawing people was an endless source of inspiration, or so I thought, in the first decades of my career. As I matured in my artistic path, I often encountered feelings of grief when my figurative artworks were not read or understood as I wanted when exhibited in public. My intentions of expanding imaginaries and caring deeply for the human body, and in particular the female body as a sacred vessel of wisdom, was too often interpreted with a destructive twist in the dominant patriarchal art-world I was sharing my art within. I stopped drawing the body in 2011 and to this day have not returned to it directly. Yet my art still draws on the human body and its subjectivity, but now it manifests more with and from an embodied inner and cosmic experiencing.

In 2009, while in existential doubt about drawing the body and making art to hang on the wall, I found Matrixial theory, as articulated by philosopher, psychoanalyst and artist Bracha L. Ettinger (2020). Interestingly, Ettinger often
interprets the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament and returns to it the feminine sources that have been altered in subsequent translations. Significantly, Ettingerian Matrixial theory introduced me to the presence of matrixial borderspace(s) and art’s role in seducing us into the imaginal liminal space of the m/Other colliding in complementary relationship with the phallic realm, even when suppressed and hidden. Significantly, the matrixial sphere serves as an “aesthetic-artistic filter” where one can enter a paradoxical time of future meeting the past to engage fragile and fragmented borderlinkings in the present (p. 265). Ettinger writes poetically and deeply with words and fluidly alters them to more accurately reflect the realm of the matrixial. As for example, she adds an r to the word metamorphosis. The matrix in this context is a “psychic borderspace of encounter” and within the matrix the process of metramorphosis serves as the “psychic creative borderlink” (Ettinger, 2020, p. 162). Metramorphosis is the creative process that transgresses a borderline—at the threshold of conductability and attunement with an unknown other. She calls us to slow down, re-see and re-know that which we think is the only and correct way to be with and language the world.

I shine light and memory onto matrixial borderspace(s) through the metramorphic co-mingling of text and image while a/r/tographically writing about my return to a time where text first met image in the early years of my life. As an adult I now see how I had an innocent and intuitive desire to integrate these historically embattled realms. The blank page is the matrix for the printed text. I entered the matrix of published books through borderspace(s) of the page to join the image with the word. My father's story and my story co-mingle in the pages of books. I love that I was creatively fearless in altering and transforming published books from my father's library into stories of embodied relationships. It is in matrixial borderspace(s) that an alliance is built between the image and the word, thus tapping into sacred “covenants hidden in art” (Ettinger, 2002, p. 230). In the patriarchal Christian context I was embedded within, the blank spaces in my father's books opened a channel to pre-Christian and Christian ancestors—for myself, my father and others to have a sacred encounter with images in relationship with the Word.

I became curious about and began inquiring into ancestral connections in my art practice in 2000 through trance. I describe what I now call trance-based inquiry (Bickel, 2020) as an awake dreaming or journey process with intention to enter imaginal realms to access arational forms of knowing and unknowing. Trances take place in the liminal zone of the imaginal. As I search for an artwork example of my trance-based art I remember and re-watch an art video based on a trance I entered on a full moon. When I look at the date, I see it took place the week prior to my dad's death in 2012. Drawing upon the imaginal through art and trance I was processing my dad's pending death while he was in a hospital 4000 kilometers away.

An Ancestral Journey

In the early hours of the morning at a nearby Lutheran church I slowly walked down the sidewalk to the church with a Lutheran Hymnal engraved with my name under my arm. I placed an altar cloth for my body on the cement ground at the church entrance and sat on it. I randomly opened the hymnal to hymn 223 and read it aloud. I lay down on my back and rested the hymnal on my diaphragm and entered the trance.

I travel down into the earth through tree roots until I reach an empty chamber. I wait here. An old woman meets me and gestures without speaking for me to place my hands on my heart. Our heartbeats join. The heartbeat takes me a loong way back in time. An old man appears and leads me on a walk over hills and we come to a small humble village church in
Germany. He opens the door for me. I ask if this is the church of my ancestors. He nods his head yes, and I enter the church. I watch as a circle of people holding hands form around the outside perimeter of the stone church. They begin to run, then to dance in circle. The energy vortex created by their movement sends my body upward. They begin singing together. Their communal chorus lifts me further upward. I am reminded that the core principle of the Christian tradition I was birthed within is community. It’s very simple. Now above the steeple, high above the ground, I open my arms and hands very slowly. While I do so I recognize that it is the spirit of the people who created me and Christ. It is the people who lift each other up rather than a dominating, unknowable paternal and singular God. Ascension is not a miracle. It’s a collective endeavor where everyone has an opportunity to be freed and released from the earthly world to enter the imaginal realm of spirit with the support of others. I float back down into the church.

The old man awaits me outside the church and walks me back. My heartbeat returns me, returns me to the chamber where the old woman separates our hearts and releases me to travel back to present time. Back to the tree above ground.
Revisiting this trance-based art video many years later I am in awe of the transformative vision I was given by my ancestors just prior to my father’s death. A vision that very much echoes the teachings of early mystical Christianity and my own feminine spiritual path. Was this something my dad knew about or was searching for himself? I am grateful that my dad was not a hell, fire and brimstone preacher. That he put to rest the fear-filled Satan fixation of his evangelical forebears. My vision took place deep in the earth where the sulphur stone that is deemed as hell and brimstone is found. But my vision is not about hell, nor does it hold any resemblance to the first or second commandment. It is guided by the Earth as the memory place-holder of the relational path of spiritual experience and understandings. The feminine mystical cosmology of Mary Magdalene and visionary art of Hildegard of Bingen and Meinrad Craighead also stand in high contrast to the first and the second commandment of the Old Testament. Theirs is a feminine spiritual path steeped in the relational and the imaginal through direct visionary revelations from heavenly and earthly realms that emanate with images.

Lamentably, the conflict between the rational word and arational imaginary culminated in the church’s rejection of direct revelations of visionaries in the third and fourth centuries (Bourgeautl, 2010). It was women who were the most frequently known for visionary ability. With the elimination of the mystical aspects of Christianity and women’s presence in the leadership of the church, the church has been mostly left bereft of space for nourishing the imaginal and visionary capacities of humans. This loss has diminished our capability to act compassionately for the whole, causing a narrowing of perspectives and blocking individual and collective transformation. My struggle to fully connect spiritually and emotionally with my dad feels part of this loss.

Most recently, in a trance-based performative project, I have been exploring my historical ancestral burdens along with the gifts while studying historical trauma. Historical trauma has recently come to consciousness in Western culture with the discovery of epigenetics and its role in the mental health crisis. Epigenetics is a scientific understanding of how we pass trauma on to future generations through our genes. Something that Indigenous healers have never lost sight of, with some claiming that historical trauma reaches back 14 generations (Affo, 2022). In my exploration and study, I have learned and keep learning about the violent and hurting shadow of Christianity as it has been projected upon women. A shadow that reached its first apex during the Catholic led Inquisition that was amplified by the Reformation. Luther himself tragically had a loathing for nature and digressed into teaching the adversariness of feminine nature (Owens, 2020). Traumatic shadows, such as the Inquisition, first demonized then created a holocaust of (mostly) women and wise nature healers in communities.

The shadow side of Christianity, generated during periods of collective trauma, has infiltrated North American culture in unique and deeply divisive ways. Our current western culture, severed from healthy ancestral lines has tragically mastered a fear-based manipulation and cooptation of images for its own power and greed. This perpetuates the desacralizing of women and nature through its exploitive portrayal of and coopting of female and nature images. Fear of the other; peoples of colour, peoples with diverse sexual identities, women and nature runs deep in Western culture. It is tragically manifesting in an inability to compassionately and collectively respond to holocausts, pandemics, ongoing wars, climate crises and more.

The overlapping of Matrixial theory and its relational healing and aesthetic foundations, with ancestral
trauma theory is invaluable. Spiritual teacher Tomas Hubl (2020), who grew up in post-Holocaust Germany as a Gentile in his book *Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating Our Intergenerational and Cultural Wound* teaches that in the ancestral field we have access to the individual, the collective and the ancestors.

And that,

> It’s helpful to hold in mind that whomever we are, wherever we are, we are never alone. We are, each of us, a living multidimensional matrix of connection: we are fitted to one another, to our ancestors, and to all other life-forms. While we remain indissolubly linked to the whole and higher aspects of each and all, we are equally bound to their denser and dissociated forms. We contain not just our own fragmented shadows but together carry the dark of our ancestors, our cultures, our planet, and our cosmos. Awakening transcends the individual, because integration is about all of us. (pp. 122)

**Copoiesis: Like Father Like Daughter**

I look through my art portfolio for a piece that is about connection; a more recent art image that brings the body into play without drawing it directly. I find a socially-engaged artwork I titled *Copoiesis* (image p).

It captures a performative moment of co-encounter photographed at an artist residency I facilitated for art students in 2014. Still a figurative artist despite no longer drawing the body in my art, this piece of art is about “being fitted to one another” (Hubl, 2020, p. 122). In the photograph young women artists and myself are engaging with an interactive art piece I made from thrift store clothing, which I joined at the ends of each sleeve. People are invited to playfully wear and insert themselves into the piece and see where the garment collectively takes them. In the times I have shared this piece, a unique collective spirit arises as individuals slip their arms into the sleeves, slide out of their individual selves and become a playful and joyful interconnected whole. In looking at this piece I recognize the threads of my early artist-child drawings—wisdom becoming flesh. Prayers visually rendered by my 5 year old artist self, are transported through time to the artist residency in this playful “matrix of connection”— a celebratory gathering of female artists.

Moving into artistic engagement inspired by the photo of the Copoiesis piece I begin to cut figure drawings out of the prayer book. The figures freed from the page become animated paper dolls for me to play with (image q). As I am cutting, a memory surfaces of how my dad was one of the first in the 1960s to bring the teaching of biblical stories through animation with felt storyboards and cut-outs to his ministry. He included this in the Sunday school teacher curriculum. As I became one of these Sunday School teachers as a teenager, I utilized this visual story telling practice. My early story-telling teaching practice has made its way into my visual collage practice. More memories emerge as I carefully cut around the drawn lines of the drawings. My dad once told me he loved to draw as a child and then he remembered just stopping and never drawing again. He did not know why. He also shared that as a young boy he liked playing with his sister and her friends but was teased by his brothers so he stopped. Bereft at an early age of drawing and more girl-style play and friendships he transferred his energy to sports and more boy-acceptable play. He often shared how he regretted the lost opportunity of learning how to play with and relate to girls. I wonder what kind of a dad and person he would have been if he had been encouraged to draw and explore the world through images and not been ridiculed for playing with girls?
I continue to play with the cut-out figures and place them on top of a spontaneous green pastel drawing I made, inspired by swimming in a lake reflecting the green trees of the forest that surround it (image q). More memories of conversations with my dad materialize. When I made the decision to become an artist and obtain my BFA I recall my dad telling me that as a seminary student he originally wanted to focus his theology thesis on the artist Lucas Cranach the Elder, the Northern Renaissance painter and printmaker. Coincidentally, my favorite time period of study during my BA minor in Art History was the Renaissance. I had loved going into the cathedrals and museums and being with the figural story telling paintings when I travelled in Europe. I remember seeing and then studying Cranach the Elder’s paintings. Cranach was commissioned by the Electors of Saxony, who supported the Reformation, and was an enthusiast of humanism and the Reformation. A personal friend of Martin Luther, he painted Luther’s portrait and served as a best man at his wedding. They named each other as godparents; he for Luther’s son and Luther for Cranach’s daughter. Cranach also provided illustrative wood cuts for Luther’s (translated to German) bible. This was the first printed bible on the newly invented printing press and able to be read by lay persons—giving direct access to the bible and fueling Luther’s Reformation. Although best known for his portraits, Cranach the Elder’s paintings were often biblically pedagogical in content (Snyder, 1985). He painted biblical stories that promoted the reformed Christian interpretations of the bible. Interestingly, his reformed faith did not cause him to shy away from depicted the naked human body in his paintings. Likewise, my father never shared concern regarding the naked body that was a large part of my artistic practice.

I do not remember why my dad did not follow through on his desire to study this artist and his art. Was it because the proposed image-inspired thesis was not seen as scholarly or Word sourced enough for the very traditional Lutheran Missouri synod? The Lutheran church after Luther, became more austere in it use of images. In writing this piece I reflect more on my dad sharing that my MA thesis story was also his story. I regret not asking him how or why? Although I could not imagine it at the time, I now wonder how our spiritual journeys fitted into one another. Was he recognizing in my journey an extension of his own journey? As I learn more about his struggle in having his own voice recognized within the patriarchal Christian Lutheran culture he was embedded in, I wonder if and how his own struggle might be reconciled through my journey of art making, scholarship and writing? His writing time was taken up mostly by writing a sermon each week (with additional sermons for the religious days, e.g., Advent, Christmas, Good Friday), writing down quotes as part of his study of books of the bible and theologians he was reading, and writing letters to family and friends. In his retirement he took up memoir writing where he had a keen desire to document his childhood years and his early years as a minister. The impulse to integrate one’s life journey is similarly present in our studies and writing. In contrast to my dad, my autoethnographic and a/r/tographic writing as ritual and healing was and is supported by artist-scholars in the institution.

Persistent Women Who Waited

The writing of this article has led me to open file boxes clearly marked and organized by my dad and stored by my mother in her garage. I am a bit overwhelmed by the many boxes. Yet, I am aware that another layer of the healing a/r/tographic inquiry awaits. I step into the borderspace. I open the box marked “Sermons.” Not surprisingly they are filed according to the different books in the bible. As my early confirmation quote came from the Book of John, I pull out the folder containing Book of John sermons. I was born on Good Friday, so I look for a sermon around that holy week and find one titled Easter, John 20.1-18, April 14, 1968. I had just turned 7 when my dad preached this sermon on The Resurrection. John’s is the one book in the
bible that elaborates Mary Magdalene and other Mary’s in the resurrection story. The rest of the books in the New Testament minimize Mary Madgelene’s role (Bourgeault, 2010). After pulling out this hand-written sermon I open, what appears to be my dad’s well-used and possibly favorite bible to the same passages in John and place a few of my cut-out child-images on its pages. I sit at my desk with a freshly sharpened led pencil and as I did as a child, I carefully write on top of the handwritten script of his Easter sermon. In contrast to my own erratic handwriting my dad’s script is very steady and readable. Tracing his script contemplatively as an adult, I am able to read and feel the words he has written with heightened awareness.

I share a few excerpts from my dad’s sermon:

**1-10 The Resurrection of Jesus**
The women had watched when Jesus was buried, so they knew the place. They anxiously waited for the Sabbath to pass over so that they could go and anoint the body of Jesus. Mary maybe was a little bit ahead of the others, or maybe her mind rushed to the wrong conclusions. When she saw the stone rolled away, she naturally thought that the body of Jesus has been stolen. Then it was natural for her to run and tell Peter and John. Peter and John checked it out and found the grave empty. However, they didn't get to see Jesus because they didn't understand Scriptures and didn't stick around.

1-18 Jesus Appears to Mary
But Mary stuck around. She anxiously tries to find the body of Jesus. And in her anxious seeking, she finds Jesus himself. Jesus reminds her that this was the final evidence that he was from God, namely his ascending to his Father. John 3.13. John 6.62.

He then enters his inquiry:

Know – If you really look for Jesus and hold on to him you will find his living presence in your life.
Feel – Not frightened and afraid, but trust in God’s promises.
Do – Look for Jesus, Don’t give up, Tell others.

He then enters his teaching:

II What makes it possible for us to see Him [?]
A. Deep love for Jesus.
B. Anxious and persistent search for Him.
C. Jesus revealing himself to us.
I insert my child self and my many women into my father’s text. I love the synchrony that has brought me to this particular sermon that circles my inquiry back around to Mary Magdalene and to the theme of ascension that appeared in my ancestral trance when my dad was dying. A sermon written by my father that presents a story of persistent women. A community of ‘women’ who waited. And Mary Magdalene, the beloved apostle, who was ahead of the others, who had a deep love for Jesus—who searched for him, found him and understood the phenomenon behind Scripture before it was written. She was the one to share the good news of the ascension with the other disciples. Contemplating my dad’s sermon, it is clear to see how it was the loving feminine that began the Christian Scriptures. It was a woman, in the flesh of Mary Magdalene (not the male disciples who left) who gestated and then birthed the mystical story of Jesus into the world.

In the beginning was the Wisdom, and the wisdom was with God, and the Wisdom was God…and the Wisdom became flesh and dwelled among us.

The bible passage I chose at the time of my confirmation is re-confirmed through my father’s telling of the Easter morning bible story in this early sermon. This healing a/r/tographic inquiry is birthing words of the flesh. The word and the image, masculine and feminine, Mary Magdalene and Jesus, father and daughter are intertwined, co-mingling, co-belonging, co-becoming and even co-healing the flesh through words and images across time and space.18

The gifts of my lineage hold much that have led to my love of the image and the expansive imaginary of spirit; through my father, Hildegard, Luther, Cranach, Mary Magdalene and more. Dwelling with fitted-together stories we can draw closer to beholding the glory of our interconnected presence on this Earth and move forward into the Aeon. I am that young dreaming artist-child and the responsible artist/researcher/teacher seeking healing, embodied relational knowledge and wisdom through the light of image and word.

She could play
she could draw
share her world

Acknowledgements

I hold gratitude for the gifts given to me by my ancestors and the ancestral lands in Europe they were born upon, cared for and nourished by. I offer respect to the ancestors of the lands I live and have lived upon, and upon which my settler ancestors have lived since their migration to North America.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father Reverend Herman George Bickel (1923-2012).
References


Snyder, James. (1985). *Northern Renaissance art: Painting, sculpture, the graphic arts from 1350-1575*. Prentice Hall.


Endnotes

1 Images as they appear in the article:
a: Barbara Ann with an adult book on her lap. Sitting beside her dolls who were often her students. Age 4. Family Photograph.
r: Photo of the artist-author at study with her father’s writing. Photograph credit. R. Michael Fisher.
s: Photo of the artist-author engaging her father’s writing. Photograph credit. R. Michael Fisher.
t: Collage of cut-out drawings with the artist-author’s father’s sermon. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

2 *A/r/tography evolved out of the Arts-Based Educational Research movement named in the mid 1990s by Eisner. It was formed and developed within a community of practice at the University of British Columbia in the early years of the twenty-first century. I was fortunate to take the first a/r/tography graduate class during my Masters taught by artist-scholars Rita L. Irwin and Stephanie Springgay. To read more about a/r/tography see (de Cossen & Irwin, 2004; Irwin et al, 2006; Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005; Springgay et al, 2008).*

3 ‘A/r/tography as ritual’ emerged within and was articulated in my Masters thesis.

4 I draw from the philosopher-poet Jean Gebser’s understanding of the arational which includes and transcends the pre-rational and the rational. The arational is most present when dreaming, meditating, and creating and is not confined by time or space (Gebser, 1984)

5 The arational in the patriarchal sphere is most often conflated with the irrational (Gebser, 1984). It is distinct and ideally operates in an integrated way with the rational and irrational realms. Serving as a link between the two. The arational is accessed through modes of knowing and sourced through, for example the body, senses, emotions, intuition, spiritual and creative experiencing.

6 A figurative artist is one who gives the focus of their art to the subject of the body.

Ancestral Journey VII took place in Carbondale, Illinois at a Lutheran church near to my home. It was one of a series of eight trances I undertook as part of a Gestare Art Collective annual ritual practice. [https://vimeo.com/user3984418?embedded=true&source=owner_portrait&owner=3984418](https://vimeo.com/user3984418?embedded=true&source=owner_portrait&owner=3984418)

In 2018, sacred theatre artist and healer Tannis Hugill and I began a collaboration exploring our settler and ancestral traumas that will culminate in a performance ritual. In our artworking process we witness each other entering trance through our bodies in the studio and through trance journeys. We have drawn from our performance experience, and spiritual practices as well as from the historical trauma work of Resmaa Menakem and Daniel Foor. See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl8NK5to-0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl8NK5to-0)


“Socially engaged art practices involve a hybridity of art, research and pedagogy, including performance, activism, image making and social research. The shared method that crosses all socially engaged art is "dialogue between the artist and the participant" (Heim, 2003, p. 186).” Bickel, 2015, p. 80).

Copoesis is an Ettingerian matrixial term for the transformation that emerges relationally within aesthetical and ethical ways of being and knowing that are nonconscious and preverbal.

This artworking was created during a Spontaneous Creation-Making session. A communal practice of art-care. See Bickel & Fisher, 2022.

See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucas_Cranach_the_Elder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucas_Cranach_the_Elder)

This insight came from Lynn Fels. I am enormously grateful for her review of a draft of this article and the suggestions, questions and challenges offered to me by her to take the article further with another layer of a/r/tograpic inquiry that could include my father’s writing. The last section of this article is due to her encouragement.

Early institutional academic champions of relational, life-centred, arts-based and even spiritually infused research and education paved the way for me and others. These include Drs. Shauna Butterwick, Rishma Dunlop, Lynn Fels, Rita, Irwin, Carl Leggo, Karen Meyer, William Pinar, Celeste Snowber, and Daniel Vokey. Each of whom I studied with as a graduate student.

I insert Lynn Fels’s poignant wondering below. I love how reading an early draft of this article led her to these questions. Her questions, in turn have deepened my own sense of healing as a daughter with my father that moves beyond reconciliation many years after his death.

“One wonders if the healing a/r/tograpical journey was as much that of the father through his daughter’s writing of this piece as she rewrites how she is listening to his story into her inquiry….beyond reconciliation, is reciprocal healing after death possible through healing a/r/tograpical inquiry?
Silent Interruptions: Democratizing Academic Discourse through Wordless Narrative Research

Jeff Horwat

Abstract

Emerging in the early twentieth century, wordless novels portrayed stories of working-class laborers, immigrants, and other marginalized groups overlooked and silenced by industrialization. Wordless novels visually operationalize their silence by presenting their narratives without words to call attention to hidden struggles of different social groups exploited under capitalism, colonialism, and other forms of systemic violence. This paper explores how the generative power of visual silence forces a pause in hegemonic discourses to create space for reflection and social change. Drawing from the collectivist ethos of wordless novels, wordless narrative research is introduced as a method of creative inquiry to study, investigate, and communicate personal narratives, cultural phenomenon, and emotional experiences outside normative academic discourses. An excerpt of the author’s current project is presented to exemplify how wordless narrative research uses silence as a productive fissure that disrupts the status-quo and creates space for other ways of knowing.

Bio

Jeff Horwat is an artist and teacher from eastern Pennsylvania. His art and research practices explore the intersections of wordless narratives, psychoanalytic theory, and arts-based research. He has taught art in both K-12 and higher education for more than 10 years, has published visual scholarship in journals such as Visual Art Research, and is the author of ‘Nothing is a Cure’—a wordless allegory about anxiety and desire. He currently resides in Albuquerque, New Mexico with his wife Stephanie and two children Maya and Simone. Contact: jhorwat@unm.edu | www.jeffhorwat.com

Silent Stories for Silenced Voices

For early twentieth century Flemish artist Frans Masereel, modernity did not fulfill its promises of technological, political, social progress. Amid the spectacle of crowding cities with expansive skylines, bustling trolly cars, and billowing smokestacks, Masereel observed growing populations of exploited working-class citizens overlooked and silenced by the roar of industrialization (Beronä, 2003). An accomplished political cartoonist, printmaker, and social activist, Masereel empathized with the struggles of these blue-collar laborers.
In 1918, he published his first novel entitled 25 Images de la Passion d’un Homme as an act of class solidarity. The book consisted of twenty-five black and white illustrations that chronicled a fictional working-class protagonist who leads a labor revolt to fight for better wages; he is later arrested for inciting a riot, tried, and executed (1918/2019). While aesthetically expressive and thematically relevant, one of the narrative’s most unique characteristics was that it was wordless. While visual storytelling had been around for hundreds of years in various artistic forms, including children’s pictures books, a wordless novel for adults was a unique contribution to literature. This early version of the modern graphic novel represented “a way to sidestep our language barriers and create complex, political, emotional and humorous stories that [can] be universally understood” (Kuper, 2008, p. 17). Masereel would later publish forty-four more wordless novels before his death in 1972—most of which explored sociopolitical themes similar to those in his first book.

Inspired by his work, Masereel’s contemporaries used the wordless novel form to explore the disenfranchisement of protagonists from the dehumanization of laborers in the deep American south (Ward, 1932/2008), poor women struggling to economically survive during the Weimar Republic (Nückel 1930/2007), and the plight of Pacific Islanders inhabiting ancestral lands commandeered for nuclear testing (Hyde, 1951/2007). While wordless novels maintained a strong readership throughout the great depression and World War II, by mid-century the genre became obscured by the growing popularity of conventional science fiction and fantasy comics. A small niche of contemporary artists and illustrators like Eric Drooker (2007, 2002), Nick Bousefield (2010), and Shaun Tan (2007) have continued to publish wordless novels that often share stories about marginalized people in the face of current social struggles, expanding the genre to incorporate more perspectives of indigenous and immigrant protagonists. In one example, Tan’s (2007) *The Arrival* is an auto-biographical tale with interwoven surreal vignettes about a father emigrating to a foreign land—the silence of the narrative alluding to the inability to speak the language of a new culture. The artists’ decisions to share stories of the voiceless without the use of text offers a sobering reality of how hegemonic social forces silence marginalized populations.

In social and political discourse, being silenced denotes a position of exclusion, disempowerment, disenfranchisement, and dehumanization (Ferguson, 2002; Fivish, 2010). Members of the working class are silenced for speaking out against exploitation; indigenous communities are silenced for defending their ancestral lands against colonial occupation; immigrants are silenced from participating in new opportunities within foreign lands. Lamotte (2019) suggests that “silence is in the location of the mysterious, colonized Other, bereft of language and therefore of humanity” (p. 75). However, while the tragic subjects of wordless novels are silenced through various forms of systemic violence, the stories themselves have their own form of silence, a generative form of silence—one created through the active engagement with the stories. Quietly reading wordless novels, readers are drawn into the silent worlds of the forgotten, engendering empathy with protagonists while reflecting on their own lived experiences to construct new meanings. The interpretive process rehumanizes the characters, reanimates the circumstances of their struggle, and gives their muted life experiences a voice. Wordless novels engineer a pause in discourse that creates space for personal reflection and invites the possibility for social change.

As an artist, art teacher, and researcher, I have been interested in wordless novels since I first encountered David Beronä’s (2008) monograph on the history of wordless novels several years ago. Initially, the formal and aesthetic qualities of the stories resonated with my interest in graphic novels. Freed from textual com-
petition of written language, wordless novels seemed like the most authentic means of visual storytelling (Postema, 2017). However, as I read more wordless novels, I was notably affected by each story’s overwhelming sense of quietness. The silence of the wordless books presented a profound way to express feelings and thoughts too subtle for words, sometimes illuminating hidden emotional struggles and traumas experienced by the protagonists. Inspired by the possibilities of the silence, I created my own wordless novel, *Nothing is a Cure* (2023), a surreal autoethnographic allegory about my personal journey to heal from trauma, anxiety, and depression. The silence of the form captured the quiet isolation of suffering with mental illness while commenting on the stigma of anxiety and depression in contemporary society.

The process of creating the narrative helped me realize the potential of wordless novels, not just as genre of graphic literature, but as a method for doing creative research. Wordless narratives are a valuable way to explore preverbal constructions of lived experiences, including trauma, repressed memories, and other forms of emotional knowledge often made accessible only through affective or embodied modalities (Horwat, 2018). Wordless narratives constitute a viable method to understand the invisible tensions that often elude conventional academic discourses. Furthermore, by undermining the hegemonic power of language, these image-driven stories elicit engagement through a different modality—an affective dimension that seeks to level the playing field—making participation more equitable and democratic. Focusing on experiences that exist outside of conventional academic discourse, wordless narratives create space for the voiceless to speak their truths without compromising the integrity of their positions. Thus, wordless narrative research is a radical method of creative inquiry that utilizes silence as an invitation to study, investigate, and communicate personal narratives, cultural phenomenon, and emotional experiences (Horwat, 2018).

**Another Possibility**

As a literary genre, wordless novels give voice to those silenced by oppressive social forces. As an extension of the form, I view wordless narrative research as a method to create space for ideas, perspectives, positions, and lived experiences often silenced within normative academic discourses. My forthcoming wordless narrative research project, *Living with the Living* (Horwat, n.d.) explores how creative research constitutes a productive fissure that disrupts the status-quo and creates spaces for other ways of knowing. Based on my autoethnographic experiences as an artist, teacher, and scholar within the academy, the narrative draws from the psychanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and contemporary theorists Mari Ruti and Slavjo Žižek to better understand the hidden tensions existing between conventional academic discourses and emerging forms of creative scholarship. Ruti (2009) posits that psychoanalysis can help to illuminate hidden conflicts, understanding the connection between the socially constructed nature of subjectivity and psychic life while also “recognizing that we are always obliged to work within the cultural materials at our disposal, that our attempts at self-constitution inevitably take place within a social context that places limits on what we can envision and attain” (p. 6). Psychoanalysis provides a theoretical bridge between the hidden affect of our subjectivities and the complex, multilayer machine of social institutions. Using psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework, this project draws from the ethics of psychoanalysis to explore how to be creative within normative academic discourses that govern scholarly subjectivities.

*Living with the Living* is set within a surreal psychological realm structured by an expansive checker-board floor with imagery on the walls suggesting a collective social ideology. The imagined world is inhabited by mechanical humanoid toys with a social order presumably maintained by two large feet, a seemingly omnipresent authoritarian structure, whose rule is reinforced by anonymous police-like figures. Underneath the
surface of the floor is a mysterious, chaotic energy that materializes as living vegetation when it breaks through the tiles. Believing an ideology that suggests the organic material is a threat to the safety of the realm, the citizens compulsively weed the intrusive grasses as they emerge—snuffing them out before their true potential can be realized. Within this dystopian setting, the narrative follows two central protagonists, Jane and Bruno, as they embark upon a quest to understand the liberating potential of the forbidden vegetative forces.

The following excerpt follows Jane (women with striped pants) and Bruno (man with beard and black shirt) as Bob (man with striped shirt) leads them to a neglected part of the realm where they encounter a large flowering plant that radiates a mysterious energy which appears to disrupt the physical environment and prompts Jane, Bruno, and Bob to question the nature of their realities. A brief written disclosure follows the excerpt.
Following a rumor of the existence of a magical plant somewhere in the realm, Bob leads Jane and Bruno to a remote corner where they see a large flowering plant emitting white light that appears to dissolve the black and white tiling on the floor and erase the striped bars on their outfits. The seemingly aesthetic experience with the anomaly forever changes the three characters. Unaware of being followed, the three are confronted by police who raid the encounter. They subdue Bob, destroy the plant, and order Jane and Bruno to weed the remaining grasses as punishment. Heartbroken but defiant, Bruno and Jane finish weeding before approaching the big feet to voice their grievances. When the big feet are unresponsive, Jane follows Bruno as he brazenly climbs the legs to see who the big feet belong to. However, after scaling to the top of the legs, Bruno and Jane surprisingly find a small garden growing out of the tops of the legs. The two are both awestruck and relieved after realizing the seemingly all-powerful symbol of authority is an illusion and the laws that structure their lives are merely deceptive mechanism of control. Wonderment turns rebellious when Bruno pulls a flower from the top as evidence of their discovery before he and Jane climb down the legs. Upon their return, Bruno hastily decides to act upon their discovery by altering the iconography on the walls to include drawings of the forbidden flower—undermining its ideological message by questioning the accepted discourse. Bruno's act draws attention from other members of the community who observe the modified drawings and appear speechless by what they see.

The Generative Potential of Silent Narratives

The plot of Living with the Living explores how to transform restrictive social structures by harnessing the potential of creative modes of thinking. A pivotal aspect of the plot draws from the ethics of psychoanalysis to discuss what the transformation actually looks like in practice with characters from the allegory performing different ethical positions. One of the central characters, Bruno, references philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who suggests that the only way to protect ourselves from the oppressive grip of hegemonic institutional norms is to dismantle them through an act, a revolutionary and sometimes violent method whereby “the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn” (Žižek, 2001, p. 44). The act is a radical measure whereby the person destroys their symbolic identity and, ideally, reinvents themselves as a way to retain a sense of lost agency (Meyer, 2003; Žižek, 1989). Channeling Žižek, the excerpt above shows Bruno speaking truth to power and risking punishment in order to expose the oppressive veil that shields others from experiencing a more truthful reality.

The main protagonist, Jane, reflects critical theorist Mari Ruti, whose (2012) strategy of resistance suggests circumnavigating hegemonic institutional norms by harnessing the resistant, sometimes chaotic forces of the Real to weaken the integrity of the social structure—thereby making them more pliable and subject to transformation. She argues that the chaotic energies of the Real can be channeled through creative and playful practices that push against restrictive collective social realities, opening up space and engendering growth without completely destroying the Symbolic structure itself. Unlike Žižek, Ruti is not advocating for outwardly defiant acts but rather a gradual transformation from within institutional forces to reveal new possibilities by experimenting and testing the pliability of Symbolic structure’s boundaries. Ruti’s position is operationalized later in the narrative when Jane focuses on how to use the forbidden creative materials to create fissures that produce the conditions for more anomalous sublime growth to occur.

The plot of the wordless allegory alludes to a broader meta-narrative embodied through the form of the story itself. Like the aesthetic objects Jane creates, the wordless allegory about the generative power of cre-
ative acts is of itself a creative act—a silent pause in scholarly discourse that opens space for other possibilities. Ruti (2012) argues that experimental narratives actively defy the Symbolic discursive structure while activating the existential energies of the Real. She suggests that any mode of communication that “makes us question our assumptions, allows us to think in original ways, disrupts the monotony of the status quo, moves us emotionally, makes us sit up and pay attention, or exhibits the kind of creative suppleness that allows us to reinvent a slice of the world, is singularizing” (p. 126). By playing with modes of expression within discourse, creative modes of story-telling not only resist the normalizing forces of the Symbolic, but they push boundaries and invite new ways of understanding. As experimental texts, wordless narratives are particularly productive in that their use of silence does more than undermine hegemonic discourses. They also act to cultivate space for creative acts and create collective networks for underrepresented voices, perspectives, ideas, and epistemologies. Fergusson suggests that “[silence] can create identities and enable communities—once understood as freed from interpretive structures that necessarily condemn (or celebrate) it, the unlimited aspects of its multiplicitous functionality are freed for their creative and productive capacity” (Ferguson, 2002, p. 11). Thus, wordless narratives as creative research extends Masereel’s original democratic vision by operationalizing the powerful silence of wordless novels as a means to create community for the voiceless within academic discourses so that their stories, perspectives, and truths can be seen.

References:

"I feel like I'm more likely to get triggered, I guess?": A poetry cluster about safety in rape culture research

Amber Moore

Abstract

This paper offers and explores a poetry cluster of found list poems written from data collected in a feminist literacy education research study. The larger project examined secondary English teacher candidates’ responses to teaching and learning about sexual assault narratives from a trauma text set, as well as pedagogy for addressing sexual violence, rape culture, and Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement, in the literature classroom. The selected poems are raw, much like the subject matter they collectively speak to, and function together as micro collection that carry a particular politics: exploring what it means to resist rape culture as a witness of, and, potentially, as a teacher of, trauma stories.

Author Bio

Amber Moore is a Banting Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Simon Fraser University. Her research interests include adolescent literacies, feminist pedagogies, teacher education, arts-based research, rape culture, and trauma literature, particularly YA sexual assault narratives. Her work can be found in journals such as Cultural Studies in Critical Methodologies, Feminist Media Studies, Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, and Qualitative Inquiry, among others. Contact: amberjanellemoore@gmail.com

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A poetry preface: The survivor on 17th Avenue

She walks with her hands stuffed
in dark pockets of a coat that
dwarfs her.
It stains her clothes,
leaving red smudges on cream blouses
like burn marks
on wayward skin.

People seem to move out of her way,
like they inherently
know to keep
their
distance;
she has long arms and
can strike quickly.

She's not swaying like she
used to- that
sash-ay-ing.
She stalks now,

in a straight line, shoulders
Her hair even tries to
escape her, flapping around,
as if fleeing, or
calling for help.
It almost sounds shrill.

I could call out,
warn her about what’s to come but
I’ve been made quiet.
She sticks to this street like a bruise.
Wait and watch
her fade. I have faith she will soon
lighten, blend back.

Before beginning my journey into academia as a feminist literacy education scholar, I was a secondary English teacher who consistently prioritizes (and still does) teaching trauma literature – especially sexual assault narratives, in my pedagogy. As we are currently still in the midst of Tarana Burke’s significant #MeToo reckoning, attending to issues of sexual violence and rape culture in schools is thankfully becoming increasingly commonplace (e.g. see Boehm et al., 2021; Colantonio-Yurko et al., 2018; Hewitt & Hol-
land, 2021); however, this was not so much the case while I was a teacher in a small city in Alberta, Canada where the subject matter still seemed somewhat taboo. Working with my high school students to unpack, for example, how rape culture presents in classic works like Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* or the young adult novel *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), I found their responses were always critical, compelling, and yes, sometimes concerning (e.g. see Moore, 2019; Moore & Begoray, 2017), which inspired me to continue focusing on how this issue can be meaningfully addressed in literacy learning. The poem that opens this article is one I wrote years ago during that time, in my classroom, alongside my grade 10 students who were poetically responding to a text about this particular kind of violence. I offer it here as a kind of artefact of where this project ultimately emerges from – that is, a dedication to resisting rape culture, especially through education, as well as an entrypoint into the research discussed in this paper.

With this in mind, the “poetry cluster” (Butler-Kisber and Stewart, 2009) featured in this article emerges from a feminist poetic inquiry carried out as part of larger study conducted at a university in Western Canada that examined the complex and critical ways in which secondary English pre-service teachers responded to teaching and learning about rape culture, sexual assault, and Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement (e.g. see Moore 2020a; 2020b; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). Participants were recruited from two sections of a Bachelor of Education course focused on foundational literacy learning; the author was a guest and guest lecturer in the course, granted permission to recruit and run this study by both the courses’ regular instructors and the institution’s ethics board (H18-02072). These emerging educators were a diverse group who engaged in this study because of their criticality and dedication to embedding social justice work into English literature education. This research explored how 23 participants responded to a trauma text set of diverse sexual assault narratives, as well as pedagogy for teaching such stories with their future adolescent literacy learners during a two-day workshop that I ran focused on teaching trauma literature to adolescent literacy learners. Part of the “double strategy” (Lykke, 2010) approach – that is, the use of two methodologies for this research which first included a feminist critical discourse analysis with the following methods: individual interviews with all participants, two focus group sessions, analysis of workshop materials from participating pre-service teachers, and a research diary; second, what followed is focused on in this paper, feminist poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2018a; 2018b; 2020a; 2020b; Ohito & Nyachae, 2018; Prendergast, 2015), employed to take a deeper, second look at data.

**Why poetic inquiry?**

Poetic inquiry served this project well because this arts-based methodology can be experimental and as such, can creatively and critically challenge researchers and readers alike (Miller, 2019). Poetry can offer different ways of knowing and so poetic inquiry complements a project focused on resistance against rape culture because to do antirape work, as Buchwald et al. (2005) argue, “imagination must be summoned” (p. xi). Further, it is also an excellent methodological choice for handling complexity in research and embracing divergent thought (Gorlich, 2016) which is useful for examining the intense topic of sexual trauma; further, as Leggo (2018) asserts, “Poetry can transform our hearts, imaginations, intellects, and conversations” (p. 73). Poetic inquiry has been meaningful to me as an emerging scholar (e.g. see Moore 2022c; 2020; 2020; 2019; 2018a; 2018b) and it is a methodology I find myself returning to. As a feminist scholar who understands poetry as a part of living a feminist life (Ahmed, 2017), this methodology is deeply significant; like other poet-scholars (e.g. Leggo, 2005; Patrick, 2016; Richardson, 1992), writing research poetry “integrates my research self with my poet self (Richardson, 1992). I am a poet and a researcher: my poetry informs my research, and my research informs my poetry (Leggo, 2005)” (Patrick, 2016, p. 385). And so, poetry is used to
create, ruminate on and present data in a powerful form that more traditional approaches might not allow for.

Three poetry clusters were written after line-by-line coding of the data – transcription produced from the interviews with pre-service teacher participants as well as two focus group sessions, based around the project’s focal themes of safety, silence, and social action. Poetry clusters can be especially helpful with teasing out nuances and providing greater depth in examining particular topics (Butler-Kisber, 2010) and as such, the poems were created from multiple transcripts to construct a collective voice and to see the data differently. This paper explores one of these three clusters in depth: the safety poems, which are all found poems written in the form of list poetry.

Why found poetry?

Found poetry is produced out of poignant words and phrases from existing texts which are then extracted and arranged into poetry using line breaks and space (Faulkner, 2020a). Found poetry was especially selected for this project as a way to directly incorporate and center participants’ voices into the work. Said another way, found poetry particularly fits the contours of a project goal to first begin with an artful attentiveness (Leggo, 2008) to the data. Writing this poetry was discursive as the poetry writing demanded much re-reading, revising, and sometimes a kind of perseverating during editing. As such, this project contains a form of found poetry that Butler-Kisber (2010) notes is ‘treated,’ meaning it is “changed in a profound or systemic manner” (p. 3). And yet, at the same time, it is also critical not to try to seek control (Leggo, 2008) – a tenet of poetic inquiry that again resonates in antirape work because sexual violence and rape culture hinges on taking control, choice, and consent. Overall, this inquiry helped to ensure that the findings were grounded solidly in the data; like Patrick (2016), I also felt as though during several moments of data analysis, “In the end/ writing a found poem/ was my epiphany” (p. 392).

Why found list poetry?

This article hone in on one of the three poetry clusters (to read about the other poems, see Moore, 2020c; Moore, 2022) produced during analysis in particular: the safety poems. The safety poetry cluster consisted of 10 found list poems from interview and focus group data coded under the major theme of ‘safety,’ which included a number of secondary codes such as Classroom safety, Precarious moments, and Women’s safety pedagogies, for example. More particularly, the list poetry, which is one form of found poetry dating back to the Bible and Homeric epic but was especially favoured by Modern poets such as W.H. Auden and Walt Whitman (Lehman, 2002), was particularly selected for a few reasons. First, list poetry is a staple of school poetry pedagogy; indeed, schools abound in lists (Soong, 2020) and it offers a somewhat familiar, friendly, inviting model (Pullinger, 2015; Soong, 2020). For example, as Bowkett (2009) writes in his poetry writing pedagogical text, “One value of list poems is that they make you look around and notice things” (p. 102). And so, it seemed appropriate to employ in a project focused on reimagining how rape culture can be resisted in schools with and alongside pre-service teachers because engaging in trauma literature pedagogy can be difficult and risky.

Next, found list poetry was selected because safety in general is often communicated via lists and this project aimed to challenge this often-simplistic tendency, especially as it unfolds in response to rape culture(s) within rape prevention discourses (e.g. Bedora & Nordmeyer, 2015). For example, especially in the case of women’s safety pedagogy, many higher education institutions have amassed lists of...
precautionary measures for avoiding rape. As Bedora and Nordmeyer (2015) found in their examination of 40 college websites, it is commonplace for post-secondary schools to post rape prevention and risk reduction “tips” like “keep a telephone near your bed” (p. 538), largely directed towards female students. And so, list poetry was deliberately selected to poetically push back against this problematic paradox wherein especially women are always at risk of being attacked, and yet they alone are always in charge of protecting themselves against this violence; like the subject in the poem that opens this paper: “She's not swaying like she/ used to- that/sash-ing./ She stalks now.” Such lists of tips demonstrate that girls’ bodies, are usually understood as potential rape spaces (Hall, 2004). Although the lists acknowledge (to some degree) the prevalence of rape culture everywhere generally and on school campuses specifically, such tip lists suggest that violence typically happens due to youthful inexperience, intoxication, miscommunication, and so forth, rather than because of pervasive misogynistic cultures, rapists, and the norms and systems under patriarchy that protect both (Manne, 2017). In contrast then, the found list poems in this cluster represent data from participants doing critical and considerate wrangling with the difficult subject matter of rape culture and sexual violence, as well as with texts that represent unique experiences with it. Finally, like Ohito and Nyachae (2019), list found poetry aided with distilling findings into poetry and this process is detailed in the following section.

Writing the safety poems: The process

And so, with this backdrop of intentionality in mind, the selected three poems shared below represent a kind of microcluster of a larger cluster of list found poetry for an inquiry into the data coded as ‘safety.’ I too “consider it prudent to make my artistic choices transparent” (Patrick, 2016, p. 388) and so although “there is no template or prescribed approach for creating found poetry” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 5), like Ohito and Nyachae (2019), who pair feminist critical discourse analysis with Black feminist poetry to deepen research rigor, I paired feminist critical discourse analysis and poetic inquiry, writing found poems to explore the data anew.

To prepare to write the first poems I used line-by-line coding to identify all declarative I-statements that emerged from the interview and focus group transcripts that spoke to various safety discourses. To write these poems, I grouped the I-statements by theme and rearranged them, often using space on the page to visually extend the analysis; for example, with “On fear,” I listed the I-statements according to length, staggering longest to shortest in an attempt to convey an image of a kind of collective spiral of fear so that it almost looks like a tornado touching down; my intention with this was to represent the sense of magnitude and fear that is felt by so many when addressing the topic of sexual violence, including several of the participants. Next, while writing “On frustration,” I arranged I-statements in a confused manner, forcing the eye to dart across the page to read in a disrupted fashion in an effort to represent moments from the study where participants described and/or worked through feeling annoyance, confusion, disappointment, exasperation, etc. Finally, for “On feeling conflicted,” I wrote a kind of dual column poem by isolating bolder declarative I-statements on the left and more uncertain I-statements on the right as I tried to communicate a sense of conflict and division as well as to represent moments where participants expressed feeling conflicted about the subject matter, stories, and themselves as potential teachers of these issues and texts.
The safety poems

On fear

I've never read it so, you know, I knew that it was a book about sexual assault um… but I still was like, nervous.
I've done it before, but with literature, I feel like I'm more likely to get triggered, I guess?
I've never done that – I don't think.

I'm not afraid of the thing, it's you're afraid of the feeling of being afraid.
I'm actually really, really shy and an introverted person. Surprise!
I'm just like, 'Oh my god, this is so scary.'
I'm really day-to-day-ing it.

I don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow!
I don't know how they're going to portray this.
I don't know.
I know if I thought about my practicum, I'd get… nervous.
I knew the serious thing was coming.

I was thinking about students the whole time.
I was watching the whole thing happening.

I mean, I understand being afraid.
I just felt scared the whole time.
On frustration

I’ve been out of school… I want to help you. I read it and… I was pretty sure that he raped her and I Googled it because it was very subtle and like, I want to say like 50% of the discourse on that says she was seduced so she agreed eventually.

I’m – I’m conscious of how I come across and I don’t want to be that crazy Black girl that got hostile in class, you know? I’m kind of being told what to teach. I’m talking a lot.

I wrote down a little note like, some things I agreed with and some things I wanted to question further… I think of that as like, a very progressive idea. I’m not cutting anyone off.

I read it and… I was pretty sure that he raped her and I Googled it because it was very subtle and like, I want to say like 50% of the discourse on that says she was seduced so she agreed eventually.

I’m – yeah, I’m open to having constructive, meaningful dialogue, but a lot of the time, there’s a lot of emotion involved…

How to address… you know, how do we talk about… racism in the classroom, like, all of this stuff…

You know… these people are really talking about social justice… what do they know about social justice? I really wish they were giving us concrete skills… on how to address rape culture in the classroom.

I don’t have time to be like, ‘racism is real.’ I’m just like, in that headspace a little bit…

I don’t really like the book and I really don’t like the [laughs] discourse around it.

I wrote down a little note like, some things I agreed with and some things I wanted to question further… I think of that as like, a very progressive idea. I’m not cutting anyone off.

I mean…

How to address… you know, how do we talk about… racism in the classroom, like, all of this stuff…

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I don’t like the book and I really don’t like the [laughs] discourse around it.

I have this other personal dilemma with like, my – my brother and his conception of class…

I feel badly for saying this again, but there’s all these white people. I want to know how obvious it is.

I want to make sense of things. I’m just like, in that headspace a little bit…

I don’t like the book and I really don’t like the [laughs] discourse around it.

I feel badly for saying this again, but there’s all these white people. I want to know how obvious it is.

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I have this other personal dilemma with like, my – my brother and his conception of class…

I feel badly for saying this again, but there’s all these white people. I want to know how obvious it is.
On feeling conflicted

I’m saying it should be.

I grew up Catholic.

I’m going to enjoy the text in and of itself.

I don’t agree with it.

I’m wrong.

I was just going to say that.

I know about this person from his writing.

I taught one of Rupi Kaur’s poems.

I want to do it correctly and properly.

I also felt conflicted because of the conversation we had in class.

I felt weird teaching it.

I don’t know.

I don’t know.

I just said…

I have decided like… like whatever.

I think those conversations can sometimes be like, the most valuable…

I think, for me… straightness is like a… complicated um… [pause] challenge…

I remember being an atheist… oh, that’s another identity thing.

I was like… ‘Okay, I think I have to separate this a little bit.’

I could tell you that I’ve spent a lot of time talking

I was like, ‘I am 100% behind you,’ and at times I was like, ready to get upset…

I’m always looking at these things and going, ‘Okay but like, that sounds great …

um… but it’s so much more complicated than that… in a courtroom.’

I’m not… no I’m not forgiving him…

I forget his name – the Stanford guy, like…

I’m sure he has his reasons and I’m sure they’re not necessarily like, you’ve like…

these dickhead reasons…

I could tell you that I’ve spent a lot of time talking

I’ve been thinking about this a lot, like… so diversity issues –

I try to… work… uh, responsibly with the kind of… um, things like power and privilege that I feel come with just being a straight guy and a straight white guy.

I just really love some of her poems so…

I liken that to… the white people.

I’m aware of – of how much easier I’ve had things in my life…

I’m trying to think of things that I don’t agree with…

I was like, ‘Man! They have all these like, great, progressive views and my professor at the time was like, ‘You know he’s… Mormon, right?’

I also felt… ehm…
These three poems each speak to distinct emotions that arose among teacher candidates as they touched on the issue safety in their responses to sexual assault narratives and pedagogy for teaching such trauma texts. To provide a bit of insight on these poems, because each line represents a unique moment and story from the study, in what follows, I hone in on a specific line from each poem and offer more on where these pieces emerge from.

Beginning with “On fear,” the declarative I-statements offer a glimpse at how some teachers in training do the significant work of engaging with trauma stories and consider how they might bring such stories into their future classrooms even though it might be fear-inducing. Lines such as “I feel like I’m more likely to get triggered, I guess?” particularly struck a chord with me, so much so that it is in the title of this paper. This is because this participant was discussing how she absolutely planned to teach sexual assault narratives – indeed, she is a former sexual assault educator herself, but she is also a victim-survivor. As such, she was mindful of the particular risks she takes with engaging in this pedagogy as it might also be triggering for her to carry out. Such pedagogical commitments to social justice are so meaningful and like her, several of these pre-service teachers demonstrated that they were moving towards doing what literacy scholars such as Johnson and Kerkoff (2018) call for; centering English education in the paradigm shift that moves us all away from rape culture and towards a culture of consent, even if it is hard and scary.

Despite its title, I would argue that “On frustration” offers a great deal of hope, demonstrating how these pre-service teachers worked through challenging moments in their responses to critically considering antirape literacy pedagogy; for example, one participant experienced a moment of frustration with herself during the focus group, represented in the line, “I’m talking a lot.” In this moment, she passionately shared about a time during her own literacy learning when she addressed the undercurrent of rape culture in a classic novel but her classmates and teacher dismissed her analysis. In the middle of sharing this difficult moment that clarified for her how educators need to be creating space to address such issues ethically and not engage in damaging silencing practices, she paused to self-reprimand and apologize to the everyone, worried that she was dominating the focus group discussion. After much non-verbal encouragement that urged her to continue, another participant further demonstrated her appreciation of this anecdote by asking the frustrated participant to debrief in more depth later on, one-on-one, to help her hone her pedagogy. This seemed quite meaningful for the frustrated participant because she often seemed to self-chastise, worrying that she was taking up too much learning space.

Finally, while “On feeling conflicted” offers many moments that express feeling unsettled, they are filled with insight. A line that particularly struck me is “Okay, I think I need to separate this a little bit,” which was offered by a participant sharing how he was really grappling with whether or not we can separate the art from the artist – particularly if that creator is embroiled in and contributing to rape culture in some way. In this moment, he was reflecting on the back-and-forth thinking he had been doing regarding how to make decisions about whose work he can ethically teach and to what extent authors’ behaviour and politics should inform what texts he decides to teach his students. In our ensuing conversation during the one-on-one interview, he and I went on to draw from an excellent essay by Gay (2018) on this issue to inform our talk and acknowledge the powerful position English teachers have with curating their syllabi.
Concluding thought

These three safety poems are certainly raw - they represent raw data bits from a study on the very raw topic of sexual trauma. Indeed, as poetic inquiry scholars have asserted, poetic inquiry poems are not necessarily poetic per se. For example, Furman, Leitz, and Langer (2006) clearly distinguish between literary and research poetry, arguing “the term [research poem] connotes the use of poetry less for expansive and literary means, and more for the purposes of generating or presenting data” (p. 27), which I have offered here. Prendergast (2009) has importantly argued that while “poetic inquiry is, in exemplary practices, indistinguishable from literary poetry” (p. xxxvi), I acknowledge that this micro cluster is not exemplary, and is distinguishable. And yet, in the same breath, when it comes to poetically investigating rape culture, as I have written before, “I admit that I care less about turning anyone on to these pieces. This poetry has not been processed into a sharp, smooth set of upcycled pages, but rather carries more of a DIY-texture: bumpy, softly frayed around the edges, and unabashedly raw, even “off-putting” perhaps” (Moore, 2020a, p. 6). As such, once again, I offer these pieces as a representation that resisting rape culture is in need of immediate and ongoing attention; the rawness communicates the very real urgency of this issue - that “we are all part of [rape culture], it is terrible, and we need to do something – anything – to eradicate it” (Gruber, 2016, p. 1028). And so, one “something” done here is providing attention to the momentousness of each moment (Leggo, 2008) in the data through poetry. To end on a poetic note, I bookend this paper with another far-from-exemplary poem – this one written during a hard moment as I was in the thick of this research:

New World

They stop.
It is a new world.

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propriate”: Reflections on teaching trauma literature to a gender fluid youth. *Language & Literacy, 21*(1), 57-74.
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Skyward

Darlene St. Georges

Abstract

Skyward illustrates the embodiment of creation-centred research (St. Georges, 2018; 2019; 2022b/c; 2023; St. Georges & Bickel, 2022), which relies on creative-experiential-engagement and interaction. Creation-centred research is uniquely rooted in métissage (Hasebe-Ludt et al, 2009), poetic inquiry (Fidyk & St. Georges, 2022; in press) and storying (Archibald, 2009; 2019), and leans into arts-based practices (Leavy 2015; 2018; Sinner et al., 2018). The term “creation-centred” reflects the ontological and cyclical nature of artistic practices and supports its creative intention and integrity. Situated in an aesthetic and creation-centred paradigm, it resists privileged discourse while generating and weaving threads of our stories through the mystery that unfolds within moments of creative insight, somatic knowledge, intuition, memory, dreams, visions, and ancestral connections.

Skyward is in-process. It is a creation story in the making that is emerging through an assemblage of memories, experiences, dreams, and visions, gaps, and silences, what is lost and found. It is a story of living and surviving, of evolving with, though, and as a result of trauma. It is creation-centred métissage that weaves my experiences, my sense of un)belonging and dis)connection, my longing and wonderment, my dreams and my visions of existing in a relational pluriverse.

By symbolically manifesting complexity of being, in being, multi-texturally, creation-centred research offers a way for researchers and those that encounter an aesthetic creation like Skyward, to reclaim and recognize the centrality of agency in transforming the personal, and political, by reclaiming and performing our unique stories, our intra-connected subjectivity—to remember our Self into the world.

Bio

Darlene St Georges is Assistant Professor of Art Education at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. As a creation-centred artist|scholar much of her scholarship demonstrates her rootedness in emergent and generative knowledge and knowing that honours the inward and creative spirit of being. Her practice-based and theoretical research invites innovation in learning and an unfolding metamorphosis of scholarship in provocative, creative, and intellectual ways. Contact: darlene.stgeorges@uleth.ca | www.darlenestgeorges.com
I remember

I used to dream
that I could fly
down the street
to the corner store

above the trees

I noticed people
walking down
the street below
eating ice cream
pushing baby carriages
sleeping on lawns
in front of the liquor store
waiting for it to open
locked in by grass

and shards of class

when I woke
in the morning
to the spectacle
of words
spewed out
on my bed
the night before
to recount
the events

I witnessed

the radio
was playing
a melody
about a guy
who lost his dog
and was dreaming
about dying
because
he was
his only friend

It was a lovely
high-pitched
romanticized
love song

leaving me to

wonder
why

someone would
want to die
on a sunny
summer day?

I guessed
it was a parable
about liminality

living and not living

or what was worth living for
if you were alone
separated from
your people

in my experience

as I flew
down my street
I was shouting out
to my friends
but
they didn't hear me
or see me

alone on this journey,
seeing like Hawk
what everyone was doing

I would recount
to my friends
in the following days
to see about

the truth

of my
experience(s)
only to have
them look
at me

queerly

and then
after long
moments
of silence outlasting doubt
they'd ask
if I could teach them

to fly too

so, we took out
our Ouija boards
called on the spirits
together
like a bunch of girls
in a remote
northern town
would do

by the time
our parents
came around
we had already freaked
each other out
and by the time
we reached
high school
they were
past that stage
    as I continued to dream

I lost my friends
to the reality of living
as wives and mothers
before
or just after
finishing
high school

I converted myself
from christianity
after sitting
week after week
on polished church pews
searching
for something
I felt I had lost
something

    deeper inside of me

It wasn't too long
before I realized
it was not there
had never been there
will never be there
in those goblets and hosts
stained-glass windows

    expected silences

leaving it all behind
I returned to my trails and tales

    trees woods ponds rocks

reminding me
that

    losing things and getting lost

invites strangeness
in
that expands the parameters of being|becoming
telling truths
dismantling lies
in bits and pieces
Boston streaming from car stereos
thinking about my grandmothers
over boys and beers
at Morgan “lake”
the only watering hole
in five miles

skyward
down gravel roads
lit up by Orion’s arrow
where we gathered
to fulfill
some kind of urgent fantasy
of escaping
our homes
our families
our selves
where I was

fire keeper
gathering twigs and branches
carefully traversing brushes
filled with lovers
caught in the chase
of whiskey and wine

winds pick up
chimes
only I could hear
faint murmurations
of meticulous sustaining
clear chords
weaving my
dreams
attention
elements
and
understandings of my heterogeneity
with crimson root

        pearls of light

and breath of memory
into something

        enduring

\_a s t
References


Note

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Image 1 — *Kiyam* [photo-digital collage]

Image 2 — *Raven* [photo-digital collage]
Dreaming my ancestors: A poetic inquiry into longing and legacy

Maya T. Borhani

Abstract

This poetic inquiry traces certain aspects of my identity as the daughter of an Iranian immigrant growing up in the United States. I use autobiographic life writing (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, 2009) to lay out (some of) the bones of a larger personal and family story, followed by a suite of poems addressing some of the mysteries, wonderments, gifts and reckonings that I am left with—and which are inherent to—my misplaced, scattered family history and lineage. Although my father shared little about his life in Iran before coming to the U.S., with the help of other relatives I have gleaned a few key details that reveal a sense of Iran the place, the culture, and our family history there, encircled by my own layered longings to experience and know all of this myself firsthand. Part imagined-travelogue, part memoir, this poetic inquiry embraces the idea that even things that are lost, never known, or left behind are part of a beautiful mosaic that resonates through time and place, telling stories of ancestry, memory, language, migration, and the legacies that endure.

Bio

Maya Borhani enjoys wandering and wondering outdoors to connect with her poetic and spiritual muses. Originally from Northern California, she has also dwelt on islands in the Salish Sea (in Washington state and British Columbia), San Francisco, Seattle and Vancouver, BC. Near to completing a PhD in Educational Studies, her dissertation engages autobiographical life writing and poetic inquiry to explore living poetically, poetry as performative pedagogy, and pedagogies of place. Uncertainties precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic have also benefitently revealed opportunities to engage a slower pedagogy, and deeper understandings of walking paths of a “lived curriculum” in place. Contact: mayatracyborhani@uvic.ca

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my parents, and my Iranian and Northern European ancestors for this gift of life. Thank you to Dr. Carl Leggo (1953-2019) and Dr. Monica Prendergast for encouraging and modeling how to begin to tell this tale.

To begin, I would like to offer my respect and gratitude to the Nisenan (Southern Maidu) and Wašiw (Washoe) people, on whose traditional unceded territories I live and work here on western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Northern California. Heo!
As part of my autobiographical research into what it means to live poetically (Leggo, 2005) as a woman, poet, performer, researcher and teacher, I ponder and sometimes wrestle with aspects of my identity as the daughter of an Iranian immigrant growing up in the United States. Through poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009; Vincent, 2018), I seek to trace certain aspects of that experience, and to illuminate and consider ongoing questions that arise in the process. I also use autobiographic life writing (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, 2009) to lay out (some of) the bones of a larger personal and family story that introduces the suite of poems that follows. As methodological enfoldment, autobiographical life writing blends well with poetic inquiry, which is also particularly well-suited to conjuring autobiographical and autoethnographic reflection. Remembering that “[p]oetry has the power to highlight slippery identity-negotiation processes and present more nuanced views of marginalized and stigmatized identities” (Faulkner, 2017, p. 93), these poems function as social research into those sticky identity negotiations of a lost (or misplaced) heritage, and repercussions thereof. These poems also perform as “exo-autoethnography” (Denejkina, 2017), or the “exploration of a history whose events the researcher does not experience directly, but . . . impacts the researcher through familial, or other personal connections” (p. 1). Exo-autoethnography has been used to address the generational trauma that children of immigrants sometimes experience when trying to make sense of their parents’ emotional responses (or lack thereof) to their immigration experiences (Denejkina, 2017).

Like other autobio-ethnographic approaches, poetic inquiry embraces care as a primary ethos in teasing out these threads of a tangled weave. Likewise, poetic inquiry enfolds embodiment and reflexivity into its creative processes, by contemplating marginalization and difference as it relates to language use, repudiating body-mind (and personal–public) splits, and offering alternative forms and formats for written/spoken words that can be directed toward social change and feminist concerns (Faulkner, 2018). For example, several of the poems herein speak to discordant aspects of my family’s patriarchal legacies, performing a feminist inclination. Poetic inquiry readily captures sensual details of field work in experientially evocative ways, infusing data with materiality; this is one way in which poetic inquiry “connect[s] writing as embodiment to ethnographic practice” (Faulkner, 2018, p. 18). As praxis, I think through things by writing poetry: poetry’s matrix, its flow and arrangement on the page (line, verse, white space) and in the ear (melody, rhythm, alliteration) offers a canvas, method and means, within which I respond to and explore the discordant and displaced details of my family’s history, helping me to make sense of jumbled facts and feelings. Thus, playing with poetic form and sensibility helps me think through difficult topics, and to organize the unorganizable in some sort of meaningful aesthetic manner.

Through the reflexivity inherent in poetry, I can explore murky truths and imagined fictions as I try to parse out who my family was, and who am I in that lineage. Embracing elements of “the confessional tale—revealing some of the personal aspects of fieldwork—allows for self-revelation and indiscretion. . . to blend autobiography with analyses” (Coffey, 2004, p. 46). Educationally speaking, sharing my family’s life stories may lead others to acquire insight into shared or similar experiences; we find our own story in the stories of others. This feels like urgent learning and social work, necessitated by continuing global migrations and crucial discussions around Indigenous sovereignty and the repatriation of traditional territories. We all just want to be home.

**Poetic inquiry as critical social inquiry**

Poetic inquiry is particularly well suited to ruminations on critical social questions. Through the medium of
poetry, difficult and painful truths find voice, venue, and safe space to seek traction in broader conversations. To that end, some of the poems that follow wonder about convoluted cross-fertilizations that occur through diasporic migration, and possible ways forward that might seek justice and reconciliatory action. Considerations of my immigrant family’s arrival in America bump up against reflections on the storied and epistemological nature of land (Basso, 1996; Meyer, 2008), both as pertains to the politics and social realities of settling in contested territories, but also in wondering what doesn’t, can’t, travel with the immigrant to a new land: how can stories embedded in a particular landscape make the passage across oceans and continents? Where is the immigrant’s place—as a new arrival—against a backdrop of ongoing colonial-settler projects (Chatterjee, 2019)? How does the immigrant’s search for (a new) home(place) align with complexities of decolonization and the rematriation of Indigenous lands in that place? (See Coleman, 2019, for a discussion of distinctions and parallels between Indigenous place and diasporic space). These are questions too vast to answer in this essay, but they nag at the edges of my consciousness as I seek to decipher my own place and identity as a border-dweller within an immigrant diaspora I only half-inherited (yet feel half-empty without), living on colonized lands. Poetry helps me document, praise, untangle and decode the journey.

The immigrant’s movement is different than mine: they are moving forward, toward something in a new land, seeking to leave something of the old place or ways behind; while I am moving ever backwards, seeking to retrieve find and reclaim something I never even had. Something lost never known; a distant time imagined presently. I think of my Iranian nomadic ancestors and wonder how much my steps inadvertently echo theirs, a rhizome sprouting from its own break, adapting to a (solo) nomadic-subsistence existence in a modern-day milieu, with car as my camel? I also wonder what I “know,” thanks to them, that I was never “taught.” Like how I know plant medicines, and how I’ve learned to “read” a landscape. Or how I love poetry like it’s my own breath. Backward and forward in time and space, spiraling through “chronotopia” (Braidotti, 2011) and a parallel sort of geographotopia, I live constantly displaced and yet critically placed to ride that wave, seeking what David Greenwood calls a “cosmological homecoming” (2019); that is, awareness and presence in “practices that support our own becoming—in relationship with ourselves, each other, the land, and the cosmos” (2019, p. 371).

I agree with Greenwood that this is “soul work”: coming home to ourselves in place while wrestling with the complicities and complexities of decolonization and reinhabitation. Deep, ongoing soul work; the kind poetry is perfectly cut out for. Did my father lose touch with his soul when he left Iran and decided to leave everything—memories, stories, language, poetry—behind? Sometimes I feel I have spent my entire life playing catch-up, learning to feed my own soul as I continually search for “home.” I embrace the complexities of this journey: the jarring gaps between pressures of assimilation by indoctrination and reverence for my Persian cultural inheritance; issues around not quite “passing” as white, yet often being expected to; a sense of otherness around things I could plainly see and understand, and others I could not. Knowing that the Iranian homeland I imagine—and in some ways long to “return” to, or at least visit—is likely not as singular or as integrated as my imagination might paint it; sifting the threads of such distinctions now becomes part of the journey, and of stories yet to be told.

A Way In . . .

I no longer try to describe where I’ve been. It is not possible to capture in a few sentences the essence of a journey, a pilgrimage that is of the mind and heart as well as of the body. I am learning
that a pilgrimage is a private thing, not easily shared. There are places we go where the people we love cannot follow.

~ Gelareh Asayesh, *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America*

My father didn’t share much about his life in Iran; neither his exact reasons for leaving, nor many details about his family or his life in that place that was a world away and yet seemed to me—an Iranian imprint- ed child who didn’t look at all like the other kids in our sunny California hamlet—like the most mystical, magical place on earth. Partly yearning for knowledge of that ancestral home, and partly from that tender place that some children experience where they feel like a stranger in their own home, I craved details of life in Iran and our family there. The stories I made up (that I was the Shah’s long-lost daughter, awaiting rescue from my suburban American malaise)—part fact, part fiction—were my child’s way of trying to bridge a gap between the little I knew of my father’s story and the mysteries shrouding his persona. (We do have some distant connection to the Shah’s family; there were also murmurings of the Shah’s secret police coming to call. I suspect these disparate threads jumbled in my child’s imagination as I pulled from each the elements needed to story my own existence at the time.) I eventually outgrew my childhood princess fantasies. My imagination, however, remained eternally piqued; this fed my vocation for writing and later, my practice of writing stories (Richardson, 2000) as autobio-ethnographic identity reflection.

Imaginary “stories” of life in a country I knew little about—so distant, geographically, so foreign, culturally—countered that unexplained sense of displacement I felt within my own life. As a kid, the Iranian part of me stood out glaringly in an otherwise mostly white American milieu: my features heavier (dark eyes, dense lashes, thick brows), my skin olive-toned, my sensitive disposition embodying more emotional intensity than most of my peers (hands gesticulating, voice impassioned, dark countenance a storm cloud of fierce determination). Was this innate Persian affect coming through me (is there such a thing, as innate cultural affect in a child born far from shores of origin)? Or was it learned behavior, modeling my father’s intensity at home? Both?

As a child, my earliest knowledge of Iran was gleaned from my dad’s mannerisms, his slightly accented speech (which he tried so hard to disguise behind perfectly spoken English), and two books of Iranian poetry in our home. The first, a green leather volume of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubiyat*, contained jewel-toned miniature paintings opposite a quatrains in Farsi, also translated into English, French, and German. This page-by-page translation (which my young mind considered and contemplated, linguistically speaking) sparked my interest in the French language, which I studied well into my undergraduate years. The Farsi script presented a complete mystery, much as I admired its delicate dots and swirls that looked like Morse code, and other than I understood that the book read from back-to-front to accommodate the right-to-left writing structure of the Persian language. This made the book (and all things Persian, by extension) that much more exciting and compelling to my childhood imagination: a secret world where things run backwards, anything possible. The paintings depicted dancers dressed in brightly colored scarves with facial features like mine, cradling lutes and drums as their skirts whirled about their ankles, turbaned men in relaxed garments, jugs of wine at hand, wild deer and exotic birds in the background. These scenes of pleasure and tranquility profoundly attracted me, while the simple quatrains infused me with my first experience of spiritual longing; poems that answered the big questions through the most mundane of metaphors: a prayer mat, the arc of the sun across the sky, singers in a tavern. The moral questions and riddles embedded in the quatrains seemed more interesting and more welcoming to me than the religious instruction I
was receiving at the time through my parents’ Baptist faith, with its image of an all-fearsome God the Father demanding dutiful obedience (echoing how things had to be in our home). The little green book soothed me. It was one of the few things my father, a medical doctor, had brought with him from Iran, a fact that my young inquiry-inclined mind found particularly curious and crucial: Why did the man who dismissed poetry as a “soft science” carry this beautiful little volume across the world with him? Was it sentiment, a memory of something or someone? Had it belonged to his mother? Or had he once read and benefitted from the concise quatrains himself, appreciative of his own culture as I now was from this long distance removed? I never had a chance to ask him that question. He was not an easy man to know.

The small green Rubiyat sits beside a royal blue, coffee-table sized edition of Shahnameh, The Persian Book of Kings, Iran’s national epic, composed in the 10th century by the poet Ferdowsi (and illustrated with over two hundred figurative paintings and illuminations). These two books fed my spiritual and aesthetic imagination about ancient Iran. They showed me (some of) the missing picture of a vast and beautiful culture standing behind my silent father. Combined with television news broadcasts from 1960s-early 1970s Tehran—a cosmopolitan and chic city dubbed the “Paris of the East”—I began to form a picture of a smart, modern society within an ancient country steeped in musical, poetic, and artistic traditions; a country and culture to be proud of, but which my father consistently dismissed as not keeping step with modern (Western?) norms. During this time, my early teens, we also witnessed on TV all the technicolor pageantry and regalia surrounding Reza Shah’s celebration of the 2500-year anniversary of Cyrus the Great’s unification of the Persian Empire. This was quite the spectacle, stirring a vague, unknowable longing in me even at the age of 12, seeing this sea of people who looked like me proudly celebrating their rich heritage of music, poetry, and dance, on parade in their shimmering silks and glittering gold bracelets, earrings, pendants, and rings. I could not understand my father’s insistence on leaving this seemingly beautiful and bejeweled country behind him in the past, and not sharing the gifts of that cultural inheritance with us, his family.

Yet, some details slipped through this puzzling silence. A feast for Persian New Year every year at the spring equinox, dad suddenly jovial for that one day of the year. (I did not learn till I was in my 40s that Nowruz, as Persian New Year is known throughout the Middle East, is the most revered holiday of the year, and has been compared to Easter, Christmas, and New Year’s combined, with its thirteen days of socializing, feasting, revelry and celebration of new life.) Picking pomegranates in early October before local teenagers could do so to splatter them on houses as a Halloween prank, we stored them in the cool garage (a trick my dad remembered from his youth in Iran) to eat all winter long, Persian-style: quartering the orange-red orbs and biting into their tightly clustered ruby seeds like an apple, savoring that delicious burst of wine-rich juices; or rolling and pressing the unopened fruit to burst the seeds within, then biting a small hole in the leathery skin and sucking out the sweet juice. Heaven.

Some revelations about dad’s Persian ways were more jarring. At the beginning of the Iranian revolution, my aunt and uncle wanted to get their oldest child, a daughter, out of the country’s bubbling political foment. They arranged a marriage for her to an older Persian man living in the UK. My 16-year-old sister and I (then 15) balked; how could they “arrange” her marriage? We’d grown up in the U.S. where (to our knowledge) such things didn’t happen, not in the 20th century anyhow. We were shocked, but more shocking still was when our father turned to us and said in utter seriousness, “What’s wrong with that?” This was the first time we really “got it” that for all his rhetoric of being “American” (read, “modern”), there was still an old-school Iranian patriarch living inside of him. Previously, we’d just thought he was exceptionally stern and an exact-
ing perfectionist, but with no context to ground those perceptions; this was the first time we connected those behaviors and issues to a cultural divide between us, and a patriarchal mindset distinct from the burgeoning feminism emerging in 1970s North America that was our everyday reality.

In the years since my father’s death, I have pieced together a few more details of my Iranian family story. I still don’t have anything near a complete picture of my father’s life in Iran prior to his emigration, or our extended family’s history. But I know this much: I am a carbon copy, quite eerily so, of my father’s mother, the grandmother I never met; she died before I was born, a few scant years after my father’s arrival in the U.S. I marvel at that remarkable resemblance that my father never saw fit to mention, wondering at the gravitas in that, the weight of holding all that inside. These many years later, I still don’t know which is more stunning: that I look exactly like her, or that he never told me. I am left wondering (why(not)).

My father’s younger sister and I also share a likeness in my grandmother’s image, though not as startlingly identical. I first met my aunt in my mid-30s; sadly, I was only able to visit her a few times before she died. She spoke next to no English (nor I Farsi), but we bonded deeply through gazing into each other’s eyes (our look-alike faces that undoubtedly would have reminded her of her long-dead mother), and a mutual love of music and dance. As traditional Iranian music played on the TV, she would circle her arms in the air above her head, smiling, snapping arthritic fingers, while I danced around her seated form, hips swaying, wrists circling, arms rising in a flutter of snake-arms, smiling back at her.

I am grateful that I grew up knowing my uncle (a doctor, like my father), his cosmopolitan wife (who looked like Jackie Kennedy), and their two children; they came to visit us twice in the 1960s, when we cousins were all kids. My cousins taught us to sing *Do-Re-Mi* in Farsi, the five of us singing happily together in the back of the big blue station wagon wherever we went. (*The Sound of Music* was a big hit that year: 1965; post-Cuban missile crisis; though still deeply embroiled in Viet Nam at the time, Nazism and fascism seeming far behind us, as a nation and a world. O, History.) Like children everywhere, we bonded over the universal languages of summer and water: swimming in Lake Tahoe, so similar in its evergreen-lined shores to those of our fathers’ childhood idyll the Caspian Sea; building sandcastles, our brown Iranian skin only tanning darker, rarely burning; toasting and eating messy gooey “s’mores” over an open campfire, snow-capped peaks reflecting a rosy alpenglow long after the sun’s descent. My cousin was studying ballet and could dance parts of *The Nutcracker Suite*; I craved dance lessons and copied her endlessly, but my parents thought piano lessons more suitable (than what, I never understood). Meanwhile, I danced my way through the world on my own (untrained) terms, jumping rope, skipping, spinning cartwheels, and as soon as I moved out of my parents’ house I sought dance lessons in earnest, fulfilling that childhood dream and initiating a lifelong connection to dance and the performing arts.

My uncle and his wife escaped to the US during the 1979 Iranian revolution and remade their lives in California, where I visited with them frequently in the years that followed. From my uncle I learned about stuffing dates with walnuts and feta cheese for breakfast; my aunt churned out a delectable flow of *pollo* (rice), *Khoresh Bademjan* (traditional eggplant stew, my favorite), *Kuku Sabzi* (egg, greens, and onion pie, kind of like a frittata), and *Ash* (barley soup). Food and stories: stories of my cousins playing together every summer in Abadan by the sea; stories of my father and his brother as kids in Tehran, riding in goat-pulled carts; and occasionally, stories of my father the superhero who my other relatives all seemed to venerate and adore.
Some details that have emerged have illuminated old secrets, puzzling deceptions, and some tender and unexpected gifts. More gaps to be filled in, if they ever can be, now that my father’s generation is all but gone (survived only by my uncle’s wife, and my aunt’s husband, in their 80s and 90s respectively). These more recent revelations have not yet had time to dwell fluidly under the flowing river of mind, letting water wash over them like stones of time, reflexively polishing their faceted faces with poetically inquiring autobiographical reflection. When they have had such time to rest and be replenished, poetry will surely help guide their stories to the light of day.

Meanwhile, we descendants are now a clan of daughters (my only male name-bearing cousin died young with no children, my own brother blessed with three daughters); as such, it seems that this branch of the name “Borhani” will pass away with my generation. Given this, my youngest daughter decided to name her firstborn son Cyrus, after the much-revered Persian emperor. “How we go on” (Snyder, 1983).

The more I discover of our family’s mysteries and untold stories, the more certain I am that my father grieved his whole life for some of the things he left behind, and the things he never told us—omissions which then created a break in the “fragile sequence” (Stafford, 1998) that binds our family here in America to generations before us back in Iran. This intuitive knowledge of my father’s grief emboldens me in my search for, if not answers, clues to the mysteries he left behind. And it softens me, reminding me we can never fully know another’s story. I have no choice but to offer him my compassion, trusting that he, too, had to make hard choices in life, that things didn’t always go according to plan, that perhaps he had to improvise, sacrifice, give up entirely—and in the fact of his emigration, start anew. There are moments, days, when I still yearn for more complete answers. I, too, grieve for what was lost and left behind.

Where there are mysteries unsolved, things deliberately left unsaid, hidden and forgotten, how does the student of one’s history resolve these obstacles? There are questions that my father never answered, stories my surviving relatives may not know. Some of these stories may be lost forever to the desert sands that blow through Abadan, the forested slopes surrounding the Caspian Sea, or buried under the great oceans crossed to get to this migratory place. The older I get, the more at peace I am with that; just as I am at peace with looking back, pulling threads, knitting together (and/or making art) where I can from the holes in this fabric that wraps me in its history, that warms the roots of my life. This feels like giving thanks to my departed relations and those ancestors I never knew, for the gift of life they have given me. Without them, where would I be? Without their stories to guide me, how would my feet find their way back home?

Poetic inquiry helps me wander and wonder in these realms of mystery filled with missing details, mixed timelines, veiled innuendos, a few clear “facts,” and curiously unaddressed ghosts and legends. Poetic inquiry helps me edge up against facts and fictions, speculations and unknowing (Seidel, 2017), as I parse loss, legacy, what’s left behind, and what I get to keep. More and more I see these lost and muted legacies as beautiful pieces of a tapestry that was possibly once-intact (and possibly not), now torn apart and scattered in the four directions—scraps floating on the wind, lining a crow’s nest, a shred of brightly colored silk here, worn embroidered brocade there. I gather and stitch together whatever pieces I can before they fly away again to unknown destinations and stories yet to be lost or sewn into place. The following poems help me find my way within those scraps, and to make up (fill in) my own story despite of, or perhaps because of, those very same far-flung pieces and missing details. After all, misplaced scattered pieces make a beautiful mosaic too; migration, memory, and mirrored murmurings of home resonate through time and space, coming to roost here in these poems about memory, language, ancestry, migration, and the legacies that endure.
This Persian Thing

Persian heritage,
no language—
part of the tangle.
Till I learn a few lines
from an archaic Rumi poem,
a sort of Shakespearean Farsi
useless in the modern world.
But little by little, words come:
morphemes and glottal stops,
the impossible gh and manageable kh;
a beginner’s vocabulary.
Orality sings and holds the keys
to speech, to conversation, to melodious
harmony, nuance and affect—
I keep listening, forming sounds
with inexperienced lips
listening to the rhythms
and exultations
practicing my child’s Farsi,
tongue rolls and stumbling consonants,
tasting a dream of Mashhad
until one day
I will make the long journey home,
home to hear the whole world speaking Farsi,
root tongue finally connected beneath my feet
to sprout and grow like a scented rose tree
every breath, every cell, every vocal cord blossoming
from the dry desert oasis this throat once was.

“A Mountain I Have Loved Will Not Forget Me”

Basho says, *The journey itself is home.*
No home but the lands we pass through
on our journey through life.
Leaving Ireland for America
for what she knew would likely be her last time,
never again to make that great sea voyage
never again to return
to the land of her birth
Irish poet folklorist Ella Young said,
“A mountain I have loved will not forget me.”
Does a mountain I have never met
remember me?
I am thinking of Mount Tochal, outside of Tehran.
What is my children’s inheritance
from this ancestral mountain we have never met?
Does circumambulating Tochal in my mind’s eye
pass down to memory’s feet?
Where does Mount Tochal live inside of me?

Daughters (For Petra & Elena)

Their twin pools of brown eyes pinned resolutely
on the future journey back centuries
to streets of Shiraz, Isfahan, Tehran
where great, great grandmothers gazed from wide
dark pools like their own, like my father’s, like mine.

Dream of Mashhad

I trace my ancestry back
to the people of Mashhad
who walked in from the desert
with carpet-laden camels,
saffron, sargol
and a bride named Eshrat,
daughter of the tribal chief.
Eshrat, it’s me—
your granddaughter in Amrika.
I carry your memory inside me,
shared heartbeat pulsing
across miles, years
a river of memories,
places and things I’ve never seen
but somehow taste, and know.
Pomegranate, anar,
jeweled seeds as red as garnets,
saffron as golden and generous
as sunlight.
Roses.
Your son taught me roses.
Soil mounded within a circular moat,
deep slow watering coaxing
luxuriant blooms of every shade
and hue, a scented pleasure garden
my enchantment and delight.

Ripe melons made sweeter with tangy salt
sprinkle of black pepper
figs, mulberries, pistachios.
Fragrant inheritance of a past
your son tried to forget
I was born to remember,
*Mamaan-bozorg, Madar-jun,
Mamani—*Grandmother,
this is *Nemat*’s youngest daughter
who you never knew—looking
through eyes like yours,
lines of your face
identically mirrored in mine.
*Mamani,* I remember (dream) the places
your son left behind,
blue mountains, blooming orchards,
Caspian Sea,
(y)our smile, the old ways,
summer nights under a silken coverlet
a sea of stars turning worlds over our heads.

*Mandorla of the Middle Ground*: A Meditation

what  *is*  ?
middle ground  
  ?
  (shift)
  *mandorla*

that  in-between  space
between

Indigenous <—> Settler
(*mandorla* in the middle
almond-shaped eye of wisdom
this middle ground)
Indigenous <—> Immigrant <—> Settler

(mandorla sprouts lotus petals
around almond eye opened wide—
many middle grounds?)

triumvirate

the question of becoming

of/in/to

places we inhabit

life journeys

in/to the heart of places

(body is home)

no fixed assignations

fluidity between pillars of identity

like water flowing

over rocks moving

around/under/in-between

everything

slowly eroding

sometimes tumbling

massive boulders rolling downstream

in winter’s churn and floe

water flowing through all

like music a language dancing

in our ears

flowing and dancing

through all

(shift)
middle ground

a meeting place

the center spirals

margins and middle

at on(c)e

curving edges
carving
lines of flight
in perpetual
motion

mandorla-eye reflecting all

an edge
cutting its own shape in the world
a margin
wrapping its arms around itself

(is this the dynamic
of nomads?)

all edges connect
margin becomes hoop
we flow in and out
of overlapping circles

(shift)
middle ground

mandorla of the heart

Language Comes Home

Language,
more than written words
more than speech or utterance
redolent with gesture and movement
drips down around us
like moonlight, stalactite, starlight,
saltwater brine, wave light,
the rhythm of tides.
Like breath.

Breath of life.
In language,
we are what we know.
A raised eyebrow,
angry words,
shiny gaze through tangled green undergrowth,
your mother's tender goodnight touch.
Cupped hands round a flickering flame
the light-struck face
this glowing halo
   a prayer of offering
      to Haq
         spirit
           that is
              breath
               smoke rising on tendrils
                of clear air
                   now wind
curling up into unknown breezes
away into transition
translation
transliteration
transcription
turn of phrase, trick of the tongue
tra la la language traipsing away again
toward change, agent,
shifting rhizomatic growth
into something different,
something new . . .
Language,
that traveling minstrel
musical mythsinger,
wanderer wonderer émigré itinerant
indigent lover of life and lands,
my wandering, breathy, billowing mother tongue
storied in land sky and sea
in the call and response of voice and ancestry
language moving through me
always on her way back home.

A Persian Sestina: Veils of Remembrance

Centuries part like a rippling sea: I hear murmurs,
ancestors breathing beneath lofted blankets
of silk and sheep's wool, dreams averting the panic
of pending immigration, its high generosity,
sights on a new land where children don't die dancing,
where you pull a deep breath and exhale.

Quiet cobalt blue night; the wind exhales.
Inchoate sounds sigh in chorus, the distant murmur
of memories surging within you, how dancing
invariably spells out a song, how a blanket
of stars, pillowed earth, suffice for generosity
and soothe your dreams of returning panic.

When morning sun illuminates dawn, does night panic?
Rising to greet first light, we bow in prayer, exhale,
make room for throbbing hearts, this generosity
unparalleled, whispered in muted red murmurs
that ripple and fold as if humming a blanket
of song to wrap me, ecstatic, in its dancing.

By the time I was born, your stories hushed, dancing
just served to remind you of the rising panic
of memories shoved under smothering blankets
of exile turned inward against yourself. Exhale.
Let the ancestors’ song ease your mind, murmuring
to all four chambers of your heart their boundless generosity.

I gathered saffron from golden fields, generosity
rising from each slender stem, my bare feet dancing
in celebration, prayer of my own murmuring,
an offering to my ancestors, their hidden panic
finally healed in this long-awaited chance to exhale
songs of praise for the mosaic that is our blanket.

Who knows what stories lie inside a folded blanket
of wool and desire? What grief, what generosity,
what lost, what found, what taken away? Exhale
the past, but welcome nimble memory, dancing
on feet that kiss the earth when no longer panicked,
ancestors joining in this quiet circle of murmuring.

Hidden inside the murmur of time, a storied blanket
soothes panic in her wild generosity,
delivers dancing to the wind, sighs, and exhales.

La Émigré (Mohâjer)

We’ve all heard how language
slipped into the suitcase,
sailed across an ocean and
popped up in Minnesota,
disguised as snow.
Language, that vagabond,
hitchhiker and thief,
escaped between prison bars
  like wind
stealing through an iron grate,
disappeared over mountains passes
dragging a misty, faded moon behind
showed up on the baby’s tongue
in California, crying through the night,
babbling names from the old country
  *Ishtar, Salome, Jezebel, Eve,*
singing love songs to a traveling moon
in a new country, with useful words
like *merci, baleh,*
*thanks,* and emphatically
  *Yes!*

* * *

“Why did you stop praising?”
“Because I’ve never heard anything back.”
  “This longing
you express is the return message.”

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.

Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.

Give your life
to be one of them.

  ~ Jalal al-Din Rumi, “Love Dogs”
References


Endnotes

1 Ella Young, 1945. Flowering dusk: Things remembered accurately and inaccurately. Dennis Dobson.
2 Concept introduced by Dr. Anita Prest, University of Victoria, where she drew a Venn diagram of overlapping circles labeled “Indigenous” and “Settler,” with a question placed in the middle, where the circles overlapped: “What is the ‘middle ground’?” (Personal communication, September 5, 2019.)
3 “Mandorla” refers to the space where two circles overlap, a liminal space offering perception(s) with/in the mythic realm. “The zone of two circles, an almond-shaped form used to represent the paradoxical union of two worlds; ‘neither-this-nor-that’ as well as ‘both this and that.’ Also referred to as Vesica piscis” (Deardorff, 2004, p. 215). “Mandorla” is also the Italian word for “almond,” referring to the shape that results in such an overlap.
4 The sestina is built around six end-words (words at the end of a line) used in a repeating pattern for six stanzas, with an ending couplet that uses all six words one more time. This sestina was written with words drawn blindly from a basket of possible choices during a writing workshop as part of Winter Wheat 2017, held at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. Though not the most elegant sestina ever written, it’s always interesting to see where a poem goes with the random words one is assigned. I find it very interesting how the six words, chosen blindly, reflected themes already present in this poetic inquiry: murmur, blanket, panic, generosity, dancing, and exhale.
Studio as Collage: Familiar & Strange

Alison Shields

Abstract

In this visual essay, I present an artistic inquiry I created as I examine the studio as a space to dwell, a space to daydream and a prompt for the imagination. I draw from previous research about artist studios and a visual archive created of objects within the studio as I re-imagine the studio as a collage; it is a place filled with odd juxtapositions of images, artworks, ideas and space that may produce new connections and imaginings. Through presenting the studio as both subject and process, I encourage readers to embrace the strangeness within familiar places.

Bio

Alison Shields is an Assistant Professor in Art Education at the University of Victoria. She received a PhD in Art Education from the University of British Columbia and an MFA from the University of Waterloo. She has exhibited her paintings across Canada and abroad, including a solo exhibition entitled Studio as Portal at McClure Art Centre in Montreal (2020), a collaborative event about Arts-based Research at the Tate Exchange Gallery in Liverpool (2018) and an artist residency and exhibition at the Skafffell Centre for Visual Art in Iceland (2019). Her research focuses on painting, artistic inquiry, studio practices and artist residencies. Contact: alisonleashields@gmail.com | alisonshields.com

a drone; animal bones; electronic music equipment; architectural designs; tape sculptures; interior design colour swatches; old spice deodorant; family photographs; animal antlers; gothic art history books garbage; diapers; suitcases; old costumes; paintings hung from chains; vintage store bird sculptures; puppets; fake meat; how-to-draw books; dioramas made out of cheese graters; books about cowboys; neon lights; pseudo-scientific experiments; re-configured childhood toys; nautical tools; newspaper articles; mountains of fashion magazines; google image printouts; sailing flags; fairy tales; strings of paint; piles of fabric; collages; paintings; sketches.
These are the objects I saw when I travelled across Canada visiting over 125 artists in their studios. On these visits, artists described the studio as a stage; a playground; a laboratory; a waiting room; a puzzle; a pressure cooker; and a brain (Shields, 2018a). One artist described the studio as full of portals that take us elsewhere. In this visual essay, I expand on these metaphors of the studio through an artistic inquiry as I re-imagine the studio as a collage. Throughout my visits, I came to view the physical space of the studio as an assemblage of architecture, ideas, imagery, objects and artworks. Odd and mysterious juxtapositions of objects in the space prompted surprising and curious narratives and connections. I draw from these odd juxtapositions that I propose form an assemblage, and through this lens I create collages that mimic the assembled quality of the studio. Through this process, I view a studio as a prompt for the imagination, one that is filled with generative possibilities through poetic juxtapositions of imagery.

While I spent years visiting, documenting and examining artists’ studios across Canada (Shields, 2018b), my passion and curiosity about studios turned inward in 2020 as I focused on my own studio. In an old building in Victoria, BC, Canada, I hunkered down throughout the past year and half. An old building with wooden rafters and old cement brick walls, with the smell of oil paint in the air, invites its inhabitants to imagine. These curious messages and dark portals left mysteriously by past inhabitants, suggest that we can be here and elsewhere simultaneously. The Ministry of Casual Living (figure 1) is a collective studio space I inhabited over the course of the past 3 years. In particular, throughout the covid-19 lockdowns in 2020-2021, this studio became both a space in which to settle and a space in which to imagine.

In this visual essay, I present an artistic inquiry I developed as I examine the studio as a space to dwell, a space to daydream and a prompt for the imagination. I explore studio and the objects that inhabit the space through the lens of Bachelard’s (1958/2014) *Poetics of Space* and Jane Bennett’s (2010) *Vibrant Matter.*
Through this process, I examine how my artistic practice developed throughout the past year through a renewed appreciation for the imaginative potential of a place. Through this work, I reimagine the studio as a collage. Through doing so I encourage readers to search for the magic within the spaces they inhabit as I oscillate between familiarity and strangeness within my own studio.

**Studio as familiar and strange**

And all of the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. (Bachelard, 1958/2014, p. 31)

In his book *Poetics of Space* (1958/2014), Bachelard uses the term topoanalysis to describe the study of our relationship to places. In particular, he examines “spaces of our intimacy” (p. 30), arguing that our memories inhabit space rather than time; our memories of intimate spaces become sites of projective memories. Drawing from Bachelard’s prompt, I recently began considering the intimate spaces of my childhood memories. In my childhood home throughout high school, I turned my basement into an art studio every night. Covering the floor in sheets, the distinct smell of oil paint filled the air. Within the quiet solitude of my nighttime studio, the basement became a space in which I felt comforted, curious and imaginative. Barbara Bolt (2004) describes the performativity of art-making as the affect and movement that occurs within the heat of practice: “The painting takes on a life of its own. It breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers and generally runs away from me. The painting no longer merely represents or illustrates reading. Instead, it performs. In the performativity of imaging, life gets into the image” (p. 1). I recently found the paintings I made in that basement studio 25 years ago. Upon re-viewing the paintings, I was immediately transported back to that space of my childhood. I was reminded of the sensation of working in the studio, the moments of frustration and exhilaration as a becoming artist learning my way through the messy language of painting.

Throughout the past two decades, I have sought out studios as spaces of imaginative solitude. Upon moving to new cities, the studio became a sign of home, grounding me in a place and within a community. This feeling of connectedness within the studio was ever more present throughout the past year and half. Rather than looking to others’ studios as the world closed down due to covid, I looked inward toward my own studio as a source for imaginative thinking. I currently work in an open concept studio and artist-run centre named The Ministry of Casual Living in Victoria, BC, Canada. As I explored the nooks and crannies, I discovered creatures up in the rafters, found natural objects arranged with care, and spaces overflowing with artistic materials. The studio, filled with artistic materials and activity, is a space that is in process and always changing. As I explored this place, I realized that my voyage over the past several years into others’ studios was sparked by my own curiosity and my fascination with the objects, images and ideas within the studio. I draw from my early memories of studios as I look to the studio as a prompt for imagination. The studio while taking on qualities of all the studios I have inhabited over the past 25 years, always offers up something unexpected. It is both grounding and ever changing. It is always in process, in movement. It is at once familiar and strange.
I view a studio as a place full of curiosities, and a space where one is constantly seeking out unanswerable questions, new problems and generating new connections and new meanings. It is a messy space, both physically and psychologically and a space of incompleteness, uncertainty and continual change. It is a space where the materiality of the studio, materials, experiences and ideas become entangled in a continual learning process. The objects within the studio each have their own histories and tell their own stories. Further, it is a place where artists’ memories, histories and experiences become materialized through making. This process by which our experiences become materialized in the studio is expressed by artist Amy Granat (2010): “There is emptiness and history, acting together… This history, my memories, they still insert themselves in this space” (p. 259). Artist Carolee Schneemann (2010) similarly describes how experiences become entangled through her art making process:

It is empty, it is filling. It is the constant site of permission – permission of uncertainty and the rarity of the circumstances in which I can address only my materials and the influences which may or may not bring them into a new form… but the permission is that I can be in a solitary concentration… the strands are pulling at research, at dream, synesthesia, at political outrage… The studio is full of nests. (p. 154)

Following my journey across Canada into artists’ studios, I began creating an archive of studio objects. In a grid format, I painted over 100 studio objects from both my own and others’ studios. Through this process, I revisited each studio as each object prompted a memory of the place. Highlighting the interaction between humans and non-humans, Bennett (2010) describes the affects produced by a grouping of objects that she happened upon: a glove, oak pollen, a dead rat, a bottle cap and a stick of wood.

When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me… I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the
contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. (p. 5)

She describes this affective interaction as the thing-power of objects (p. 3). Through viewing the studio through this lens, the objects within the studio become active agents within the story told to me by the artists. The studios contain remnants of old works next to new works, sketches, piles of books, trinkets, all in a seemingly haphazard formation. As such, I propose that the studio forms a poetic assemblage through juxtapositions of objects, artworks, imagery and the architecture of the space itself.

Figure 3

![Studio as Collage](image)

One thinks of collage as a particularly 20th-century artistic phenomenon. But in its very nature of pasting together different fragments of the world and the possibility of constructing a coherent world from them, it is a central category today, both for artistic activity in itself and for artistic activity as a metaphor for how we think in general. This idea of taking the world as a single element and then splitting it apart is one of the fundamental activities of the studio. (Kentridge, 2016, p. 25)

As I nested within my studio and explored the objects surrounding me, I sifted through my paintings of studio objects. While initially viewing each studio as an assemblage in itself through the juxtapositions within the studios I visited, I began to see the imagery from the studios for their generative and creative potentials through the lens of the medium of collage. Kentridge's discussion of collage as fundamental to artistic processes allowed me to re-view the studio. I wondered what would happen if I re-collaged the studio. Thus, I began cutting up that archive and recreating new collages with these objects, new juxtapositions and new imaginings. Bachelard (1943/2011) describes a poetic image:

> We always think of imagination as the faculty that forms images. On the contrary, it deforms what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and changes them. If there is no change, or unexpected fusion of images, there is no imagination; there is
no imaginative act. If the image that is present does not make us think of one that is absent, if an image does not determine an abundance – an explosion – of unusual images, then there is no imagination. (p. 1)

Through this process, I sought out this poetic image, one that generates imaginative thinking.

Figure 4

This reworking of the studio as collage allowed me to view the studio as both a subject and a process. Taking on the studio as both subject and process allowed for a meta-analysis of the studio, and prompted me to more deeply examine my life-long relationship to my studio. I view artmaking as a performative process (Bolt, 2004), one that generates experiences rather than merely represents. Thus, through remaking the studio archive into multiple collages, I capture the in-process, ever-changing quality of artists’ studios. Further, the odd juxtapositions of objects and the empty space surrounding them prompted me to create new connections and consider what is absent.

As I reflected on this process, I became aware of the quality of the studio as a prompt for imagining new possibilities. Thus, I highlight the creative potentials of the studio. Art Educator Charles Garoian (p. 2013) describes the process by which working with materials situates the artist’s subjectivity into the making:

Our bricoleur’s fancy improvising, jerry rigging incongruous images and ideas, adding and subtracting, attaching and detaching, gluing and nailing, leaning and propping, in order to extend and expand their presumed functions prosthetically, linking the present with the past, the familiar with the strange, to see and understand the one through the other, back and forth, and again. (p. 3)

Simon O’Sullivan (2010) similarly explains that through art, we continuously and deliberately move between sense and nonsense, continually scrambling existing codes to create new more complex systems of understanding and meaning. As such art making becomes a production of assemblages. Making art allows for a continuous mixing up and reconnecting of ideas to create new connections, like a puzzle that has no final image, but can instead be continuously reconfigured to create multiple new formations. O’Sullivan
argues that art may produce a diagram that opens up in multiple directions, allowing for unintended outcomes, new connections and multiple meanings to emerge. He describes art as having the capacity to produce new worlds. I view these collaged images as performing the collaged quality of artistic practice as described by Kentridge (2016). Thus, the collages of the studio, through their active and ever-changing quality became a metaphor for studio practice, thus prompting me to re-view the studio as process.

Figure 5

Figure 6
Reconfiguring the studio as a collage allowed me to continually reimagine this familiar space. In a time when my world felt ever-more confined and repetitive, I looked toward the studio that I inhabited as a space of infinite possibilities for story-telling and poetic connections. In a moment when the world appeared to stand still, and I often felt stagnant in my research, art practice and everyday life, this small gesture of cutting up and continuously recreating the studio transformed my art practice. Further it changed my understanding of what it means to transform my practice. With this work, rather than look forward toward newness to change my art practice, I instead looked toward a place of familiarity with a fresh perspective. This work prompted me to examine what I hold as important to me within my art studio, examine the roots of that connection and create work that captured my curiosity-driven love of art studios. Lisa Wainwright (2010), professor at the Art Institute of Chicago describes the importance of the studio space for the creative process: “The studio is a space and a condition wherein creative play and progressive thinking yield propositions for reflecting on who we are – individually and collectively – and where we might go next” (p. ix). Creating these collages allowed me to embrace that condition of the studio and find the strangeness that exists within familiar spaces.

Figure 9
References


Becoming an artist: Embodying emergent art making practices

Kate Wurtzel

Abstract

Written in layers, this creative essay invites the reader to consider the relationship between one’s own becoming and emergent practices in the teaching and making of art. Weaving between a discussion on the theoretical concept of becoming and emergence, along with a personal narrative presented with images, the author tries to demonstrate what emergence might feel like in the body while creating alongside-and-with her own child. From points of disruption to points of harmonizing with material and material bodies, this essay examines emergence through the lens of an embodied relationality and offers up potential ways to experience such practices.

Bio:

Kate Wurtzel is an Assistant Professor of Art Education at Appalachian State University. Her work, often grounded in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, explores the practices of art making and its relation to pedagogy as an emergent and embodied experience. As someone who spent many years as a museum educator and public-school art teacher, Kate’s approach to teaching takes the whole being into account. Through an emphasis on continued art practice, pedagogical explorations, and constant reflection, she seeks to encourage and support pre-service teachers as they travel through the process of becoming art educators. Contact: wurtzelkl@appstate.edu | katewurtzelarteducation.squarespace.com

From across the room, I hear a small young boy exclaim, “I want to be an artist when I grow up!” My educator response kicks in nearly automatically, and I holler back across the room, “You already are an artist! You are becoming one all the time!” These sorts of call and response, or cheerful shout outs as I began to call them, were a regular occurrence in my elementary art classroom, often with a projection towards the future and what one wants to become in time. The statement “I want to be an artist when I grow up,” in particular, would often surface when students seemed to become more deeply engaged in their work. As the intensity of their process seemed to increase, I would often hear more statements about “becoming an artist” in the future. Yet, the phrasing of this cheerful shout-out points towards an understanding of the artist as something one becomes later in life, like a fixed position of the adult artist achieved in the future. When, in reality, the becoming of an artist in the classroom (and in life) is a constant,
I stand back and look at the canvas.  
Each piece of tape changes the canvas.  
As I walk up to it, red tape in hand, my palms are sweaty.  
Don't overthink.  
Feel. Listen. Feel. Listen.  
I am so nervous, but I know I need to be in this space.  
This space of becoming. This space of complete uncertainty.  
Just feel.

The idea that we are constantly in the state of becoming is situated in the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the French psychoanalyst Felix Guattari. In their most seminal text, A Thousand Plateaus (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), they explain how becoming brings about what they identify as a deterritorialization and a reterritorialization; it is the constant break down and the reconstruction not through imitation or likeness, but rather through the explosion of “two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome” (p. 10). For Deleuze and Guattari, these heterogenous lines were the orchid and the wasp coming together to form rhizomatic (lateral rather than hierarchical) connections through the reproduction process, the pollination. In this example, the wasp never actually becomes the orchid, nor does the orchid actually become the wasp, but they become something else, together—they are immanent to one another, the orchid as food for the wasp and the wasp as an extended reproductive organ for the orchid. In other words, the orchid and the wasp are not simply being, as in engaging in a set of fixed relationships central to one thing, one entity. Rather, they are becoming—their relations are always in motion and shifting in response to the assemblage with which one is connected. In the world of the artist and art educator, these heterogenous lines, these rhizomatic connections are those materials and material bodies becoming interlinked, constantly being broken down and reformed together, not through a blending of independent central selves but through an eruption of possibility to create something beyond any individual component. The paint, the canvas, the child, the scrap of tissue paper on the floor, the bit of glitter left behind, all contributing to the undoing of the centralized self and in relations that are emerging in process. As feminist
philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2002) explains, “processes of becoming, in other words, are not predicated on a stable, centralized Self who supervises their unfolding” (p.118). Rather the process of becoming is the work of attempting to cross lines transversally, to connect in unpredictable (and possibly decentered) ways, to see/listen to whatever might occur and emerge from these crossings. It is about engaging beyond reason and calculation, allowing the self to be broken down by the process, decentered, and reformed as part of something other than what was before. Which, I believe, requires a reliance and trust in the concept of emergence as an educational approach in the teaching and learning of how one ‘becomes an artist.’

She presses the paint saturated paper onto the canvas, covering layers of tape.

Squish. Squish.

As the paint shifts from one surface to the other, it gives way under the pressure of small hands.

Sinking into the fibers of the canvas and leaving the paper behind.

Tiny fingers pull back.

The anticipation is palpable.

We both eagerly await to see what is revealed.

The idea of emergence, and emergent curriculum, is a concept found in curricular studies for some time now (Aoki, 1986/2005; Jones & Nimno, 1994). Curriculum specialist and scholar Ted Aoki (1986/2005) calls for a curricular landscape that is open and flexible to the unplanned and the unplannable. Dr. Kimberly Powell and Dr. Lisa Lajevic ask how we might prepare students to plan for this way of operating, to plan for the unplannable. In other words, considering how to engage with emergent curriculum or emer-
gent practices that involves a degree of risk/uncertainty is not necessarily new and continues to be prevalent today, especially during these uncertain times (Hegeman, Sanders-Bustle & Hanawalt 2020). However, my interest is in the physical embodiment of these experiences and the creation of a third thing, an undetermined event that unfolds due to the emergent nature of becoming. What are we asking of ourselves in an embodied way to engage in this way of being, teaching, learning, creating? How might we allow the unplanned to occur? In this way becoming and emergence are intimately tied together, both asking us to step in, to commit to an openness to that which is encountered and recognize our reliance on a relational ontology, a relational way of being in the world.

Similar to states of becoming, emergence is the construction of a third entity that goes beyond what is already present in two (or more) parts. Natalie Loveless (2019), who identifies water and snowflakes as emergent, explains emergence and its interdisciplinary nature as “productive of outputs that exceed what is demonstrably present in their constituent parts” (p. 26). Emergence, is the allowing of the creation of something other than, something that is beyond possible for any singular component. The key here though might be in considering how we allow ourselves to do this kind of work—how might we allow ourselves to engage in emergence and emergent practices as a way of committing to the complexity of our own learning and teaching. How can I open myself up to an emergent teaching practice and inspire a similar trust in the process with students? These are questions I continue to ask of myself, considering how to embody the practice of emergence so that one might allow oneself to sink into their own becoming, and welcoming in states of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the hopes of gaining what may be inconceivable from the perspective of one, a singular entity.

She looks to me for approval.
I recognize my position of power and wonder how I can break free of it.
I can’t. What do I do in this moment?
Don’t panic. Stay open to the moment.
I give her a head nod, a smile, and a nearly failed attempt at a wink.
I decide to follow her steps, letting her lead.
Releasing, or at the very least shifting, any agenda I might have had.
I shift my attention and pick up a piece of paper.
A squirt of blue, yellow, and gold.
I walk up to the canvas and press the paper to its surface.
I feel the squish and turn to her with a look of delight.
Now, it’s her turn.
SHE cheers ME on with a head nod, a wildly successful wink, and a huge smile.

Fig. 3 (untitled) photo of work in progress, acrylic on canvas
Allowing Emergence

When I speak of embodying emergence and emergent practices, I am referring to the idea of allowing oneself to slow down, to be-with in an experiential way, to consider the space between bifurcations and binaries, the play between self and other, between materials and material bodies. Here, I use the word to allow, or allowing, not in a hierarchical manner with an implied power structure, but rather as presenting a softness, a kindness, an opening towards the self that privileges decentered ways of moving and creating in the world. Dr. Sylvia Kind (2018) explains her use of emergence and experimentation in her teaching practice as “a slow work of noticing (at first)” (p. 8). We slow down, we notice, we pay attention, we feel our own withness—a shared, and potentially de-centered, with-ness that is inherent to the idea of becoming and key to the idea of emergence. Perhaps, if we can open ourselves up to the play between expansion and contraction, between the self and other, between subject and object, and allow ourselves to really embody emergent practices, we might experience shifts in perception. So that the child who calls out I want to be an artist when I grow up, moves from perceiving oneself as a fixed entity to understanding the self as part of ongoing relations that are yet-to-be-defined. I believe cultivating this shift in perception, however, requires seeing the self not as separate from other, but in response-relation with other, like an un-choreographed dance guided by material bodies responding in the moment. In this way, allowing emergence is allowing yourself to be blurred, to actively, responsively, and willingly be of the world in all its unfolding movement.

We press and pull the paint onto the canvas together,
Like a play between expansion-contraction, subject-object, self-other
never quite landing but in constant oscillation.
We (the paint, the child, the canvas, my body, etc.) are dancing,
responding to shifts from one another.
Our collective, unexpected movements, driven by curiosity and reached through intuition, are activated and surprising to me at times.
I tell myself to stay open. Slow down. Notice.
Allow your expanded perception to lead.
I encounter moments of resistance within my own body—I need to reopen myself to my own process of becoming.
How do I expand in moments where I feel myself contracting?
Her hands and mine, we pull back the tape.
Ripping vigorously, joyfully, until every little bit is pulled from the canvas.
Together, we stand in silence.
Looking, feeling, experiencing connection with each other and with that which has emerged.
Fig. 4 (untitled) photo of work in progress, acrylic on canvas

Fig. 5 (untitled) photo of tape with acrylic
References:


Rooms that Awaken Us: A Poetic Inquiry of Multiple Selves

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
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 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].
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 Ordonseillie and Sage Yasmina Ordonseillii. Video Still by Rawda Harb

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

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.

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”\textsuperscript{ii},
she flies out the door
Because that’s where the real magic is
That’s where she soars
Outside of this room…

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)

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-borned?
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...
References


Endnotes

1 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.
2 Reference from Cinderella, clock striking midnight and the spell is then broken.
3 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.
A Daycare Artist Residency in Minusio: Aesthetic Enunciations in Borderspaces

R. Michael Fisher

Abstract

This is a compilation of happenings from an artist residency at an urban core daycare and kindergarten site from July-December, 2021. The artist provides some notes on how to approach a residency, create site-specific art and work with the children, their teachers, care staff and the community surrounding the site. A newly coined concept of minusio, emerged over time and served as an invisible basis for art-care, in a sense the mirror(ing) of the gift of nurturing but also the lack of care—and offering a route to what human’s really desire, when they are not so busy and distracted by the banality of the world. Minusio is not an answer to lack of care; perhaps, but an aesthetic way to be with art and stones, and other materials and processes in borderspaces that may provide a ‘bridge’ for us back to the maternal, to Nature and healthy ways to exist. Using an ethical minusio principle of less is more aesthetic, the art residency was empathetically sensitive to place, and specifically to mountain crushed stones (gravel) for children and adults to bond with.

Bio

R. Micheal Fisher is a Canadian artist, researcher, author, educator (Ph.D. University of British Columbia, 2003) and independent scholar, He has had careers in nature interpretation, environmental biology, rehabilitation, family and youth therapy, school teaching and adult eduction. Since his teens, he has been dedicated to Life and the decolonization of his mind through arts and healing technologies. He has exhibited his art internationally, written numerous monographs on the problem of fear and is finishing a collaborative book on art-care and the value of aesthetics to develop true compassion and wisdom. He is currently Human Resources consultant to a daycare centre in Nanaimo, BC. Contact: r.michaelfisher52@gmail.com
Figure 1: Artist Walking to Daycare Residency (digitally rendered video still by R. Michael Fisher ©2021 from video by Antje Bitterberg)

Figure 2: First Assessment of the NIA Working Site (photo by R. Michael Fisher ©2021)
I approach this essay as a documentation but also a teaching, based on a five month artist residency I did at a daycare center (Nanaimo Innovation Academy, Nanaimo, BC) during 2021. I am an artist/researcher/teacher very interested in socially engaged collaborative art beyond the classroom. In particular, my place-based installation work partakes in the outdoor studio residencies conception and the dynamics of creating pop-up art galleries. Philosophically and theoretically, the entire project is underlain within a Ettingerian matrixial borderspace theory interested in the intersections of art, trauma, healing, empathy becoming compassion via the maternal relationality as care.

The approach and findings herein are fluid and not strictly linear and descriptive, nor do they create a formula for pedagogy and curriculum in such sites of residencies. My aim is to probe into some of the intricacies, enunciations and amazements that came to me during this residency. I did not systematically evaluate student outcomes from my interventions but share my field observations and speculations of what was happening, including my interactions at times with adults and the community—but mostly, including my relations with the materials and the place.

INSTEAD of trekking on some far-off exotic adventure for thrill, freedom, and proof of something one's ego would love to boast about, I went tracking in the local neighborhood (Figure 1). In their heyday these old rail tracks were the life blood of island life, often shipping out the coal that was heavily mined many decades ago that allowed this city to prosper. I like the tracks because you are in 'no man's land' with official signs telling you to stay off the property, for it belongs to the railroad corporation. So many transgress this law, for pleasure, and some for survival as a place to camp for the night. As a tracker, I am on extra alert in this zone and territory—where you never know who or what you are going to meet, and more so these days of economic collapse with so many people without places to live flocking to these borderspaces and zones of transgression.

Within a few blocks from the house my partner and I just moved into, I literally stumbled along the near-abandoned railway tracks that led through the urban core of Nanaimo, British Columbia (Figure 1). The tracks led me to young children playing behind a tall wood fenced-in yard. I was glad the fence was not too tall and I could see everything going on from the tracks. It looked alive with play. It sounded vibrant, happy, and inspiring. I liked the architecture of it all. As I innocuously walked around the place, on the front street side I saw a huge wooden sign on the main building, which said, “Nanaimo Innovation Academy” (NIA). A school? Upon arriving home, I looked up the organization's website. The philosophy of this small non-profit daycare and kindergarten fit with my alternative philosophy of education. Their emphasis of pedagogy was child-centered with the imperative to have children and their teachers (daycare workers) ‘follow the play’ that will lead to what children want to learn. Waldorf, Reggio and Montessori, wholistic education were banner claims of what happens at NIA. This was my curricular homing grounds of attraction and explorations dating back to becoming a certified teacher in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

To my surprise, I wanted to somehow get involved. If successful, I knew it would be a totally new and challenging experience in my life to be around such young ones. I'm 70 years old and I savor my quiet sanctuary spaces these days for making art, contemplation and writing.

NEXT DAY, my partner told me there was a call to participate in an Art Walk in the city. I was not much interested to show my art for a new exhibition. Yet, within 24 hrs I put one-plus-one twogther. I contacted the NIA Director and proposed two possibilities: (a) they host my art work for the Art Walk and I would...
include the children's art, both serving as a fund-raiser and promotional event for them and, (b) we do the same as (a) but I come on site as an artist-in-residence for five months prior to the Art Walk. My concept was to work with the community, NIA and with a basic simple material like stones, with durability and flexibility for applications in outdoors environments. I had a few initial concepts swirling but my proposal said upfront: “I would let the rest of the ideas and processes of creating art and teaching at NIA emerge. I approach my residencies as art-inquiry and learning rather than teaching art per se.”

I had been working with commercial grade gravel (stones) at the new rental house we had just moved into. These stones were the basis of a spontaneous art sculpture project where I was creating a ‘Zen’ garden at the side of the house. After the long move from one province to another, I was mentally exhausted and wanted to do something really minimalist with my hands and the land. How could I connect with this new place? The stones bordering the house called to me and enunciated ‘this is a place to care about.’ I sat down on the grass and began weeding the stone bed and clearing out all debris. It was a simple aesthetic act of touching and purifying. It was also back-breaking work to bend over so much. Definitely outside my comfort zone. That physical pain, the trying of my patience, all told me I was involved with ‘the other’ and was not just a voyeur designing or decorating a landscape.

I had NO NAME at the time for this practice of connecting with the stones. Yet it became a daily ritual for a number of weeks. I eventually named this basic practice/process an enactment of minusio—that is, subtracting (minus-ing) something as a way of making something more. I like what plant scientist-mystic Monica Gagliano wrote regarding a message she received from a pine tree: “Move not, but be moved—then everything is brought into being at the most perfect time.” That is an example of minusio. Ultimately, it is a practice of art-care, where the materials I work with are respected and expected to move me beyond myself, and in much expanded ways, rather than how I move them. The practice of connecting with place, space, time and materials is an artistic way for me to enter the realm of the ‘sacred.’ By this I mean a convergence of my own awareness with the consciousness of greater-than-humans in which I co-exist on this planet. The relationality is utmost, far beyond my willful attempts to ‘create art.’ Thus, the stone bed around the house was a place of configuring a sacred site for my own care and healing as well as for others who might visit the ‘Zen’ garden.

To my surprise the Director and the main teacher at NIA immediately went for the artist residency I proposed. While in contemplative practice with the house installation the insight came that I could do something similar, and maybe more, with the same kind of commercial stones at NIA. On my initial site inspection, I noticed that NIA and many parking lots in the residential areas, used this same commercial stone base (Figure 2). I presumed it was a relatively cheap and available local material. Within a few weeks, after attaining all the security...
paper work required to volunteer in a daycare, I booked a dump truck half full of local gravel to be poured onto the back end of the gravel parking lot (Figure 3)—with some 30 children and their caregivers witnessing the new visitation. My sister who moved to Nanaimo 12 years ago showed up for the stone dump. She was fascinated by my idea and couldn’t believe that I would entertain young children for five months with only a pile of gravel. I too had my doubts but trusted it would all work out.

IN PARALLEL to meditatively working with the stones at my house, I had several street encounters with “trashed” places—that is, illegal street garbage/waste dumps—many in natural areas near to where we lived. Many homeless people roamed and found refuge in the area often leaving their trash behind them. My curiosity for these nomadic neighbors in our new city was not one of blame as there are many sources for the “troubles” of homelessness, and migrancy practices. Yet, I had to be honest with myself that what arose when I encountered the “trashed” places was an anger—at the whole system of capitalism and its gross economic injustices.

As a long-time environmentalist, the real “pollution” of trashed places is a sign, a symptom, and symbol of lack of care and respect in society. It really bothered me—especially, with dumps encountered while walking in the otherwise beautiful ravines and Nature. Encountering these cultural-dump(s) in nature brought up a terror and disgust inside my soul that destabilized my own false sense of security as a ‘safely’ housed person. There was no escape from the waste and reality of a social system in crisis it represented. At times, no doubt, these toxified places reminded me that my nomadic-artist and marginalized life was also at-the-edge. And being homeless and cast-off (i.e., dumped-off the mainstream of culture) was not far away as a real probability for me because of the choices I have made to be radical critical thinker. I question everything ‘normal’ and usually conclude it is ‘insane.’ I knew I had to work with this disgust-repulsion-fear phenomenon, outside and inside myself, using art processes of inquiry. So, where was my compassion? I needed to track it and re-find it for myself.

The MOTIVATION of the “dump” truck and stone “dump” pile came from my conscious decision to repeat (and echo) the dump of stones that had already made the functional surface of NIA’s staff parking lot. This same gravel material also covered the playground inside the NIA fence. Everyone at NIA was walking, playing or driving on this everyday—taken-for-granted “dumped” material. My challenge was to make the stones (although a grade larger in size than those on the parking lot and playground) that come from blasted mountains in the local area—become also familiar and ‘match’ the expected aesthetic of the places on NIA property. The greater artistic-aesthetic challenge, however, was to bring the stones to life—animate them to be worth bonding to for the NIA community and beyond. I had to simply figure out how to make them interesting material, filled with potential for beauty and even the sacred. They deserved to stand out, catch attention and be cared for anew. Could I do this, and by what means would this happen? I had never done this before. Failure was always a reality and/or a thought travelling alongside me through the five months of this artist residency with the children and the stones. Every day I risked walking into my fear. I followed the art and unknown with care.

I was working the borderspaces in this art project literally ‘outside the fence’ of the secure grounds where children are dropped off (“dumped”) by caregivers and parents five days a week. To bring people into the borderland I invited them into an elaborate out-of-the-ordinary ceremony to bring the stones to their new ‘home’ at NIA. The staff and children participated in this ritual to create a minimalist (i.e., art via minu-sio) ‘sacred site’ for the newly dumped stones as art material. Part of the creating of sacred space was done
during my prior visits to the site. I lit candles and meditated, opening myself to what the site was ‘saying’ or possibly could ‘say.’ Ten minutes before the dump truck drove onto the site, I had the children and staff gather around a rope I had laid in a circle on the ground where the stones would be dumped. I shared a few call and response poems I had written, and then gave them a choice of picking two colored buttons each, from a bag. I invited them to put their imaginations into their hands with the buttons. They were to imagine the button in their left hand representing something they are frightened by or want to leave behind in their life; and the button in their right hand representing something they wish for to come true. Then they were given permission to throw the buttons into the circle. I said, “the Stone People would be coming in the dump truck and would bury their buttons.” In retrospect, this button ritual was likely a projection-reflection of how to release and transform my own fears and wishes for the environment and living a healthier life.

When I pointed the children in the direction of the waiting dump truck, sitting a half a block away, I told them we will have to call the truck over. So, together on the count of three we all yelled and called the truck to come over. The dump truck driver picked up on the cue and the scene was set for the next part of the ritual. The dumping itself was an art performance, a happening. The children loved the deep growl of the big truck engine, the slow tipping up of the bucket, the dust and bigness of everything to do with the truck’s dumping performance at their place of daily care. The truck dump was intended as a spectacle and at first, I was reluctant to fit it with my philosophy of the less is more. But then I remembered, the whole truck performance is a process of less is more. The gaping negative space in the truck’s box stared at all of us watching. It emptied itself. It minus-ed itself by forces greater than our own input, though we all participated in it happening. For the next five months we would respond, engage and co-inquire into what the truck had dumped out.

I PREDICTED that the children would likely run and jump on the stone pile in this ritual. So, I intervened to slow them down from that kind of rambunctious spontaneous play. As an aesthetic intervention, I disciplined and minus-ed the process of reactions and impulses they would have for playing in habitual ways. The art

Figure 4: Children Collecting Stones at The NIA Dump Site (photo by Barbara Bickel ©2021, with permission)
performance was more than just an entertainment spectacle to hype their adrenalin and let them discharge energy onto the material *en masse*.

The aesthetic *minusio* calls for an *emptying negativa* aspect in themselves or holding-back—that is, to minus themselves appropriately to what had actually just happened. The shift I wanted, that was possible but not guaranteed, would be for them to have an encounter interiorly from the Stone People’s *(i.e., subjective-relational) point of view—in contrast to a totally secular utilitarian point of view (i.e., objective). I was shaping their initial experience with several prompts in the ritual space, in order to have them just *be with* and *connect* with the stones for what they were in and of themselves. To establish some immediate empathy, I created an animistic-sensibility (narrative) in the ritual by telling them “the Stone People have come a long ways to be here with us; so I brought a blanket to keep them warm and quiet.” Two adults helped arrange the red cover over the pile (Figure 3).

Then, the teachers and care-givers gave them each a small container to collect a few favorite stones from the pile from the bottom edge that was not covered by the blanket (Figure 4). To close the ritual, I gave each child a surveyors coloured flag to push in around the base of the pile (Figure 3), telling them that this would “give the Stone People protection” in the next few days especially, and for the whole artist residency during the coming months. The children did this with cautionary care and zeal, thus completing the ritual. A ritual that instigated a space of integrity for the stones as well as building the sense of gratitude and required permission—I would now be able to make art and invite others into connection with the pile of stones for the next five months.

The first full stone pile sculpture I made played with the original contours of the ridges left by the dump truck as it moved ahead slowly, stopping a few times to spread the stones out. I had bought commercial stones which were all shades of gray but I intuited the children would probably like working with some white stones, so I bought some at a local shop and had them added into the gravel mix in the truck before dumping. The white stones immediately became “crystals” for the children as they shouted out when they found a white one for their individual collection. Influenced by their attraction to the white stones,
I echoed their magical aesthetic basis into accenting lines of the curving forms—lining them with white stones.

EVERYTHING—IS A COMMUNICATION. What quickly became apparent when spontaneously working with the materials and the children, within the art and aesthetics of this place-based project, is that the stones are communicating with the children. The children communicated back when they picked-up stones and thus accented the experience with their aesthetic choices. Their love for the white “crystals” further accents the communication and I carried it forward into the installation. The children came by and visited me working at the stone pile in the next days and weeks with their parents and care-givers when at the daycare and that began another layer of communication. I noted a finely-knit web of communicating going on—like an ecology of human-stones—and so much more that is not all understood. Communication is not mere exchange of information—it is memory and meaning and re-creating communality—that is, relationality on all levels, material to spiritual. I often found myself journaling at the stone site caught up in lingering poetic phrases and fragments. Following traces of all the connections that were happening whether I was physically present or not—this kept me attuned to the whole as well as the particular.

POETIC and reflective writing filled several of my project journals, and after a few months, ideas were stirring from having several encounters with the stones, the NIA children and passers-by in the neighborhood. I wrote (journal entry, August 24, 2021):

If people don’t come to the [stone] dump, that is children and their care-givers, as they seem reluctant to come by, then I’ll bring the children to the “dump” to hang around “trash.”

I’m now sketching an image from my head where the dump creates itself the ‘child’ image...Creation itself—if you think about it, the Big Bang—it’s a story of a dump—of energy/heat/matter in concentration—intensity—moving outward to less intensity—and not always in nice neat clinical order—it’s more a dump(ing)—called an expanding Universe.

What can I see? What am I disgusted to not see at a dump? Am I also doing this with the Universe and its excesses? Is that what modern humans are doing? How will we ever feel at home—here—in this place?—happening?

An early theme arose while I was working at the stone pile in the first month, whereby I noticed how people observe what is going on in their community on the land, or how they do not. NIA staff typically would drive into the parking lot and not look over at the art being made. It was a challenge for me to build-in and attract curiosity and engagement, when virtually everyone seemed to be going somewhere fast—too fast. They did not have the head-space, the band-width, to include art happening(s) in their workplace parking lot, at least, not in the form I brought upon them. No doubt, myself and the stones were somewhat alien strangers. The community passers-by were often more intrigued and talked, curious to know what I was doing. I wondered: How can I help NIA create a more “Invitational” curriculum and culture as an organization so that people and the children of NIA would want to come and participate in the emerging and changing stone sculptures and/or just come and talk with me as the artist in residence?

Looking for other-than-human engagement with the stones to help create more human engagement I turned to a soil/mulch dump site of left-over organic material left at the end of the parking lot from a year ago. I
began incorporating the mulch into the stone pile sculpture(s) to accent, through contrast, a soft-path-way into and away from the stone pile. Many people walked this path as an organic mediator to approach the sculpture center piece. I thought it would slow people down and lure them to travel in a more winding natural flow, rather than the typical way of walking from A to B in a straight line.

Ideally, they might take off their shoes and socks, and walk with bare feet on the soil towards the dump. Art can be a great way to slow people down in general and move them into a place of calm and contemplation. I personally, did not see a lot of this, but I could see the foot prints left in the mulch and the wearing down of the stone pile sculptures from those who visited the site when I was not there.

At SOME POINT early on, to attract people I figured out how to use the hand-made planter boxes already on this borderland site near the outdoor free library box (Figure 2), to possibly inspire others to make art with the stones. I began a series of sculptures in the boxes, leaving them unfinished, to serve as prompts (Figure 9). The dark soil ground was aesthetically pleasing to place stones on top of. Several people in the community did work in the plant boxes, mostly when I was not there on site. Upon reflection, I think the plant box installations were effective interventions for “invitation” to the community-at-large because they were more like working on a ‘chalkboard’ or in a less daunting small frame. Teaching art for years has shown me that most people like the box or frame and fixed borders. In contrast, the stone dump pile did not have that comforting containing aesthetic and scale.

People did walk over the stones, but at times did anyone make art with the stones on the dump pile itself, although at one point someone walked up and pissed on the stone sculpture in the night. Communication with the stones and the art can come in all forms, not all of them welcome. Some of them toxic. In response to people leaving cigarette butts in the stones I created a poem and had a sign made to respond to the defilement of the stone pile (Figure 8). Not long after, I installed the sign in the stone installation these disturbing communications stopped. This inspired me to make more signs as part of the stone pile creations. painted at home in my studio at the same time that I was attending to the stone pile.

This became a series of large gray-scale paintings where I created compositions based on my experiences at NIA with the children and in the community. I also made the painting (Figure 10) with the basic design of
leaving a section in the painting for the children to work directly on in the gray and black rectangular spaces (10 in. X 10 in.). I was curious to see what the children would produce in markings as ‘conversation’ upon seeing my painting and having had many experiences with me and the stones over the course of the residency. I don’t know for sure what they experienced but I do know what 3-5 years old children will do when they get space and are given a few pencil crayons and told: “You can make whatever you want in this space.”

Figure 9: Sample Art Sculpture in Planter Box  (photo by R. Michael Fisher ©2021)

Figure 10: “Gray Scale #1” [acrylic painting on canvas, 40” X 40” ]  R. Michael Fisher ©2021)
I informed them their art and mine will be shown together in the Art Walk. Participating in the Nanaimo Art Walk 2021, I was able to link NIA to the city and the local art community “Hecate Street” is the street name address of NIA in Nanaimo where the daycare is located and where these children spend so many hours of their life.

The day when I brought my art piece to the daycare the painting was laid on the ground. Children, two at a time, were invited to pick their choice of drawing instruments (from a minusio palette): black, gray, and white pencil crayons; in keeping with the characteristically gray-scale schema of each of the paintings and the stones which were of these muted colors as well (Figure 11). The exceptional color in Figure 10 on the main subject (the artist’s tennis shoes) was unique—and, that has a longer story behind it. Basically, the children were given markers and allowed to draw freely all over my body—that is, on the white sneakers, lab coat and hat that I wore on the first encounters with them at the daycare inside the fence. I wore this transformed clothing whenever I went on site inside or outside, so that children and adults all learned to recognize “my costume.” The children spontaneously began to consistently call me “Artist” (Figure 12).

Figure 13 is a small portion of the large painting. This depicts an area of intense drawing the children made, often drawing on top of each other’s drawing. Analyzing their art response to the painting was a fascinating process as part of my inquiry. The children at times echoed parts of the painting with subtle drawings but mostly they marked fast and heavily (especially the boys) with a seeming interest to make powerful marks on a very big painting. I felt they really were claiming their territory—with me. They seemed “fearless” to express their unique co-participation with “the artist.”
I have come to FRAME everything I was doing during the residency as *minusio* aesthetics in the register of the affective domain that moves beyond simple concepts and words. I felt I was in the midst of *art-care* from the Stone People and the land, air—everything, at this *borderland* site. I felt emplaced and nourished—at home. All beings, visible and invisible were involving themselves as I was inviting them to play and make with me. These were intimate “imaginary companions,” as child psychologists and philosophers have recently been studying. These companions were of a kind that was new to me. They were offering me more than what adult humans were able and willing to.

An emergent art-care also took me by surprise again and again coming from the children at NIA. This descriptive article can barely pass forward the embodied “zoomed” soul experiences I had when on the ground face-to-face with the children in various playful and often spontaneous encounters. There is some spirit in the eyes of a child that truly I could only call now, “light” although that is so not meant to be romantic, new agey, or love—or such other projections of notions.

Maybe it is just a mystery what transpired body-to-body, eye-to-eye, and “zoomed” is the term that I used to tell myself and others what happened today at the day care. I needed to tell this story as it was certainly a major part of the artist residency in terms of connectivity, communicative warmth and what brought me a joyous meaningfulness, laughter and tears from time to time. I am so grateful to this mystery.

In stark contrast, a passivity on the adults’ part disturbed me at times throughout the residency and was never resolved. I probably took it too personally. I needed to be better prepared for it. But because it was my first time working in this kind of setting and with such young children and professional day care workers; it “shocked” me a bit. I found myself not able to really connect across a divide—invisible but real—and thus was not able to talk to the teachers and staff the way I wished. Why? One reason was that doing a residency...
such as this was brand new to them, but more so, what was hard to witness was how there is so little time in the day for anything but the basic care of children, from the 8:30 am drop-off to 5 pm pick-up. The adults seemed mostly rather speeded up and harried from the vantage point of the art-site in the borderlands and my slowed down aesthetic space/practice. I had empathy for their dilemma.

Artists in residence may have the intention of slowing down busy parents and care-givers and daycare workers lives to engage with the aesthetic; but to be able to design art co-inquiries and interventions with social engagement in the sacred time of borderspaces, one may find themselves stumbling and unable to even begin to think of how to be co-creative with this fast-paced life-style. I found minusio to be helpful to get in touch with an aesthetic compassion greater than myself. This allowed me to be less judgemental than I might otherwise.

THE ONLY CURA for my despair about the shortage of curiosity and attention available for the art-care transmission (sharing), came through the symbol of ‘the Mother’ (Figure 14). The dominant Western culture’s fast productive tempo, and other cultural strict legal rules, habits and taboos make people so fearful to encounter the full intimacy, vulnerability and joy of both art-care and ‘the Mother’—and Nature. I wanted to show with this symptom that the mothering going on in the child care center and in the parking lot art project were signs of what our dominant society worldview does with mother-love and the gift of care from mother-earth-making. At the same time, this Mother was a reminder of possibility, of new birth of preciousness still—always, even in these dark times of a world going into major cascading crises of great consequences and a lot of suffering and death.

This LAST SIGN that emerged was powerful for me. I left it up on the site for a few months, even when I had officially finished the residency. It now lays in my basement, as I don’t know what to do with it next. It was a sad sign to create and install on the site because it is (in a way) rather a parody on art-care and mothering in today’s world—yes, so it says, “Mother is present” and is absent (aka: it’s only a sign). Absent mother(ing) on the one hand is real and has consequences for bonding and love in today’s societies; albeit, mothers per se are not the problem—the problem is systemic, economic, and the result of living in a rather violent culture of fear of consumerism and materialism. My use, of what I now call minusio, as a basis for art-care is in a sense mirror(ing) the lack, the absence, of what human’s really desire. So, minusio is not an answer,
perhaps, but an aesthetic way to be with art and stones, and other materials and processes in borderspaces that may provide a 'bridge' for us back to Nature and natural ways—back to the rhythm of Gaia, Herself, Mother Earth.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the surrounding neighbors, the children, parents, and staff at NIA, and especially the Director Keely Freeman for allowing me to work and play in their community. I give thanks the Snuneymuxw First Nation, on whose traditional territories we live, play, and learn at NIA. I am grateful to all the “crowd-sourced funders” who contributed confidence and money for me to carry out this project in ways I would not have been able to do without those resources. In particular, to be part of Dr. Pauline Sameshima’s grant through Lakehead University, with an exhibition site to show this work is an exceptional gift; go to: https://galleries.lakeheadu.ca/2021-residency-r-michael-fisher.html My playful talks at the “stones” with pedagogist Antje Bitterberg, Vancouver Island University, helped to bring art into a better dialogue with early childhood learning with materials, of which I could not have fully seen without her experience.

Thanks to Dr. Barbara Bickel for her support with many of the ideas, photo documentation and discussions about the emerging installations and advice on how to make art collaborative and socially engaged. I was inspired by and initiated into the Gestare Art Collective during the time of this artist-residency, which gave me a deeper grounding in mother-care aesthetics as an ontological and ethical approach to art-making, human development and community-care. And lastly but not least, I offer thanks to my sign-maker Ryan Cullen, who offered his talents and wood supplies many times to enhance the 'messaging from the stones.'

References


Endnotes

1 E.g., see socially engaged art/teaching approach of Bickel (2015). The simple definition of how I understand socially engaged art is that the foundational “material” of my art practice is social experience, based in “relational ontologies” (e.g., Thayer-Bacon, 2017) and steeped in an ongoing interchange of communications with the social sphere—in this case the NIA community and the larger community of the place in which NIA is situated in the inner urban core district of a city.

2 The residency studio as a site of co-inquiry is exemplified in the work of Jordan and Bickel (2021).

3 I am referring mostly to the borderspacing conception in artist, theorist and psychoanalyst Bacha Ettinger’s (2005) work.

4 I only arrived at the concept minusio (a name I coined) some eight months after the start of the NIA residency. This emergent term was derived from my study of and experience with the negative philosophies and theories, like minimalism in art history, but with less stylistic need to remove ‘the artist’s imprint’ on a piece of art. I find that kind of minimalism still too self-centered in its focus to remove the artist and simplify. I was after a natural negation process that was a minus-ing so as to allow for something much larger to arrive, and to do so unpredictably, but to be socially engaged art the whole time. One question that accompanies minusio aesthetics, is how can I as an artist remove something that builds a bond-deeper-stronger and, even eternal between artist, art materials and viewers and/or co-participant? I have since developed an elaborate theorizing about minusio which is detailed and technical beyond the scope of this essay.

5 See Art-Care Practice of Restoring the Communal (2023) B. Bickel and R.M. Fisher.

6 “Homeless” people is a controversial term for many, and I use the term for myself in actuality—as a nomadic artist. So, I do not see it as absolutely negative and meant to be demeaning as if claimed by someone of privileged capitalist-resource status (which I do not have). My feelings of disgust related to dump-sites that are toxic is a feeling that comes from my life experiences of people and greater-than-human beings treated as unworthy of the best care that ought to be given to them. I am talking about “polluting” implicitly throughout and along-side with notions of “dumping.” I find that a creative good space for inquiry and art-care and its lack thereof.

7 “Failure” may sound too strong and negative, and even at times implicitly I may sound blaming of those ‘others’ whom I critique as having not given much artistic or attentive value to the art/inquiry conducted during the residency. I would not personalize my use of that term totally, even if I refer to “my” failure to achieve the ideal aims I had for the residency. Rather, in a collective context, I use the term here and in my other past works, of discerning and documenting the “collapse” of many living systems—ecological, social, economic, etc. that are currently pervading everything that is happening. In that context of collapsing cascading crises, yes, “failure” is not unreasonable to imply and claim. My point of use is, that humanity, largely since leaving our Indigenous primal ways some 10,000 years ago, has failed to care-enough for Life. I am not the only one that has declared this phenomenon and ontological universal reality since the early 1960’s with, for example, Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring as the iconic recognition of disaster/failure coming. Ideally, with extra-sensitivity, I might have involved everyone relating to the residency experiences to have a ‘voice’—that is, in a pluralistic, inductive, co-constructing their own individual meanings (ontologically) of what was going on—beyond my labeling some generic phenomena. To have done that inductive research systematically, was far outside my time budget and my focus of major concerns in this residency.

8 There are many references in Buddhism and (mystical) nondual philosophy traditions that I have studied and at times practiced which foreground the importance of emptying; in relation to this Matthew Fox has taught me about the theological tradition of the via negativa (apophatic) path as “the way” to the Divine (e.g., Fox, 1986); in my own 33 years of research and spiritual-educational practice of transformation I utilize “fearlessness” as the major apophatic way for recovery, healing and liberation (e.g., see Fisher, 2010; and Fisher and Kumar, 2021).

9 As part of the post-colonial and post-humanist philosophy I brought into this project/residency, I am interested in the Indigenous worldview (e.g., Four Arrows, 2016) as a pan-Indian perspective of general ethical-interbeing transmission of values and behaviors that work with Nature, not against it. The “stones” were Nature and thus, I was working to shape an aesthetic-sacred experience of stones as having dignity, rights and worth in their existence just because they exist; in this case, stones are that substance and spirit of value, as they are factually the mountains here in the local area (even if blown-up and fragmented so violently by human activity and capitalist extraction economies). Unconsciously or not, my view was that children will feel empathy with the stones and what the mountains have been through—in a traumatic way—to arrive at the place of NIA—a new home. In the ritual with NIA, I called them “Stone People”—echoing the general Indigenous philosophy and ethical understanding that all things require status as ancestors and/or as equal beings to humans. I have read of these labels in some Indigenous-based literature and seen in documentaries—of the language use where “people” is not just to signify humans.
Aesthetically and artistically, working in only black and white (gray scale) was majorly challenging and part of the minusio application for the entire project. Color was minus-ed from these pieces as much as possible—and, indeed, I found that something more was created in impact. One really needs to feel this ‘more’ when standing in front of all three large paintings in the series. In Figure 10, the use of color was intentional in order to ‘match’ the memory of the NIA children drawing with color markers on my white lab coat, hat, sneakers, in the early weeks of the residency. I wanted to honor their marks and use of colors, but also on one sneaker in the painting it turns into a gray scale so the children would see how that is actually done in a painting. None of them really noticed, as far as I can tell.

Art-Care is a term recently coined by Barbara Bickel and myself (both founders of Studio M*)—see the development of theory and practices in detail in the forthcoming book Bickel and Fisher (2023).

I draw for inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorizing on “borderlands theory” (a good summary is Naples, 2010).

Gopnik’s (2009) discussion of “counterfactual people” and “imaginary companions” gives one a whole new meaning to the evolutionary significance of childhood and this thinking process and befriending that goes on in imaginal spaces for most children—and, with dreamers, poets, writers, film directors, etc.
Sunrise Haiku Project: Learning to Trust

Diana Tigerlily

Abstract

Born and raised in Illinois, I moved to the ocean during a major life transition, leaving behind the familiar: family, forest, and soil. This essay incorporates reflection, photographs, and haiku to represent sixteen months of journeying to the ocean sunrise everyday. The daily practice yielded unexpected insights, moments of deep healing, and growth. The biggest lesson for me was that no matter how thick the clouds and how strong my doubt, the sun will still rise. By witnessing the phenomenon of the sun rising everyday, I have been able to rise up through layers of self-doubt and grief, and begin moving into a place of sustained affirmation and trust.

Bio

Diana Tigerlily, Ph.D., is a Professor of Practice in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at Southern Illinois University Carbondale where she has taught since 2003. Last year, she was the recipient of the University Teaching Excellence Award, earning the title Distinguished Teacher. She teaches feminism, storytelling, yoga, and meditation, and is a dedicated student of life. Trained in embodied performance methodologies, she practices staying present, writing from the heart, and trusting the process.

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Sunrise and Ocean
Have explicitly taught me
The constant is change
I have been witnessing the truth of the above statement each morning at sunrise over the ocean for the past sixteen months, at the shore each day, taking photos, writing an accompanying haiku, and then posting the haiku with its sunrise photo on social media.

The process of the sunrise itself, plus the witnessing of sunrise, has become for me a generative metaphor for life’s daily lessons, and has primarily taught me that very little is predictable and the best thing I can do is to let go of expectations and simply show up. The “showing up” has resulted in layers of insight.

An initially unplanned project, this sunrise haiku series has ultimately become a journey of healing.

Sunrise teaches me
Anything is possible:
Show up to find out

The word “sunrise” positions the sun as the star of the show, but the sun is not the only performer on this oceanic stage. In the same way that we as humans do not live in a vacuum or without context, the sunrise too is a collaborative performance with a myriad of qualities of all the elements: the light, the water, the clouds, the reflections, the wind, the sand—and they all distinctly come together each day delivering a spectacle unique as a fingerprint. Every day. Tirelessly.

I’m coming to know on deepening levels, and continuing to unpack, what the witnessing and experiencing of this sunrise phenomenon is teaching me in layers of meaning. In its entirety, the sunrise haiku project—the commitment, the waking up, the showing up, the documenting, the sharing, continues to change my life everyday, in the same way the coastline changes everyday. And just like there are the physical changes of the coastline, there are also the personal changes in my reality. Additionally, via the sharing of my documentations of the sunrise, the project has created change by impacting others.

At the external, visible physical level, there is nothing static about the coastline, the ocean, the waves, the temperature, the degrees of cloudiness and sunshine, the colors of the sunrise, the amount of seaweed, the saltiness of the water, the moisture of the sand, the intensity of the wind, the force of the waves.

Some days there are mounds of seaweed; some days there are walls of sand where the water has cut through. Some days there are rip currents, or marine life such as jellyfish or man-o-war. Some days the sand is rippled; on windy days it shards the air like tiny glass needles piercing the skin, forcing me to take cover.

The ocean itself is unpredictable. Some days the water is calm as a lake, other days the waves are fierce; sometimes the ocean rocks me like a lullaby, other days it spits me out on the shore.

Regardless, the waves are always in motion, and the colors of the sunrise change by the moment and are often unexpected. Thick clouds give way to brilliant colors. Rain clears to shining light.

I used to think I could determine the sunrise based on the view I saw outside my window upon waking each morning; however, I quickly learned that I cannot. Some days it is raining outside, but when I arrive to the ocean there is no rain. Sometimes, the clouds are so thick, I’ll think I won’t see the sun, but they disap-
pear and the day is bright. I’ve learned that change in my life is as rapid as the evolving sunrise; my emotions as mobile as the colors.

I didn’t set out to “do a sunrise haiku project.” I didn’t have a preconceived plan that I would photograph the sunrise, write a haiku, and then post the photo with its accompanying haiku everyday for over a year. But about nine months (a gestation period, coincidentally) after living at the ocean, the project organically emerged.

I had recently moved to the ocean from the Midwest. My marriage had ended the year before, then the pandemic arrived and my job went online. I moved to the ocean, manifesting a lifelong dream. I’d always loved the ocean. When I was a young child, before I had ever been to the ocean, I decorated my bedroom with posters of palm trees. I named one of my first two cats “Ocean” (the other, “Moonglow”). When I got my first car, I had my license plates read “Ocean” 28. When left the Midwest to move to the ocean, the date synchronistically happened to be the 28th. I didn’t realize the connection until later.

Once I arrived at the ocean, I went to the ocean everyday, though not necessarily at sunrise. The few times I had gone at sunrise, I found the experience extra special, so I decided to try to do that more often.

To make it to the beach in time to witness the sunrise is no easy task for me, and is in fact a triumph. I am naturally a night owl. It’s difficult for me to wake up in the mornings. I need the alarm clock, and I need to snooze.

So, one day, on a day that happened to be May 1, 2021, I decided to go the ocean sunrise the next morning. I set my alarm, and then I went. I took a few photos, chose one photo and posted it to Facebook, without any words. I returned the next day at sunrise, took a few photos and posted a photo along with a few words. The following day, I returned to the sunrise, took photos, and this time when I posted the photo, I wrote a haiku to go with it, which felt good. I’ve always been drawn to haikus. They help me distill my thoughts.

Haikus are cleansing,
like a flossing of my thoughts
to clear the debris.

I was enjoying this sunrise process, so I continued to go to the sunrise and post a photo and haiku. And I continued, everyday, until at some point I realized this had become a regular thing. A project. A discipline. A practice. A ritual. A necessity.

I made it an intention to continue doing it everyday, maybe even for a whole year. At that point I wasn’t thinking of what the practice would come to mean for me. All I knew was that it was important for me to do this, as a discipline, as a practice, and as an honoring of the ocean that I was finally living near, after living my whole life in the Midwest. What I didn't realize, and have only recently come to realize, is that this practice, this project, has been a healing journey. I thought I was the one in control of the project, but everyday, the project has had a new lesson, a new release, a new epiphany, a new surfacing of grief, a new reckoning:
Seeming obstacles
Oftentimes are angel’s wings
Guiding us to fly

Followers on social media began commenting, thanking me for these sunrise photos and haiku. Telling me how much they look forward to them everyday. Their comments have ranged from simple thank you’s, to comments on how they are inspired, to more involved comments and reflections.

Here are a few recent examples:

“I LOVE your morning pictures! I look forward to your posting every morning! Then each time through the day when it pops up, I enjoy it still again. Thank you so much for doing that!” G.B.

“Diana, you will never know how much your posts mean to me every day. Before I had progressed with my MS, I went to the Pacific (Oregon) and the Atlantic (Outer Banks and Jekyll Island, GA) every year and it’s the one thing in my life I miss so much! I rewatch them daily when I want to feel calm and meditate. Thank you so much.” Joan Listen

“So, periodic verbal check in besides just hitting the heart: These colors have been haunting me. Hard to describe, it starts with the colors of a Hang-ten shirt one of my best friends in high school had and how that shirt is being re-marketed as a nostalgia brand in some of the same colors from when I was young. These colors. I kept seeing the picture of the shirt/ad go by, thinking of my friend, the light in him, our days at the beach. There’s an interesting queer theory book, Chromophobia, about men and color and gender expectations/paradoxical damage. Color is a way to the world, much like sound. I feel like the world responds to us when we are open to these wavelengths and vibrations, how we are struck by light and color and warmth and memory and possibility and all of that. Again, then, spending time with your daily photo has afforded me pleasure and connection, called me back to my body, to story, to the warmth of him and Huntington Beach, to contemplate the (in)finite. I am so grateful for you and your practice, Diana. I sit with them the way I do the Haystacks at the art institute. I give myself to the color.” Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

“Diana, every morning I share your posts with my 18-year-old grandson who is really struggling with bipolar depression. He seems to like them. Thank you for your inspiration. Just wanted you to know they do touch lives.” S.P.
In addition to the online followers, there are also beach “regulars” I have met, who have come to expect my presence, and me theirs. There are also random people on the beach at these sunrises: vacationers, couples, meditators, fishermen. I’ve been inspired by them all, have listened to their stories, shared mine. There’s a community of people, each in their own immersive sunrise experience, honoring the space of each other’s own experience. There is an informal kindred spirit-ship and care among the regulars—a looking out for one another.

It has been approximately 500 days since I attended that first sunrise, and I am still dedicated to this practice and have no desire to stop.

I haven’t been to the ocean sunrise every single one of those 500 days. I tallied the numbers, and I’ve been to the sunrise nearly 70% of the days. At this writing, I have created 341 sunrise photos and accompanying haikus.

The days I missed I was either away visiting family in the Midwest, or I was at the ocean but not going to the sunrise. Those random chunks of time where I was here but not going, were inexplicable to me. I would be awake. Sometimes I would even get out of bed and be ready to go, but for some reason, I couldn’t muster going. This would bother me, but I also did my best to trust my process and not be upset with myself. I came to realize that I simply needed the stillness and the silence. There is a lot of motion, a lot of sound, a lot of energy at the ocean: the movement of the water, the rush of the wind, the blowing of the sand, the heat of the sun. So, I’ve tried to let myself be, to trust my process. And to my relief, each time, I would eventually wake up and attend the sunrise, and begin attending every day once again.

I’ve learned a lot from this project. I’ve learned that coming to the sunrise is the work of healing. This was a recent and grand epiphany. While I already had come to know that this sunrise project was a healing process, the profound realization is the emphasis on “work.” The work of healing.

Through this epiphany—which occurred while I was at the sunrise-- I realized that just because attending the sunrise daily at the beach is a rewarding and pleasant activity, that doesn't necessarily mean it is an easy one. I tended to become upset with myself those days that had been difficult for me to go to sunrise, wondering if I was lazy or if there was something wrong with me. But I realize now the depth of the work I have been doing while I’m there--not only in the physical action of waking up early and getting there, but in the emotional work I hadn’t yet known I would be doing.

I don’t just go to the sunrise and then leave. I have a specific ritual, a kind of meditation. First, as I witness the sunrise, I take a large number of photos due to the sunrise’s evolving nature. Then I sit on the shore, sift through the photos, narrow them down to the best ones based on my personal criteria I’ve created and what mood I’m feeling that day. I choose the sunrise photo and write the haiku. Writing the haiku is another form of meditation. Often, the haiku only takes a few minutes to write. Some days it takes longer.

Once I complete the process of witnessing the sunrise, taking and selecting the photos, writing the haiku, and then posting to social media, I immerse myself in the ocean. I float, I swim, I stand on my hands, I pray, I offer gratitude, I set my intentions. Sometimes I cry. Always, I marvel that this is my life.
Daily ocean swim
Deep salt soak in morning light
Calls me to my truth

After my ocean immersion, I walk and/or run to the pier, which is 1.8 miles down the coast, and then turn around and come back, making it a 3.6 mile journey. When I return to my spot, I delve into my yoga practice, a deep and rich focus for me. I end with alternate nostril breathing and meditation, savasana, and another immersion into the water before I leave.

Ironically, on the morning I ended up having this particular epiphany that going to the sunrise is the work of healing, I didn't want to go to the sunrise. I forced myself to go. I negotiated with myself, told myself I could just go see the sunrise and then come right back home. I’ve told myself that often, but almost always end up staying once I’m there. I’ve only left early two or three times, and those times it was because it was either painfully windy or heavily raining.

On this day, when I arrived at the sunrise, the colors of the sky resonated with me in a way that made me feel completely at home. Pastel pinks, lavender blues with hints of neon warmth, these colors were the palette of my soul and inspired this haiku:
If I were to paint
My soul, I’d choose these colors.
This is my softness

Looking at the photo now, my feeling is that these are probably not the eternal and essential colors of my soul; but that, in keeping with the theme that the constant of the sunrise is change, these were the colors of my soul in that particular moment, prompted by my emotions present in that moment. The resonance was warm and soothing, fulfilling. It is likely that on another day, my soul would resonate with a different palette.

Remember, that day, I hadn’t even wanted to go to the sunrise. I was in a very low energy state. Depressed. Numb. I posted the photo and haiku, and began my walk to the pier. I didn’t have the energy for running that day. I walked slow, with my shoulders low, too heavy to hold up. My low energy must have been apparent, because a person I often see on my morning walk remarked, “You’re mellow this morning,” mistaking my sadness for calmness.

I continued walking. During my walk, sometimes I waded into the water and floated weightless. The water was gentle that day, thankfully, as though it sensed my need to be held. I released all tension, let myself be as heavy as I felt, and the water fully buoyed me.

I soon realized I didn’t have it in me to walk all the way to the pier. I let myself accept that. Some days
I pushed myself, knowing that push was what I best needed for that day. But on this day, I knew I simply needed to stop walking and lay down in the sand. And that’s what I did. I felt the warm sand beneath me, and I burrowed into it like velvet. The sand hugged me, gave me touch, so I felt less lonely, much like the way the water held and buoyed me so I felt weightless, burdenless. I laid there for several minutes in a restorative state until a wave of water came up and surged beneath me, soaking me, telling me it was time to walk back to do my yoga practice.

During my asana practice, in the middle of seated forward fold, I unexpectedly began to cry. I became aware, in a painfully visceral way, of a grief for loved ones and an old life I hadn’t known I was still carrying. The emotional pain was deep, and I hadn’t fully realized it in such nuanced ways until that moment. I sobbed and sobbed, from an old place, then eventually, suddenly stopped crying as inexplicably as I had begun.

Release emotions
Like clouds pouring rain. Find the
Openings of light

At the end of the practice, while laying in savasana, I realized some energy had moved. It was subtle. Very subtle. So subtle, I nearly didn’t register it. But I recognized that I didn’t feel as sad. I also recognized that the
pain in my hamstrings that had been hindering my walking the last few days had dissipated. The emotional pain had apparently lodged in my physical body, taut and stuck, but had released. As I immersed myself in the ocean one final time for the day, I recognized that I was now in a much higher energetic state than I had been when I’d first arrived. The morning practice had been transformational. And that’s when I realized, *this* is the work. Everyday. *To come to the beach and heal.*

Radiating peace,
Healing light illuminates
My inner spirit

These sunrise reflections reveal something new to me everyday about myself, about my path, about my process. The sunrise haiku project is not really about the sunrise or the haiku; it is about the practice itself of showing up. I show up nearly every day, but there is nothing repetitive about it. Each sunrise is different and each engagement with the sunrise heals something true, reveals something new to me, that I’m then able to share with others.

The practice is about helping me to heal, by releasing tears, grief, and to remember who I am. I’m a person who had always wanted to be at the ocean, and I successfully manifested a home here, an accomplishment that had always seemed unattainable; a feat that had required courage.

I’m a person who reads the signs. I have been guided on my journey by the Great Blue Heron. I followed the heron here. When I arrived, the blue heron showed up on the beach, as did its cousin the White Egret, and
they continue(d) to guide me, leading me to the house I now call home.

Signs are messages
From angels and spirit guides.
Pay close attention

My time at these sunrises has yielded other relationships with the wildlife. In keeping with the lesson of showing up without expectation, I went to the sunrise one cold, windy, foggy January morning, and again negotiated with myself that I didn’t have to stay. But once there, I stayed and did my practices. Here is the story that emerged that day, which never would have happened had I not shown up. Quoted from my social media post:

“January 28, 2022

I helped save a Northern Gannet today.

I was walking on the beach and saw what looked like a bird missing its head. I got closer and saw that the feathers around its neck area were matted. Was its head missing or was its head hidden, tucked asleep? It wasn’t moving and looked dead. But suddenly I saw a slight movement. I couldn’t tell if I imagined it. But it moved again. I wondered if these were just electrical impulses from a dead bird or if it was alive.

I knew it was alive.

I was alone on the beach. I scanned the coastline and saw a fisherman, made my way to him and told him about the bird. We walked to it, and he said it was dead.

I said no, watch.
And sure enough, it very subtly moved. The fisherman poked it with his fishing pole and up popped its head! But there was fish wire sticking out of its mouth. “See that,” pointed the fisherman. “It might have swallowed a hook.”

I said we have to help it. He said these birds bite hard, and so without gloves we could get hurt. But he stuck his pole toward its mouth so the bird would bite the pole instead. Then with some effort he managed to grab hold of the wire with a tool he had. The bird opened its mouth wide and we could see the hook. It was a double hook lodged deep in its mouth. After a few tries, he managed to wriggle the hook completely from the mouth. But the bird was not well. It appeared the wire had been wrapped around its neck at one point. The bird was exhausted and not flying away.

A couple minutes later, a woman taking a walk on the beach saw us and the bird and came over to us and said, “I’m a wildlife specialist.”

What are the odds of that? Her specialty is rhinoceros!

So she called someone she knew at the wildlife rehab center, and that woman called a woman she knows from fish and wildlife services who was nearby and had a crate. We pin dropped our location on the beach and
waited for her until she arrived and got the bird in the crate.

The bird will live. I believe it manifested the four of us for its survival—me who believed it was alive, the fisherman with the tool, the wildlife specialist with the quick connections, and the woman who was nearby with the crate.”

I’ve also witnessed, two different times now, a newly hatched baby sea turtle making its long journey from its nest to the ocean, struggling to traverse the dense seaweed. Its single-pointed focus and determination are inspiring.

Be the sea turtle
Hatching new and traveling
With trust towards home

A few days ago, a new symbol showed up for me. I was on my walk, meditating on next steps regarding my career, dreaming up an idea, and wondering if I could do it. The ocean was calm that day, the water clear and nearly lake-like. The sun was getting hot, so I waded into the water, still in my meditative, manifesting state. I was in shallow water, low tide, when something next to me caught my eye. Less than three feet away from me, just chilling on the ocean floor, was a stingray, about three or four feet long, laying there so close to me and so still, I could have easily stepped on it. This was the first stingray I’d ever seen in real life. I admit, it startled me, and I immediately left the water, my heart pounding. But as I continued my walk, I realized this had to be significant. When I returned home, I looked up stingray symbolism and was surprised at the message’s specificity and relevance to my current journey and what I had just been meditating on during my walk:

“Stingray symbolism is letting you know that everything is now in place. You know that you have the means, you have the tools, and you have the skills. Now get busy and get on with it. In other words, your Stingray meaning is telling you that everything you have worked toward is open to you. Therefore, you must stop hesitating. Like the Blue Whale, this spirit animal insists that you have faith in your abilities and follow your inner guidance.” (https://www.spirit-animals.com/stingray-symbolism/)

Devote time and space
For that which is emerging
Now. You are ready

I had been dealing with a crisis of confidence, and despite this powerful message, I was still in a deep state of self-doubt.

A few days later I was walking on the beach at sunrise and, once again, I was suddenly struck with an intense, unexpected, old grief. At my old home in the Midwest, I had built with my then husband a seven-acre sanctuary that included stone-lined gardens in the shapes of mandalas, a giant labyrinth, and a young oak grove surrounding the Mother Oak Tree. I’d sit beneath the Mother Oak and meditate, while seated on what I called the goddess stone, a sandstone slab imprinted with an image in the shape of a goddess. I had placed the stone at the base of the Mother Oak tree.
For twenty-one years, I lived on this land planting trees, designing gardens, bringing my vision for sanctuary to life. Three years ago, I made the difficult decision to say goodbye.

I had already done a lot of grieving, but on this day of my walk, I was suddenly overcome with an immense grief. I missed the oak grove, missed the Mother Oak, missed the labyrinth, missed the goddess meditation stone. I missed the energy of this land, and I began sobbing inconsolably as I walked blindly through my tears. I was grieving these trees as deeply as I had grieved my animals, as deeply as I had grieved the loss of loved ones and an old life. I knew I had a deep connection to all living beings, but I truly didn’t know my love went as deep with the nonhuman world as it does with the humans in my life. But based on the depth of my grief, I learned that it does.

Finally, my sobbing stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and the next day, as I was walking the coastline, I felt a major shift occur. I recognized how far I had come in the last three years. I remembered my power as a manifestor. And that memory reminded me to trust. It was a breakthrough, a clearing of the clouds of grief with the bright sun shining through. The darkness had lifted. I felt lighter, brighter than I had in a very long time. I’ve seen that kind of sunrise, and I have written the haiku for it. My life had become entwined with the metaphors and the lessons of sunrise. I am imbued with sunrise and haiku. I radiate sunrise and haiku.

It’s quite the process—
Sunrise. Moving through layers
To shine. We are that.
That same day, after the healing breakthrough, I had a creative epiphany, the kind of idea that swirls into my mind instantaneously. These have been rare for me lately, but normally abundant in my life, so the fact that it happened the day right after I experienced the healing breakthrough is a testament to how clearing a block (the cloud) makes room for creative flow (movement and sunlight).

During this project I have come to realize that my haikus fall into categories. Some haikus act as a caption that paints the visual scene of that day’s sunrise: (See above photo as accompaniment to the following haiku)

Waves leap up to kiss
Radiating sun fingers.
Heart glows from the palm

Others are a caption that make a philosophical statement prompted by the visual of the sunrise:

No horizon line
Divides us. We’re all colors
Reflecting ourselves
Some capture the emotional mood or energy of that day’s sunrise:

Synesthesia
Each color a nutrient.
I feast on sunrise
There are also inspirational haiku, sometimes based in Yogic or Buddhist philosophy.

Don't let anyone
Keep you from being your best
Self. You are all you.
In your deepest heart
You already know answers.
Find the right question

I’ve noticed that in my own evolution, the
haikus have evolved too. I continue to allow the haikus
and whatever message is meant for that day, to emerge
organically. I do not force the haiku.

Having now amassed quite a collection of photos and
haikus over the past year, I intend to compile them into
formats that people can enjoy outside of social media,
such as print and electronic books, calendars, and a med-
itation deck.

Meanwhile, I will continue to perform my daily sunrise
ritual, and learn and heal.

You are beautiful,
Life, with all your tough lessons,
Teaching me to shine

This project teaches me to trust. To show up without
expectation. To not try to predict a particular outcome.
To not attach to a plan.

I am surprised everyday by what comes to pass, what I
witness, people I meet. These are often life-path signifi-
cant moments that I would have otherwise missed.

Through this project, I have evolved in my healing jour-
ney and in my power, much like each individual sunrise
is a complete evolution from darkness to an emerging
of light, a navigation of density and opacity of clouds, to
finally the rising of pure light, the dawning of a new day,
to clarity.

Before I came to realize this was a healing journey, my
first major epiphany was that the only constant was
change, in all aspects of the sunrise and the shore. I
thought at the time, that was the big metaphor, the big
takeaway of the project.
But a year and a quarter into the project, I realized that my personal healing journey has been itself the “constant change” metaphor. In that way, I’ve discovered myself as the sunrise metaphor. Expansively, each one of us is a sunrise metaphor.

We are a sunrise
In process. Ever changing,
Giving light each day

The sunrise represents the journey we each go through into becoming our brightest self. We rise from root to crown: from earth, through clouds of illusions, to enlightenment, from body back into our true selves as spirit.
The sun rises up
Like energy through chakras:
Red root to white crown
I continue practicing staying present and becoming my best self.

Recently, unbeknownst to me, another photographer took this photo of me photographing the sunrise:

I watch colors dance,
See them merge and melt and mesh.
I become their glow