WRITING AFFECT:
AESTHETIC SPACE, CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE & THE SELF

By Sarah Elizabeth Truman

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for the degree of Master of Arts

Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore writers and their writing practices as embodied, contingent, and affected by aesthetic environments and contemplative practices. I discuss contemplative practices as techniques for recognizing the co-dependent origination of the self/world, and as tools for disrupting the tri-furcation of body, mind and word. I explore the written word's role in the continuous production of new meaning, and as part of the continuous production of new “selves” for writers, and readers. I use narrative auto-ethnography to situate myself as a researcher, sensory ethnography and interviews to profile four practicing writers, and arts-informed Research-creation to document my own writing and contemplative practices. I also consider whether a post-pedagogy view of educational research might produce/allow space for more creative approaches to educational theorizing.
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Marjorie Brush, Aoife McGrandles and I lingered by our lockers. Summer spilled through the windows and wafted down the hall. Not only was it the last day of the school year, it was our last day ever in that school. Maybe that's why we were reluctant to leave.

Four teachers gathered at the end of the corridor. Mr. Pepper and Mr. Baker – my two basketball coaches – and Mr. Lao and Mr. Cull. They laughed and snickered. Mr. Baker held a piece of paper, a note.

“Whose initials are those?” said Mr. Baker.

“I’m not sure,” said Mr. Pepper.

“You should frame it and put it on your wall, Bob!” Mr. Baker laughed, Mr. Lao laughed, and Mr. Pepper laughed. Mr. Baker handed the note to Mr. Cull.

We ambled toward the teachers.

“What’s so funny, Mr. Pepper?” Aoife McGrandles asked.

“Tell us the joke,” I said.

“Do you know anyone with the initials ST?” asked Mr. Pepper. Aoife McGrandles twisted her lips, narrowed her gaze and rubbed her chin.

“ST?” said Aoife McGrandles.

“She’s ST – Sarah Truman!” said Marjorie Brush. She pointed to me.

“Yeah, those are my initials!” I said.

Mr. Cull handed me the note. He looked away. It was a stupid note I'd written months ago to Lesley Scherer who had lost it in her locker until that afternoon.

It read:

Dear Poopums;

Meet me in the upstairs washroom at 1:45. I'll escape from “Mr. Dull’s” art class. I hate art, it is quite the royal bore.

ST

“Now that’s a work of art!” Mr. Baker laughed.
“Mr. Dull. Quite the royal bore,” Mr. Pepper said with a British accent.

Mr. Cull laughed and looked away.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t think art is a bore. I didn’t mean it. And you’re not dull.”

Mr. Cull looked at the ceiling. He laughed and faded into his classroom.

We left middle school and never returned.

Two months later I entered the portable of my grade 9 English class. Laminated on the wall was a quotation from Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám:

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
       Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit,
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
       Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

I memorized the quatrain that morning.
Chapter 1
Overview

In this thesis I explore writers and their writing practices as embodied, contingent, and affected by aesthetic environments. I approach composition theory from a postmodern and Buddhist perspective and view the individual “writer” as a contingent assemblage of body/mind/speech.

In Chapter 2, I use the Literature Review to ground the study in discussions on composition theories, cognitive science, and contemplative practices. I draw from cognitive theory’s “embodiment” hypothesis that suggests that our corporal encounters with the environment are the seat of all meaning and creativity, and the transactional view of mind that sees cognition as a process of organism/environment interactions or transactions (Johnson, 2007 p. 147; Varela, Thompson & Roach, 1991).

I discuss contemplative practices as techniques for recognizing the co-dependent origination of the self/world, and as tools for disrupting the trifurcation of body, mind and word. Co-dependent origination is the Mahayana Buddhist explanation of the “occurrence of events” that make up the world as perceived by the “self” who is also a contingent, co-dependent “occurrence” (Kalupahana, 1986, p. 343). I also discuss how “…mindfulness and meditation can loosen…ideological formations that structure the lived experience of oppression,” and become tools for transformation and conscientization (Orr, 2002, p. 481; Freire, 1970).

I take a postmodern view of writing theory and draw from philosophers and theorists who explore writing as in-flux, embodied and contingent. I ponder the written word’s role in the continuous production of new meaning, and as part of the continuous production of new “selves” for writers, and readers.

In addition, I draw from theories of human geography to explore space and place as contingent, in flux, “the product of interrelations,” and “always under construction” (Massey, 2008, p. 9). Similarly, I use affect theory to describe how space is “produced” both textually and bodily, in conjunction with other bodies, objects, social conventions and relations that are “…always in excess of a transpersonal capacity” (Thrift, 2004, as cited in Timon & Steyaert, 2011, p. 52). I hope to show that writers/students do not just inhabit space: we create, or perform, space. Likewise, text does not only inhabit space, it also creates space.

Guiding Research Questions

What is the relationship between aesthetic/sensory environments and writing practice?

In what ways do contemplative practices and writing affect a person’s sense of “self”? 

How might my research with professional writers inform writing practices in schools, or in the public sphere?

How does the drive for pedagogical application influence my approach to theory and data?

And how can my findings further arts-based educational inquiry and the emerging field of Research-creation?

Methodologies Overview

I use several methodological threads to approach the research questions.

In Chapter 3, I use Clandinin and Connelly’s Personal Experience Methods and elements from William Pinar’s currere to present stories from my past in order to have a “complicated” narrative conversation with myself and situate my research interests (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Pinar, 1975).

In Chapter 4, I use sensory ethnography and participant interviews to document several other writers’ aesthetic spaces, contemplative practices, and writing practices (Pink, 2009). Barbara Tomlinson (2005) argues against the limited representation of writing that “privileges the moment of transcription, as if it were a synecdoche of writing” (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 52). During the interviews, I ask questions that draw on the writer’s broader social context to explore myriad factors that affect a writer’s practice and sense of self.

I approach participant research from a postmodern perspective (Fusco, 2008). A modernist approach might strive for homogeneity and non-contradictory presentation of data; from a postmodern perspective I allow my participants, myself, our varied, and sometimes contradictory views to stand in the body of the thesis.

In Chapter 5, I use A/r/tography and Research-creation to investigate my own writing practice and examine how I compose my “self” through writing. Chapter 5 occupies the bottom third
of each page throughout the thesis; it is both an investigation of my own writing practice and a response to the other chapters in the study.

Stephanie Springgay, Rita Irwin, and Sylvia Kind describe a/r/tography as a method of “inquiring in the world through a process of art making and writing…” (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005, p. 899). In a/r/tography the art making is the research. In Research-creation, the art (writing), the artist (I), the researcher (I) and the people reading this dissertation (you) are all part of a continuous production of meaning, and new “selves.”

Carl Leggo describes autobiographical writing as a means for “…seeking diverse possibilities of identity” and recognizing how identity is “composed in the intersections of multiple processes of identity shaping and reshaping” (Leggo, 2008, pp. 17-18). I discuss how I draw on the Ancient Greek practice of Hypomnemata – or journaling – and transform, through writing, “the things seen or heard ‘into tissue and blood’” (Foucault, 1997, p. 213). My creative writing stands as an incomplete investigation of my “self” and a foundation of meaning underlying (literally/graphically) and affecting the other studies in the thesis.

At the beginning of each study, I explore the various methodologies in greater detail.

In Chapter 6, I consider whether a post-pedagogy view of educational research might produce/allow space for more creative approaches to educational theorizing.

I also consider how this thesis contributes to arts-based research, non-representational approaches to research and the emerging field of Research-creation.

Dissemination

Donal O’Donoghue asks:

In what ways might the representation of research findings in new and different ways productively serve to enlarge, advance and deepen…consciousness? (O’Donoghue, 2010, p. 409).

In this thesis, through intertextuality and interimagery, I explore O’Donoghue’s question by experimenting with new ways of creating space and meaning. Along with words, I use photographic images, silk-screened images and graphic layout to investigate writing, space and the self. Within this triple-imaging process the art, layout and words are not “…separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings” (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005, p. 899).

Drawing from my interest in textual and aesthetic space, I explore the use of different typefaces and spacing throughout the thesis. I present the creative non-fiction in a different typeface, along the bottom of each page as an underlying influence. I happily upset the linearity of reading with this graphic structure.

There is no event, no phenomenon, word or thought which does not have multiple sense...A thing has as many senses as there are forces capable of taking possession of it (Deleuze, 1993, as cited in Manning, 2008, p. 12).

In the spirit of post-pedagogy, and Research-creation, I resist suggesting any pedagogical applications for my research.
Chapter 2
Literature Review
A note on “Composition” Theory

Although this thesis is about writing, it is not about composition theory in the usual sense. When asked if I think it is possible to codify, standardize, and construct a writing framework, or theory of writing that is repeatable, and works for all students/writers, I usually say “No”. This stance may earn me the title of a “post-process/composition theorist” (Dobrin, 2011).

To be clear, I think that many process-based approaches to composition – free writing, mapping, peer editing, process over product, and heuristics – are useful in learning to write (Elbow, 1971; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Murray, 2003). I also think that traditional methods of rhetoric, textual analysis, and invention, are useful in learning to write. Students can and should learn syntax, vocabulary, parallelism, literary devices and different writing styles. Beyond these skills I don’t know if it is possible to teach someone how to write effectively any more than someone can be taught to live effectively. I do know that writing affects “me.” Similar to theorist Sharon Crowley (1998), I view process-based approaches to composition and traditional approaches to composition as extensions of the same pedagogical process in that they:

“…maintain the modernist composing subject [student or writer]…who is sufficiently discrete from the composing context to stand apart from it…this subject is able to inspect the contents of the mind and report them to a reader without distortion, using language that fully represents a well-formed composing intention” (Crowley, 1998, p. 213).

With this thesis, rather than reinforcing the “modernist” view of a composing subject, I attempt to view writers as contingent and in flux before they write, while they write, and after they write. I am also not trying to fix a new composition theory (I use “fix” in the sense of holding fast). Instead, I explore the act of writing as in flux, occurring in “places” that are also in flux, assembling and affecting the writer who is also in flux. So in that way, this study is about “composition,” how the “composition” of space, embodiment and language interact to create meaning.

The ‘Who’ and ‘Where’ of Writing

To discuss how the aesthetic environment, contemplative practices and writing affect writers, I will first explain how I perceive people (writers) as contingent, in process and embodied, and the environment as a contingent occurrence. I draw from discussions of cognitive science to illustrate embodied cognition and the notion of the self as in process or flux. I also draw from Buddhism to present a view of embodied cognition and the notion of sunyata – emptiness or co-dependent origination. Co-dependent origination is the Mahayana Buddhist explanation of the “occurrence of events,” that make up the world as perceived by the “self” who is also a contingent, co-dependent “occurrence” (Kalupahana, 1986, p. 343).

Chapter 5
Arts Based Research Creation

Anne Kolodny (2005) states, “…the writer is never writing about what truly happened; no matter how hard writers try to capture what they understand as reality, in a sense, they are writing about the process of writing” (Kolodny 2005, p. 9, italics mine). We are also writing about the process of “self.”

Carl Leggo describes autobiographical writing as a means for “…seeking diverse possibilities of identity,” and says “…we need to write autobiographically in creative and courageous ways that acknowledge how each of us is composed in the intersections of multiple processes of identity shaping and reshaping” (Leggo, 2008, pp. 17-18).

When I write creative non-fiction I don’t see the activity as developing a fixed “self” in the modernist sense. Similar to Leggo, through writing autobiographically in the form of creative non-fiction, I explore my various “selves.”

As Stephanie Springgay states in Body Knowledge and Curriculum,

…A/r/t/ographical research as living inquiry constructs the very materiality it attempts to represent. In other words, engaging in a/r/tographical research constructs the very “thing” one is attempting to make sense of. (Springgay, 2008, p. 37-38).
Embodied Cognition and The Contingent ‘Self’

In his book *The Meaning of the Body* (2007), philosopher Mark Johnson investigates aesthetics as rooted in visceral, embodied experience. Johnson presents an “embodiment” hypothesis that denies the body/mind dualism and asserts, “…every aspect of human being is grounded in specific forms of bodily engagement with an environment” (Johnson, 2007, p. 1). This embodied view “situates meaning within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment” (Johnson, 2007, p. 10).

Johnson’s theory of embodiment suggests that meaning, “…arises from and remains connected to, pre-existing patterns, qualities and feelings;” thus our corporal encounters with the environment are the seat of all meaning and creativity (Johnson, 2007, p. 13). Johnson holds a transactional view of mind and sees cognition as a process of organism/environment interactions or transactions, “Cognition does not take place only within the brain and body of a single individual but is instead partly constituted by social interactions, social relations, and cultural artifacts and practices” (Johnson, 2007, p. 147).

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty stated that the body is not “…a collection of adjacent organs but a synergetic system, the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 234). Modern cognitive scientists, such as Varela, Thompson and Roach, build on Merleau-Ponty’s double sense of embodiment as: “encompass[ing] both the body as a lived, experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms” (Varela, Thompson & Roach, 1991, p. xvi).

Varela, Thompson and Roach continue to explore the similarities between cognitive science and the Buddhist tradition, where a “person” is conceived of as a centred (egoless or selfless) cognitive being. Their book *The Embodied Mind*, draws on Mahayana Buddhism as taught by Nagarajuna by illustrating the importance of co-dependent origination or dependent arising and its relevance to modern cognitive scientific thought and understanding of embodiment (Varela, Thompson & Roach, 1991).

The notion of dependent arising describes the understanding that the aggregates that make up the world/self/others arise in relation, or co-dependently.

- Whatever is dependently co-arisen,
- That is explained to be emptiness
- That, being a dependent designation,
- Is itself the middle way.

*(Garfield & Priest, 2003, p. 1)*

In Buddhism, dependent arising is equated with “emptiness” (*sunyata*) meaning empty of independent origination. If all things are ‘empty’ of independent origination, and ‘co-dependently’ originated, the understanding follows that there is no ‘essential self’ or ‘essential’ anything – existence

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In *a/r/tography*, the art-making is the research. In the lower third of each page of my thesis, I include several creative non-fiction stories I wrote in conjunction with my qigong practice, in my self-designed writing space. I present them, and allow them to stand within the broader theoretical framework of the study as an attempt “to make sense of” my own writing practice, and contemplative practices. Rather than writing about writing, I present my creative writing as data.

Lather and Smithies ask:

What structures our capacity to “name” ourselves, to “speak ourselves, to make a ‘self’ in the midst of the collision of shifting identities and movement across different contexts? What inherited meanings do we draw on?...How do we come to know ourselves? (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 124).

I developed the stories from episodes from my life I recalled during my critical self-study (Chapter 3). Reading through them now, I laugh at the many “selves” I’ve been and become throughout my life and how my surroundings have influenced and affected me.

I recognize that meaning and understanding are, “complex, singular, and relational” – my own lived experience is not fixed but an expression of the “never yet known;” and that the meaning of an event is continually mitigated by a set of relations and will change in different circumstances (Springgay, 2008, p. 39).
and the experience of existence arise co-dependently. In this view, there is no essential “ground” to stand on – or even to “shift” – nor essential “self” to stand on it; experience occurs through the combination or assemblage of various aggregates (which are themselves ‘empty’ of independent origination). Affect theory has a similar approach to understanding the self as contingent and in flux. Theorists Timon Beyes and Chris Steyaert (2011) state:

Instead of returning to a phenomenological stance that sees the corporeal as a stable basis of human experience, affect instigates us not so much to look at representations and significations as to engage with the intensities and the forces of organizational life, an event across bodies from which sensible experience emerges (53).

Many western scholars also hint at this recognition. Steven Shaviro (2007) articulates Alfred Whitehead’s notion of “occasion” as “...the process by which anything becomes; while an “event” – applying to a nexus or a society – is an extensive set, or a temporal series, of such occasions” (Shaviro, 2007, p. 2). He goes on to say that “no occasion is the same as any other; each occasion introduces something new into the world” (3). Whitehead’s notion of “event” as an extensive set of “occasions” is reminiscent analogous to the Buddhist notion of karma – meaning action, or a pattern of actions that appear more “permanent” over time. It is through the pattern created by karma that the self emerges.

Michel Foucault (1997) cites the ancient Greek practice of keeping hypomnemata (a diary or personal journal) as a kind of methodology for creating the “self.” Hypomnemata were not private or “confessional” writings like a modern version of a diary. Rather they were personal notes “to capture the already said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (Foucault, 1997, pp. 210-211).

Writing theorists Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (2006) draw on Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s work and acknowledge that although we may perceive the “self” as continuous and unchanging, it is always in process and influenced by culture, language and embodied feelings. Damasio (1999) presents a view of a “self” that is continually in process – and there are two levels of this self: a “core” self (which feels) and an “extended consciousness” self (which is self-reflexive and linguistically based) (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, pp. 18-19). For Hunt and Sampson, the view of the self in process provides a “basis for understanding our own reflexive self as it is engaged in the process of writing” (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, pp. 19). But even that “reflexive” self is not permanent.
I created a silk screen to describe my current understanding of how the “self” assembles. It’s the Chinese character “我” meaning “I”. I’ve always liked this character because of its complexity and apparent movement. It consists of the “hand” radical and the “spear” radical. I’m not sure about the etymological meaning of the word but I like it because it is far more complex than the linear “I” in Roman script. I illustrate the symbol with contingent lines comprising, penetrating and diverting it to show how I (and other things) are contingent events, occurring for a time and then assembling into something/where new.
If the “Self” is in Flux, is Language in Flux too? (“I” think so…)

Philosopher Donald Davidson states that linguistic communication is, “always incomplete” (Kent, 1993 p. 9). Richard Rorty describes Davidson’s philosophy of language as a manifestation of “…the willingness to drop the idea of ‘intrinsic nature,’ a willingness to face up to the contingency of the language that we use…[and] break with the notion that language is a medium…of either expression or representation” (Rorty, 1989, p. 9). This is similar to what Doreen Massey (2005) describes when she says that a representation (be it geographic or linguistic) is no longer a fixing in place, but is instead a “continuous production,” “…[n]ot representation but experimentation” (Massey 2005, p. 28).

I like the idea of viewing language, or writing, as “experimentation” rather than “representation” as if it is always in motion and without “intrinsic nature.” Unlike structuralist theorists, Davidson refutes the idea that “…there is a single repertoire of expressions — with their meanings and their semantic interpretation which everybody shares” (Kent, 1993, p. 10). This echoes what Deleuze said: “There is no event, no phenomenon, word or thought which does not have multiple sense…” Deleuze, 1983, p. 4) Davidson agrees that we share “linguistic lore” but he presses that meaning is indeterminate (Rorty, 1989, p. 11).

If meaning is indeterminate, and a representation is a “continuous production” how is it that we understand and are able to create in a given instance? Davidson posits the notion of “passing theory,” wherein linguistic ability is seen as the dexterity to “shift ground appropriately” or adjust and interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion (Davidson, 2006, pp. 260-261; Kent, 1994, p. 293; Dobrin, 1997, p. 75). While it seems self-evident that we have to adjust where we “stand” to understand each other, I still like the notion of a passing theory because it sounds like the theory is in constant flux and movement. I also like the notion of the necessity to shift ground in order to interpret a particular utterance, and in order to compose a particular utterance. I appreciate how the phrase shifting ground describes language/meaning as experienced viscerally: in motion ( shifting) and materially (ground).

Living abroad in China for three years offered me many opportunities to apply passing theory and shift ground. When I first arrived in Nanjing I overheard two locals saying “‘Nigga’” repeatedly. I thought they were horribly racist until I realized that the phrase “Na ge” (那个) meaning “that” and often pronounced “Ni’gga,” is used as a filler in spoken Mandarin. The gentlemen had paused to think mid-sentence, used the filler 那个 and I believed they were saying “Nigga”’. I didn’t shift ground well in that instance. The following year, I had the opportunity to explain this function of the Chinese language to my black British friend who wanted to punch a fruit vendor for calling him a “Nigga”.

It’s easy to see the necessity for a passing theory and shifting ground when using second or third languages, but I think the theory holds true within a “first” language, both spoken and written: often I encounter a phrase in English and have

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My Writing Practice Overview

I write a personal journal and I write letters. Both letter writing and journaling help me develop an embodied and present stance on where I “am.” Letter writing is useful in developing descriptive prose in that I usually describe my surroundings in greater detail in letters than I do when I keep a journal.

I view journaling and letter writing as similar to the ancient Greek practice hypomnemata. Foucault says that writers use hypomnemata, “to capture the already said; to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (Foucault, 1997, p. 210-211). I also write in conjunction with qigong and meditation. I don’t think these practices have had a causal affect on my writing, but they have a correlative affect on my writing. I’ve practiced meditation and qigong for more than a decade and the practices have certainly affected how I perceive myself, and the world.

I usually drink a cup of tea when I write.
(Always Incomplete)
Stories I’m working on as Research Creation

The Jars

The gingerbread style house emerged from the alley of trees. It towered, red bricked, with ornate wooden carvings along the eaves. In the attic, beneath the steep peaked roof, a little window watched down across Caledon’s rolling hills.

“We won’t stay long,” my mother announced. “Just for a cup of coffee and a chat. So you can play in the yard, or come inside and be friendly, and then we’ll go to Dairy Queen.”

I felt bored before we reached the front door.

The front hallway was dark until my eyes adjusted. Wooden floors squeaked beneath our feet. My parents clattered down the tall hall toward the bright kitchen. Voices loud and animated filled the space. I smelled coffee.

Antique teddy bears, dolls and other old fashioned toys filled the living room. I wanted to play with them, but I knew they were for show. The blond doll’s eyes seemed to follow me as I walked.

“Sarah, come here,” my dad called.

I walked the length of the house into the kitchen. “You
remember Margaret – don’t you? Remember she and her husband came to visit last year?”

“I remember. Hi,” I said.

“Hi Sarah. What do you think of the house? It was our dream home. And now it looks like I’m going to sell.” She smiled sadly to my parents.

“It’s old,” I said.

“Yes, it’s from the 1880s.”

“Do you want to see something really interesting? In the basement is a collection of jars – over 200 antique jars. The previous owners collected them. Tell me which ones you like best.” Margaret pointed to the basement.

“Don’t break anything,” my father said.

The ancient stairs leaned forward like they were sliding me down. The basement smelled dank and dusty. The floor felt crumbly beneath my feet. I saw two rooms. Daylight broke through the window in one room. I gravitated to the light.

Sun glistened on the jars. Most of them sparkled transparent – some with patterns and fruit and vegetable designs. A row of green jars, and a row of blue jars and a row of yellow jars lined the shelves. A single pink jar caught my eye. I moved toward it.
Composition scholar Sidney Dobrin (2011) outlines how composition studies have recently begun to embrace notions of spatiality and writing. Unfortunately, says Dobrin, these discussions of space mainly through the use of “spatial metaphors” usually “geographic or cartographic – as a means of talking about relationships between subjects [students] and locations…” (Dobrin, 2011, p. 33). Dobrin cites Derrida and admits that although nothing is produced “without metaphor” he still hopes to “disrupt composition studies’ reliance on spatial metaphors [like the relationship between students and the ‘spaces’ they inhabit] in favour of more rigorous development of spatial theories of writing” (Dobrin, 2011, p. 35).

Dobrin states:

> Writing requires space. Writing requires material space onto/into which writing is inscribed, and it requires cultural, historical, political space to occupy. In both of these instances, writing sets up occupancy within or saturates a particular space…Content is of course, spatial; it is that which fills writing, which occupies writing, which empowers writing to occupy (Dobrin, 2011, p. 56).

Dobrin then explains that “content is limited by its container” (p. 56). Dobrin’s statement makes sense in that the context or “container” writing occurs within will “limit” the writing, and that content is spatial. But it seems to me, that content is something that can spring free of, or modify its “container.” Writing, or the word, has the capacity to affect space, even produce space. Henri Lefebvre (1991) discusses the seemingly strange notion of producing space: “To speak of ‘producing space’ sounds bizarre, so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 15). Michel Foucault says we do not “live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live in a set of relations” (Foucault, 1986, p. 23). Both theorists seem to say that we don’t inhabit space, we create, or perform space; and likewise, text doesn’t only inhabit space, it creates space. Both textual and bodily, is produced in conjunction with other bodies, animate and inanimate objects, social conventions and relations that are, as affect theorists say, “…always in excess of a transpersonal capacity” (Timon & Steyaert, 2011, p. 52).

Geographer Edward S. Casey (1998) illustrates how Derrida relates writing to spatial configuring:

> I have the feeling that when I…write, when I build certain texts, the law for me, or the rule, has to do with the spacing of the text. What interests me is not really the content but some distribution of the space, the way that I write is shaped, spatially shaped (Derrida, as cited in Casey, 1998, p. 310).

According to Casey, Derrida brings both writing and architecture together when he states that architecture is “a writing of space, a mode of spacing which makes a place for the event” (Casey, 1998, p. 312). I think Derrida’s notion can work in reverse: writing is an architecture of space, a mode of spacing which makes a place for the event.
The terms architecture and writing are both based in the root word “text” – from the Latin texere meaning “to weave” (Ingold, 2007, p. 68). While early forms of writing were more viscerally based, similar to “weaving” (not just figurative references to weaving a narrative,) in recent decades it has developed into a more virtual activity with the use of computers and word-processors. But the experience, or act of writing is still physical and creates space for the event.

**Composition and Embodiment**

Modern cognitive science tells us that “the mind is inherently embodied:” everything from accessing memories, to comprehending streams of sounds or written letters, to interpreting an interlocutor’s body language occur as body/cognitive processes, often beneath conscious awareness and control (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Cognitive science also tells us that reason is not disembodied but results from the:

…nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience…[and] what universal aspects of reason [and conceptual systems and language] there are arise from the commonalities of our bodies and brains and the environments we inhabit (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 4-5).

In recent years, composition theorists have begun to discuss the importance of embodiment and aesthetic environments in writing praxis. Composition theorist Raul Sanchez (2012) revisits how both modernist and postmodernist composition theories fail to “confront the question of embodiment” (Sanchez, 2012, p. 237). Theorist Kristie S. Fleckenstein (1999) states that it is only “through bodies that floating signifiers and signification are ever briefly anchored” (Fleckenstein, 1999, p. 284). She warns, “reducing materiality to signifiers limits our ability to formulate, recognize, and challenge cultural truths and material conditions” (Fleckenstein, 1999, p. 284). Fleckenstein argues it is possible to reclaim corporeality in writing without sacrificing poststructuralist insights through developing a “somatic mind: a permeable materiality in which mind and body resolve into a single entity which is (re)formed by the constantly shifting boundaries of discursive and corporeal intertextualities” (Fleckenstein, 1999, p. 286). Fleckenstein outlines the importance of contextual spatio-temporal place and states that the “materiality of the somatic mind is tangible location plus being…an organism in this place (body, clothing, cultural scene, geographical point is not the same organism in that place)” (Fleckenstein, 1999, p. 286). This is similar to the importance Howes places on “emplacement,” meaning “…the sensuous relationship of body-mind-environment” (Howes 2005, as cited in Pink, 2009, p. 24).

Sharon Crowley outlines that composition studies’ modernist leaning allows the field to maintain the notion of, “a sovereign, controlling disembodied and individual voice that deploys language in order to effect some predetermined change in an audience,” while at the same time, composition studies’ postmodern leanings purport that “individuals are neither devoid of embodiment nor free of the linguistic/cultural contexts in which they circulate” (Crowley, 2002, p. 177, as cited in Sanchez, 2012:). Sanchez highlights Crowley’s observation that neither post-modern nor modern perspectives of composition...
studies “confront the question of embodiment.” (Sanchez, 2012). Bruno Latour goes as far as comparing the opposite of being a body as being “dead:”

…there is no life apart from the body…[then] to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning ‘effectuated,’ moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans. If you are not engaged in this learning you become insensitive, dumb, you drop dead (Latour, cited in Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 11).

Relating writing to the body Michel Foucault (1997) discusses how hypomnemata (wherein through journaling we transform, “the things seen or heard ‘into tissue and blood’”) is the practice of creating the self through “…reading and assimilative writing [where] one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read” (Foucault, 1997, p. 213, 214).

L. Katherine Hayles (1999) critiques postmodernism’s – specifically Foucault’s – view that, “the body is constituted through discursive formations” (Hayles, 1999, p. 194). Hayles differentiates her notion of body, which is often represented as a normative male body, relative to a certain “criteria,” from embodiment. In Hayles view embodiment is “performed” and “enacted” and “tied to the circumstances of the occasion” (198). Hayles draws from Elizabeth Grosz’s statement that bodies “be represented or understood not as entities in themselves or on a linear continuum…but as a field, a two-dimensional continuum in which race (and possibly even class, caste, or religion) form body specifications” (Grosz, 240, as cited in Hayles, 1999, p. 196). Hayles describes embodiment as:

“contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment…embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference…embodiment is other and elsewhere, at once excessive and deficient in its infinite variations, particularities, and abnormalities (Hayles 1999, p. 196).

Sanchez cites Hayles’ notion of “specific instantiation,” which brings a temporal aspect into her theory of embodiment wherein the body emerges “in discourse” and that “instantiation” occurs, according to Sanchez, “in the moment of inscription, the act of writing” (Sanchez, 2012, p. 241).

Is Sanchez saying that we write ourselves into being? Or is he saying that the act of writing becomes possible at the same juncture or “instant” of embodiment? If the latter, his understanding of the materialization or occurrence of the self is similar to Tantric philosophers. Tibetan Tantric philosophy outlines the Three Vajras – the triple gradation of Body/Mind/Speech – as an ensemble of constituent parts that make up an individual (Guenther, 1986, p. 9). Many people believe the triadic notion of Body/Mind/Speech to be “Body/Mind/Spirit” and consequently miss the linguistic element Tantra offers. The Indian Tantra yoga tradition also places importance on speech and goes as far as saying that mantra (a word usually said to invoke or represent a deity) does not just represent the deity or devata, “A mantra is the Devata” (Woodroffe, 1998, p. 219).

Eloise

I ate sushi for the first time in Berkeley California. I was 19, had just hitchhiked from Lake Louise Alberta, and had unwittingly injected LSD.

“Just try a piece,” Eloise said. The chopsticks, wooden spindles, clutched the squiggling sushi. Infinite eyes attended.

“It’s moving. It’s alive,” I said.

“It’s vegetarian, it never moved!” Eloise said. “You shouldn’t take drinks from strangers.”

“It was orange juice. Why would I suspect LSD in orange juice?” I asked.

“We’re in Berkeley, that’s what people do here,” Eloise said.

The colours of the cosmos shone on the sushi. It breathed magnificent, spiraled ocean of emptiness.

“What’s that sound?” I asked.

“You’re just tripping. There’s no sound,” she said.

I heard the crystals of eternity grinding, grinding down into myriad things.

“Are you going to try it or not?” Eloise asked.

I sipped the sake. The altar of mouth communed and the cathedral of nostril perfumed and the catacomb of gut
Taking the Tantric view of embodiment, I like to consider my “self” as the ensemble of body, mind, and spoken word. This ensemble forms a “contingent structure” I call “me” that interacts with and affects other bodies and other ensembles and other texts. The “ensemble” that I call “me” is interconnected, interpenetrating, with the environment that surrounds “me.”

As evidenced by the note I described in the Introduction, the written word is “nomadic,” “always incomplete,” and a “continuous production,” affecting and creating selves both during and after inscription. I scribbled that flippant note to my friend while “bored” in art class and didn’t think of it again until the teachers handed it back to me months later. It carried a different meaning in that new context. What I had written wasn’t even “true,” I actually liked art. The note made some teachers laugh, and the insulted teacher visibly upset. The note affects me anew as an adult educator/researcher/writer as I re-read it in this thesis.

Contemplative Practices, Embodiment and Writing in Schools

In recent years, studies in the United States have shown that Eastern contemplative and meditation practices can be used to “increase concentration, learning…and catalyze transformative learning” (Hart, 2004). There is also a growing body of evidence on the efficacy of contemplation for promoting health and wellbeing, developing writing skills and cultivating body/mind awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Ozawa-de-Silva & Dodson-Lavelle, 2011; Simmer-Brown & Grace, 2011). I support the movement to bring non-religious, contemplative practices like meditation and qigong into schools as tools for transformative citizenship.

I first learned qigong in China, and have practiced it for more than ten years. Kenneth Cohen outlines qigong as:

A holistic system of self-healing exercise and meditation, an ancient, evolving practice that includes healing posture, movement, self massage, breathing techniques, and meditation (Cohen, 1997, p. 4).

Roxana Ng (2012) articulates how qigong can be used to “disrup[t] the bifurcation of the body and mind in pedagogical encounters” (Ng, 2012, p. 345). Ng writes from a post-colonial perspective and recognizes the inherent legacy of colonialism, patriarchy and hierarchies in education in Canada that have subordinated myriad social, linguistic and ethnic groups. Ng states that hierarchical control does not only manifest “…in the form of intellectual encounters. Most intellectual encounters entail a confrontation of bodies…Power plays are both enacted and absorbed by people physically…” (Ng, 2012, p. 346). According to Ng, decolonization requires two critical acts: “deep reflection and some form of embodied mindfulness practice” like qigong (Ng, 2012, p. 360). Ng illustrates how qigong is a useful tool for “cultivating critical inquiry” in that it is at once “embodied and reflexive” (Ng, 2012, p. 350). Reflexivity helps practitioners to recognize where in their lives hegemony and common sense are unquestioned. She argues that living in an unquestioning state we are often victimized by warmed. My hand would soon pass through the cup – fluid. The Kirin painted on the cup in ink blue winked. I see you, it said. I know you. The mythical beast that lives on wind knew me.

“I am a cathedral of consciousness. The Kirin knows me,” I said.

Eloise leaned across the table and took my hand. “Try the sushi – you’ll like it!”

I was high. I had never tried sushi, but most importantly on that hazy evening, Eloise was speaking to me. She’d had ignored me for the previous three days. Two days of hitchhiking south, and one day in People’s Park and she hadn’t spoken a word to me except to tell me I was stupid.

Eloise was four years older than I. We met at a lodge in the Rocky Mountains. She had recently graduated from Queens’ University and had moved to Alberta to work. I had finished my first year at University of Toronto and went to Alberta to work for the summer.

Every night after my shift in the café at Moraine Lake Lodge, we’d paddle a yellow canoe onto the aqua marine glacier lake, smoke and watch the sun set behind jagged peaks. On weekends we’d hike into the mountains and camp among larch trees and crystal creeks. We saw a grizzly bear one evening as we switch-backed into Paradise Valley.
a dominant class, “change is only possible if we can develop the capacity to examine our patterns of behaviour objectively, without attachment” (Ng, 2012, p. 352).

Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted the notion that there is a split between body and mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, and not the body (hooks 1994, pp. 191-192).

Building on bell hooks’ and Ng’s critique of Cartesian dualism, my vision for transformation in teaching and learning begins with the understanding that cognitive functions, feelings, mind and language are embodied processes. This embodied understanding does not require a transcendent spirituality, or disembodied reason, or the notion that knowledge is “absolute” and bestowed transmission-style in schools. Similar to pragmatist philosophers, I see the body as “the very condition of meaning making and creativity” (Johnson, 2007, p. 15).

I appreciate the Tantric philosophical view that speaks of “…the body as consciousness and consciousness as bodily activity” (Fields, 2004, p. 47). I see contemplative practices as embodied and emplaced tools for transformation and conscientization (Freire, 1970). Contemplative practices have offered me the opportunity to become aware of my humanity, my contingent social/economic/physical situations and an active participant in meaning making rather than a passive receptacle for banking style learning (Freire, 1970).

Contemplative practices also support Christine Sleeter’s (2005) notion of visionary pragmatism. Sleeter states:

Visionary pragmatists recognize what is possible to accomplish in a specific context, but…see beyond that context. Visionary pragmatists reach for what may seem unattainable, seeking ways to turn the impossible into the possible (Sleeter, 2005, p. 181-182).

Deborah Orr (2002) believes that the Japanese Zen master Dogen’s approach to mindfulness and meditation can loosen the “…ideological formations that structure the lived experience of oppression” (Orr, 2002, p. 481). According to Orr, Dogen understood the relationship between contemplative practice, critical insights and transformation. Similar to Orr, I see contemplation as inextricably linked to social justice: once I become aware of the social situation I inhabit and create, I am either a willing participant in perpetuating what is, or an active participant inciting positive change through perceiving the “limiting situation” and “transform[ing] it (Freire, 1970, p. 49).

To be clear, the mindfulness practices I describe are not techniques for disappearing into a netherworld. They are practices designed for recognizing that the mind is present and embodied in everyday experience. Varela, Thompson and Roach state “…mindfulness techniques are designed to lead the mind back from its theories and preoccupations, back from the abstract attitude, to the situation of one’s experience itself” (Varela, Thompson & Roach, 1991, p. 22).

I find qigong and meditation useful in cultivating inner space for

The sleeping quarters of the lodge we worked at were decrepit, musky and damp so we slept huddled in the same bed on cold nights. In August we decided to hitch-hike to California for a trip before I had to return to school in Toronto.

“Here, I’ll take a piece of sushi apart so you can see what’s in it. You have to eat something,” Eloise said. “Look. Avocado, rice, sesame seeds and nori, that’s all!”

“What’s nori?”

“Seaweed,” she said. Winnowing, winding seaweed swirled in my mind.

It took us more than a week to hitchhike from Lake Louise to Berkeley. We made it through the Rockies to Victoria to the ferry to Port Angles. We danced at a Pow Wow on Bainbridge Island. We hitched rides with families, hippies, librarians, and a hunchback.

We slept beneath the stars in the Oregon’s Sand Dunes. A meteor shower tumbled across the long vista. Eloise zipped our sleeping bags together into one.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” I asked.

“We both have boyfriends,” she said.

“I know. I was only kidding,” I said.

The stars burned.
creative endeavors and deconstructing space. I like to practice qigong in conjunction with my writing practice. Wuji (无极) is one of my favourite qigong postures. Practicing it has deepened my understanding of qigong and inner “space”. Wuji means “Supreme Emptiness” – and I feel that when I practice wuji, I embody emptiness. Wuji has helped me deepen my own understanding of “emptiness” – or codependent origination, and it has inspired me to look more closely at the importance of cultivating space for creativity.

According to the Chinese philosopher [Zhuang-zi], by relinquishing psychic turbulence through “mind-fasting” one can hear “the emptiness in which infinite possibilities are harboured” (Murphy 1992, p. 451).

As a long time student of Buddhist philosophy, I have come to understand the notion of cultivating emptiness – sunyata – as an integral aspect of my personal development. Tibetan Tantra’s Three Vajras (body/mind/speech) in unity are said to be an articulation of sunyata meaning void or openness to the notion of co-dependent origination (Guenther, 1986). For me, the practice of wuji has become an embodiment of the notion of emptiness because practicing the posture makes me feel open and expansive in my body/mind and at the same time I feel aware of my contingent, intra-connection with the environment.

There is a long tradition in China and Japan of cultivating contemplative space before embarking on a creative endeavor. Philosopher Hiroshi Ichikawa’s notion that integration of the body/mind is related to aesthetic appreciation illustrates the Eastern contemplative tradition’s correlation between contemplative practices and art:

...Japanese tend to see bodily practice as cultivation, seeking at its end not power, but the recognition of body-mind integration, the natural expression of which can be seen in activities such as Zen archery (Ozawa-De Silva, 1993, p. 36).

Many of Japan’s and China’s greatest poets were also contemplatives – for example Ikkyu, the Zen monk and wordsmith.

In Zen Buddhist painting, Zen masters often draw Enso – a circle representing the void. But the concept of Enso is also said to represent the moment when the body and mind are free to create – which can be cultivated through contemplative practice (Seo, 2007). The development of the concept of Enso is related to Chinese Taoist and Buddhist monks and nuns who cultivated spiritual awareness in conjunction with their artistic painting and poetry, and Japanese masters who practice archery and tea ceremonies along with painting (Seo, 2007).

Eastern philosophy recognizes a link between embodied awareness and ‘artistic’ ability. In Chinese literary theory there is a concept called wenqi (文气), coined by 1st Century literary theorist Cao Pi, to describe the “inborn talent of a writer as manifested in his writing” (Gu, 2009, p. 23). And in the two-thousand years since Cao Pi’s death, the concept has taken on myriad meanings from the aesthetic merit of a piece of writing, to the author’s inspiration, to literary momentum of the words (Gu, 2009).

The following morning I wandered ahead of Eloise towards the highway. She got lost on her way out of the sand dunes. Her face streamed with tears when she finally found me.

“Where were you? Where were you?” she asked. I offered her water. She flicked the bottle away. “You don’t understand the gravity of this situation,” Eloise said.

Eloise stopped speaking to me. We hitchhiked south in silence, speaking only to our rides, never to each other. We slept in the Red Woods in California. Their towering forms blocked out the night sky. We slept in a forest near People’s Park when we finally arrived in Berkeley.

I woke up early that first morning in Berkeley and decided to go to a shop and buy some juice. Eloise awoke and found my sleeping bag empty. Ed – the man who’d driven us across the Golden Gate Bridge, toured us around San Francisco and then over to Berkeley the previous day was also missing.

Eloise decided Ed must have kidnapped me and called the police. Ed returned with breakfast. The police arrived and handcuffed him.

Ed had criminal record, was on probation and hadn’t reported to his probation officer for two days so the police thought he was a suspect.

I returned a half an hour later to find Eloise missing; the bags gone the campsite empty. I wandered out of the
I don’t agree with the notion that wenqi is innate and unchanging. I view wenqi similarly to theorist Stephen Owen: “[Qi] is that by which all other elements which contribute to the formation of a poem—talent, learning, personality, the affections—are animated” (Owen, 1992, p. 67). I take Owen’s notion and expand it to include the author’s environment and myriad other processes expressed through the writing event. Everything that intersects in the moment the pen scratches the paper. And once the pigment bleeds onto the parchment, the ensuing affect that the sharp black lines in the form of letters or ideograms have on the eyes, nose, ears and emotions of s/he who moves it.

Wenqi is the intersection of various processes culminating in the printed word. The wenqi doesn’t stop there. Words don’t stop. Words continue to create meaning – to readers, to writers, to typographers – wenqi is the process. The writer, the reader the pen, the ink, the paper are all part of the process.

What I call “I” is a point at the intersection of infinite variables. Qi supports this entanglement – it drives the process. In this case, I have chosen to focus on the act of writing, and the written word to exemplify the point. But the process is true for any event. What we write is part of the process of becoming, and affects the writer’s body/mind and everyone else who encounters the writing.

Embodied Contemplation as Space Creation

I practice qigong daily and it helps me cultivate a sense of openness to others and to my own creativity. Through the practice of qigong, I not only create “space” in myself for creativity, but when preformed in a group, qigong can create a space among various people which is open, curious and supportive. Studies have shown that other contemplative practices, such as forms of Yoga and meditation can help foster an open and supportive group environment or classroom space for both teachers and students (Miller, 2007, pp. 106-115).

I see mindfulness as the human capacity to encounter our external environment, be it an interaction with an individual or a group or an encounter with social institutions with full alertness, awareness, clarity, and intention (Ng, 2009, unpaged).

Qi not only happens in space (as in a certain time and place when I practice it), but also creates space in my body and in my surroundings. In the neoliberal, standards driven curriculum do classrooms offer the contemplative space for listening, questioning and developing creativity? Ellsworth (2005) states, that affective pedagogy “...involves us in experiences of the corporeality of the body’s time and space. Bodies have affective somatic responses as they inhabit a pedagogy’s time and space” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 4). I see contemplative practices as useful tools in recognizing the self in situ and in

forest into a swarm of police cars, Ed in cuffs and Eloise in tears.

“You’re stupid,” Eloise said.

I spent the day playing basketball in People’s Park. I ate lunch with the Hare Krishnas. After lunch some guy gave me a glass of orange juice laced with LSD.

Eloise found me playing basketball and insisted I join her for dinner. I had hoped she would find me.

“Maybe I’ll just order some noodles,” I said.

“No. You’ll try sushi,” she said. My hands wiggled and fidgeted. The sushi breathed. Effervescent sapphires of punctured space shattered the silence and rested on my eyelids blue.

“You’re a loon,” Eloise said.

The following winter, Eloise and I worked at a ski resort in Alberta. We lived in Sunshine Village on the side of a mountain, in a room buried beneath the ski run. Two ferrets made a home in the snow well outside of our window. At night, the light would spill from our room and illumine the ferret’s snow cave. They watched us and we watched them. Eloise and I drank “Tom Collins” every evening and skied every day. I mailed my essays to Toronto and somehow finished my second year of university.
flux, affected and affecting the space it inhabits and creates.

“Forms stimulate thoughts” (Steiner, 1999, p. 45). Rudolf Steiner understood the relationship between aesthetic environments and cognitive/embodied processes and designed his classrooms and schools to be both scholastically and “spiritually” functional, albeit, from a Eurocentric perspective.

Jack Miller (2000) discusses how attention to the physical environment of a school can turn the classroom into a “sanctuary” and help develop what he calls the school’s “soul,” through a thoughtful balance of “soft warm colours,” “artwork” and “space” (Miller, 2000, p. 110). Miller’s research into schools not only looks at the aesthetic “environment” but also how contemplative practices affect and contribute to student learning and creativity (Miller 2007, pp. 75-79).

What Miller and various other theorists have recognized is how the aesthetic and cultural assemblage of a place affects the people that encounter and help create the space:

…what is special about place…is precisely that thrown-togetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now…a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman (Massey, 2008, p. 140).

When considering the makeup and power differentials of a classroom assemblage, Elizabeth de Freitas says, “Even inanimate objects are seen as active mediators in a social material network” (de Freitas, 2012, p. 593). I take de Freitas’ statement to mean that constructed space is inherently political and that the physical objects – from religious ornaments to flags to lighting and layout of a room all influence the environment and how bodies behave within that environment.

Sara Ahmed (2010) says:

So we may walk into a room and ‘feel the atmosphere’ but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point. The pedagogic encounter is full of angles (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37).

The “angles” that mitigate each person’s experience are varied and complex. Embodied mindfulness practices can be used as tools for recognizing that such angles exist and can contribute to transformative learning within and without school environments.

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Eloise reassembled the roll of sushi, dipped it in the wasabi and tamari paste and popped it into her mouth.

“Have you considered the process involved in bringing that combination of ingredients into your mouth?” I asked.

“I don’t think half as much as you do in general. It’s a rule of mine,” Eloise said, her eyes like oceans green. I almost asked her why she had stopped speaking to me. But I worried that she might get mad again.

After Sunshine Village shut down for the season, Eloise and I hitchhiked to Lake Louise. We met a warden from Lake Louise’s ski hill and he let us stay in his chalet for a week. His deck overlooked Saddleback, Temple and other jagged mountains in Banff National Park. We listened to Joni Mitchell, Morrissey, and Brian Eno, smoked and drew pictures. One day we canoed from Lake Louise to Banff. We brought a case of beer, no life jackets and let the current pull us downstream.

Part way through the voyage, we discovered an elk’s skeleton caught on a rocky embankment. Eloise suggested we take its skull and tie it to the bow of our canoe. We finished our canoe trip as Vikings: drunk, irreverent, charging down stream in the aquamarine water.

We pulled over beneath Castle Mountain and waited for the warden to collect us. I gathered wildflowers and scattered them around the skull.
Chapter 3
Situating “Myself”
Narrative Auto-ethnography

“Who a researcher is, is central to what the researcher does” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13). In this section of the thesis I use auto-ethnographic study to situate my research interests. I ask myself: what qualifications do I bring to researching writing praxis, aesthetic space and contemplative practices? And what self-understanding can I gain through investigating my personal, professional and scholarly past?

I conduct this opening self-study through composing narrative “portraits” of important moments of my life (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). I collected data for the study through “Personal Experience Methods” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), and through free writing (Elbow, 1971), in conjunction with my qigong practice (a standing meditation practice). The study also includes journal reflections and narratives of significant events in my personal, professional and scholarly life (Beattie, 1995).

Maxine Greene articulates the importance to look “with a stranger’s vantage point on everyday reality” (Miller, 1998 p. 146). Influenced by this idea, as well as Greene’s reflections on literature and important episodes in her own life, I have attempted to take a ‘stranger’s’ vantage — or at least a self-reflexive stance while examining the data of my self-study (Greene, 1995). Butt, Townsend & Raymond suggest as three categories of experiences that influence teacher development: “…the teacher’s private life history, professional experiences, and the teacher’s own experiences as a student in school” (Butt, Townsend & Raymond, 1990, p. 255). I foray into each of these areas in the study and ask: “what is the contribution of my scholarly and professional work [to my] evolving biography?” and to wider social issues? (Pinar, 1975, p. 14).

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) state, “self-studies should promote insight and interpretation,” and with that in mind, I leave “blanks or gaps” in the text that will be “filled by active readers with personal meaning from their own experiences outside of the text” (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 16; Barone and Eisner, 1997, p. 75, italics in original). Tom Barone describes the “story format” as best suited to promoting “epiphanic moments” and that such a form also leaves room for a “degree of interpretive space.” (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 81-82; Barone, as cited in Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 577).

Coulter and Smith posit, “…the event that is transposed into a vignette is often representative of a large set of confirming data instances” (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 587). I don’t wholly agree with Coulter and Smith that vignettes are necessarily representative of a larger set of data conforming instances because I think that each instant is unique and should be taken as such. I am wary of the use of anecdotes as a tool for generalization in research, and I also recognize the power of editing in a narrative wherein the removal of data could be more revealing than what is presented.

Still, I recognized through data-collection and reflection that significant episodes of my life often occur to me in the form of ‘snap-shots’ or vignettes, and the episodes presented in the text are representative of a larger set of data conforming instances because I think that each instant is unique and should be taken as such. I am wary of the use of anecdotes as a tool for generalization in research, and I also recognize the power of editing in a narrative wherein the removal of data could be more revealing than what is presented.

I recognized through data-collection and reflection that significant episodes of my life often occur to me in the form of ‘snap-shots’ or vignettes, and the episodes presented in the

“Thank you spirit elk,” she said.
I collapsed onto the grass. Eloise lay beside me and held my hand. It burned. The warden arrived.

“I know you’re not hungry now. But you will be. I’m leaving the rest for you,” Eloise said. She sipped the sake.

I sipped the sake, my senses afire. Eloise watched. “We should probably go to San Francisco tomorrow and figure out how we’ll get to Toronto,” she said. School started in a week. I didn’t want to go back to Toronto. I didn’t want to go back to university. I wanted to wander longer.

***

The last time I saw Eloise she punched me on the dance floor at her MA graduation party. The DJ played Soft Cell’s ‘Tainted Love.’

Eloise followed me outside, dumped all my schoolbooks onto the road and trampled the flower I had brought her as a graduation present.

That was more than ten years ago.

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“Just eat the sushi,” Eloise said.

I gripped the chopsticks in my right hand.

“Be delicate. Delicate but firm,” Eloise said.
self-study have direct bearing on my research interests, so I decided to use the literary narrative form of vignettes to present my findings in the self-study.

Vignettes referred originally to the stylized vines (vin) that framed a page of photographs, and later to a style of photos, and later still, to writing. I use vignettes that highlight epiphanic moments from my life as literary devices to explore my past in a way that allows for verisimilitude in the reader (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 75, italics in original). Epiphanic moments that, “…disrupt the ordinary flow of life,” provide me with incite into my own scholarly and pedagogical direction, but will also provide entry points for other educators to reflect on their own lives and practices (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 17). Narelle Lemon (2006) states that the use of photographs and visual narrative in education studies is an “under researched area of narrative inquiry” (Lemon, 2006, p. 2). Because of my interest in photography, I have included some photographs in the self-study.

Who/Where Am/Was “I”?

My writing desk is a 1920’s portable measuring table that likely once belonged to a travelling cloth merchant. I bought the table in a dusty antique furniture warehouse in Winnipeg’s Exchange District. The table has tiny castors on each leg, and the legs fold upward for easy transportation. The table is maple, stained deep brown with ochre veins and eyes. It has black measuring numbers stencilled across the top that the travelling merchant would have used to measure cloth and fabric. On the table sit my globe, a cup of Puer tea, a mechanical pencil and this computer. I’m perched in front of the desk in an uncomfortable wooden chair (uncomfortable for my bum, but comfortable for my back because I don’t slouch in this chair). The table stands beneath a south-facing window of the attic of my red brick house. Out the window I see the peaks of several streets of turn of the century houses, and the Niagara Escarpment. At the base of the escarpment runs the Bruce Trail, and although I cannot see the trail, I know it is there and I know that I could walk its length from Niagara to Tobermory.

I worked as an editor and writer before studying education and I still remember all of my writing desks and the windows they sat beneath. If I have a choice I always place my desk below a window.

Children’s Spaces

Me at the Cottage, age 7

I scale the rock wall behind the cottage – I feel the damp moss and dirt against my fingertips. I reach the top – a small plateau of bedrock – black granite with ribbons of pink quartz running through it, covered in purple, green, and orange lichen. The rocks look like candy up here. I am alone, exploring. Mommy and Daddy won’t be mad as long as I, “stay on the property.” The mosses grow dry in late summer and smell burnt in the sun. A tiny stream runs along one side of the rock and small flowers grow in the damp. This is my special spot. If I straddle the stream I have one foot on and another foot “off the property.” If I wait long enough perhaps a band of wild travelers will come and take me with them on a voyage.

Deftly, I dipped the sushi in the tamari and wasabi mix and brought the chopsticks to my lips. The wasabi burned up my nose and down my spine.

Eloise laughed. I shuddered in a prism of taste. &

*Eloise is a pseudonym.
John O’Donohue the philosopher speaks about the relationship between landscape and the body: We never know how many places of nature meet within the human body. Landscape is not all external; some has crept inside the soul. Human presence is infused with landscape” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 96). I have sought out various lands through my life and lived abroad for more then five years; regardless of where I am I always pine for the Canadian Shield. I have had the opportunity to be in countless beautiful places and inspired buildings. I have also witnessed desperate poverty both abroad and in Canada and it has made me aware of how the environment shapes the spirit; but also how the spirit can shape the environment.

Mrs. Hu, Liu Ming & Guan Zi Zai

I eat lunch with my qigong teacher, Liu Ming and his mother, Mrs. Hu, twice a week. Mrs. Hu cooks delicious mapo dofu, qing jiao tu dou si, and ku gua and always stirs up a little lotus paste for dessert.

Mrs. Hu and Liu Ming live in the center of Nanjing, near Xinjiakou in a gray, dusty, government-issued building. On their front door hang a gilded fortune symbol, two pictures of Guan Yin Bodhisattva and some of Mrs. Hu’s calligraphy. Many people in China hang calligraphy on their walls as art – the same way westerners might hang photographs or paintings – but Mrs. Hu is an extreme calligraphist. Layers of her ink black renditions of Buddhist sutras line the walls of the apartment. She practices calligraphy daily on thin pieces of paper and then pins her writings onto the walls. When there’s a breeze in the flat, the walls flutter and flicker with brush strokes, and crackling paper sounds.

Both Mrs. Hu and Liu Ming studied traditional calligraphy for years and often speak of evoking qi or nature when writing. Liu Ming says that writing calligraphy is similar to practicing qi gong or tai chi and requires concentration, attention to breath and proper posture.

One day last month Mrs. Hu told Liu Ming to write me a large shufa – calligraphy as a present. Liu Ming unrolled the long, thin white paper onto the floor, placed stones on each corner to keep it flat and stood above the blank page and breathed deeply. Liu Ming dipped the thick
I've always loved marginalia. I didn't always know that term, but since I was a child I have enjoyed reading other peoples' scribbles in library books and in books I find in used bookstores. Since the episode with Mrs. White, I haven't written in a public book myself, but I don't mind when others do. As long as the text of the book is still legible, I view the notes as added meaning. And in the case of blackout poetry, I'll venture to say it's okay to deface the text of a book.

I can't remember my life before reading. As a child, my mother used to read entire books to me aloud – Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, The Secret Garden. Even at a young age, I recognized the power of literature to transport and transform me. In high school, I set out to discover my own ‘favourite author.’ Inspired by my favourite pop star, the British singer Morrissey, I chose Oscar Wilde. Throughout high school I read Wilde’s entire cannon and marveled at his witty prose. I then devoured Salinger, and later Steinbeck; they remain three of my favourite authors. Entering university it only made sense that I would study English literature and philosophy – and after graduating I planned to become a high school teacher.

My mother’s aneurysm was misdiagnosed as a migraine and she wasn’t operated on for 10 days. By all accounts she should have died. She didn’t. My mother’s short-term memory was damaged irreparably and she had to train her long-term memory to store recent events. She was confused for months. The experience, and her six-months in recovery rattled me.

Deborah Orr (2002), while discussing equality in classroom settings describes pedagogical innovation as the “willingness to deal with the life experiences of students outside the classroom” (Orr, 2002, p. 478). Although I would not normally brush in the black ink and wrote the calligraphy in several careful, yet fluid strokes. Someone watching might have thought calligraphy a strange art form in that Liu Ming created a picture in less than a minute. But that’s a superficial understanding, and the trick of Chinese calligraphy. Liu Ming had written those same characters thousands of times; that’s why it looked easy.

The calligraphy is four feet tall and reads, “Guan Zi Zai,” the first three characters of the Buddhist Heart Sutra.

After the ink dried, Mrs. Hu rolled the calligraphy into a tube and handed it to me. “This Guan Zi Zai calligraphy will help you understand more about Guan Yin. Most western Buddhists know Guan Yin, the compassionate bodhisattva’s name as Guan Shi Yin, which means Observe World Sound. What many of us don’t know is that she has another name: Guan Zi Zai. Guan Zi Zai means to Observe with Ease. Most Buddhist would probably agree that regardless of what you call her – Guan Yin, or Guan Zi Zai – she is not an actual person, so me trying to “find” her in China is a strange endeavour. But Mrs. Hu doesn’t find my affinity to Guan Yin or Guan Zi Zai strange and wanted to help me.

The Guan Zi Zai calligraphy haunted me at first. I woke
consider myself a marginalized student, during the year of my mother’s aneurysm, I couldn’t concentrate on my studies and felt like I had to truncate my emotions in order to get anything done. My second year of university remains a blur of hospitals and doctors and my mother’s hallucinations during recovery. The only thing I read for pleasure was Chinese philosophy. All the other subjects I was studying felt dead – even literature. I decided that school was pointless and nearly quit. My father forced me to finish my third year, “or work in the chicken factory sweeping giblets.” As a vegetarian, this was the worst threat he could present. I finished my degree, begrudgingly.

Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

~Diamond Sutra

I spent the following three years learning yogic and Buddhist meditation practices at a retreat centre. During those years my interest in Eastern philosophy deepened through regular practice and I met my teacher – Sri. For more than a decade he has been a steady guide and inspiration for me. After three years practicing yoga and meditation I decided to travel to China to investigate Guan Yin – the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Victor Turner (1969), the anthropologist reintroduced Van Gennep’s term “liminality” in his book *The Ritual Process*. Liminal space refers to the threshold between two worlds, or two phases of life and is used when discussing ritual processes:

The attributes of liminality of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous...are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

I think of myself as a dweller in liminal space when I travel and write. The writing process occurs in liminal space in between embodied understanding, and the written word. Over time, I’ve come to see writing as both a ritual act and a physical and mental space of being neither here nor there, but becoming. My own experiences are transformed through writing about them, and I am transformed by writing. Just as my up in the middle of the night with its dark wispy characters staring at me. My fingers wrote the phrase on every surface – steamy bathroom mirrors, taxi windows cold beer glasses. I read the *Heart Sutra* daily and contemplated why being at ease, or Guan Zi Zai might be significant to my life.

When I went to visit Mrs. Hu, she would ask me, “Guan Zi Zai shi shenme yise?” (What does Guan Zi Zai mean?) I’d laugh because I didn’t have any idea what the name Guan Zi Zai could mean other than representing Guan Yin bodhisattva. Mrs. Hu insisted that I study the calligraphy carefully. Liu Ming insisted that language was useless and practice was the only way of understanding what Guan Zi Zai meant.

Mrs. Hu and Liu Ming both agreed that I needed to practice qigong daily and remember to say Guan Zi Zai until I understood the true meaning of the name. They reminded me of my teacher Sri in that instant: he always says, ‘experience is best.’

One afternoon in winter Liu Ming and I practiced qigong in the garden. I stood between two tall gingko trees, faced the pale sun, bent my knees slightly and concentrated on my breath.

“Remember to say Guan Zi Zai,” Liu Ming called from his place beside the rocks.

“Guan Zi Zai,” I whispered to myself, remembering the calligraphy.

Yunnan Province, China

Outside the window, water gallops in the ancient canal. I can smell coal from the stove in the courtyard where the Naxi woman roasts sweet potatoes. I’ve been in Yunnan for a week, and China for two years. I still feel like a ghost most days – observing, keeping notes, watching Chinese culture, but not belonging. This threshold life is fulfilling, yet lonely. My main medium of communication is mailing letters back to Canada. I imagine my words travelling by post to the other side of the world – a tenuous link in this large landscape.

Illustration: Guan Shih Yin
moods are influenced by the spaces I inhabit and the spaces I inhabit are influenced by my moods.

My book – *Searching for Guan Yin* (2011) examines my two-year travels through China and the misadventures I experienced while researching Guan Yin. Guan Yin is a liminal being – a bodhisattva – who has achieved ‘Buddhahood,’ yet continually returns to help others. Guan Yin is considered male in some contexts and female in others adding another element to her liminal character. In the Heart Sutra, Guan Yin (or Guan Zi Zai) recognizes that the aggregates of the world are “empty” (空) of independent origination (or co-dependently originated). If all things are ‘empty’ of independent origination, and ‘co-dependently’ originated, the understanding follows that there is no ‘essential self’ or ‘essential’ anything – existence and the experience of existence arise co-dependently.

During my travels throughout China in search of Guan Yin I handwrote letters to my teacher – Sri and he responded. We modeled our missives on the Ming Dynasty tradition of *Qingshu* (情书). *Qingshu* translates as “love letters,” but in the Late Ming dynasty *Qingshu* referred to letters written between close friends that intermingled “literary genres” and “expressed one’s innermost feelings” (Lowry, 2003, p. 243). I used the archive of correspondence of 100+ handwritten letters as the basis for my book and dialogic style of letters as the narrative voice of my book.

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**Returning to Canada**

**The Unhappy Editor**

No one ever talks about reverse culture shock. I look out the window at the foreign vista of red brick buildings on Montreal’s plateau. We just put the finishing touches on the yoga magazine and sent it off to the printer – I should be excited, but instead I feel exhausted. I’m unconvinced that it is even possible to write about spiritual matters – and I grow tired of the subtle, or not-so-subtle proselytizing I hear in the yoga community – the claims of nonduality and oneness, always followed by the importance of following a particular path, or teacher to that ‘oneness’. Dogmatism creeps in everywhere.

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Guan Zi Zai. The phrase was self-generating. I began to understand. Guan Zi Zai. The thought blew like a breeze through my mind. My perception changed. The words revealed themselves: Guan Zi Zai is a verb, a directive, as well as a noun, or name. Guan Zi Zai is not just a being—it is a way of being. In saying the name I’d been telling myself to do this over and over again but not listening to the message. I’d been looking all over China for a noun and ignoring the verb. In that moment I realized that I didn’t need to research Guan Zi Zai, I needed to embody Guan Zi Zai.

For a few minutes in the park I embodied ease. The world transformed. I felt open, spacious and compassionate. Everything in the park seemed to shine as if it had a light of its own.
Two years Trucking: Myriad landscapes & Thoughts

Photos: Gladstone, MB; White Lake, ON; Roundup, MT; Maple Ridge, SK; Banff, AB; Vancouver, BC; Kenora, ON; Gallup, AZ
English Teacher

After working several years as an “unhappy editor,” and a two-year stint as a long haul trucker, I decided it was time to do what I always planned to do – become a teacher. I studied for my Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in the United Kingdom. As a British citizen, I had always wanted to live in the UK so I thought that studying there would be a good opportunity. I loved the program – for the teaching, but more surprisingly, and unlike most of my cohort, for the two Master’s level research projects we conducted in schools. One study I conducted over a 10-week period questioned whether the reading of literature had the ability to incite empathy in teenage readers. We used journal writing, visualization and role-play in conjunction with the novel *Private Peaceful* (Morpurgo, 2003). The study and the unit were both successful and fostered my hope in the power of literature, and my curiosity in educational research.

I felt at home in the UK. I had a love and familiarity with the land and the people and the beer. My first placement school was in one of the most affluent districts in Cardiff. My second placement school was in the Welsh valleys on one of the poorest council estates in Western Europe – yet with a tremendous view of the windswept ancient landscape. Those varied environments reminded me again of the social justice issues that accompany education.

The ‘Library’

Formally in a portable that was destroyed when the rotten floor gave way to dirt, the library found no new home on the property. The English teachers did their best to relocate the books in a room near the cooking facilities – but with no librarian, and little time themselves they couldn’t manage the space. It has been in this condition for over a year: books lie in damp piles on the floor, and those that have been placed on makeshift shelves are not classified in any usable manner. Students can access the ‘library’ by walking through the home economics cooking facilities – but only if accompanied by a teacher. If someone walks outside around the back of the building and rolls up the grey garage door that covers the window, some daylight will grace the space. But that doesn’t usually happen.

I didn’t think it possible that in a first world country, a school would be without the funds, and the staffing to support a library. I remember the libraries of my youth as the brightest, warmest and most important rooms of the school: what was happening to education? I was told that IT suites, and “Learning Resource Centres” were replacing libraries.

Trained in the British curriculum, and a British citizen, I secured a position at a British school in China. In one of life’s spirals, I moved back to the country I’d grown to love several years earlier. At the British school I was faced with the reality of summative assessments in the form of IGCSEs and

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The Sleet Storm

“That guy is going to end up in the tulips,” David said.


David rolled down the window, extended his arm, and touched the face of the passenger-side mirror.

“Another couple of degrees and the road will be a skating rink,” he said. He rolled up the window and rubbed his hands together.

We had just left Thunder Bay and were headed west toward Winnipeg. It was 1 am, minus one degree Celsius and sleetling.

“Do you want me to drive this shift? I know this road,” David said. David used to live in Sioux Lookout and hauled logs down Highway 17 to Thunder Bay.

“No, I’ll be fine,” I said. “I’ll just go slow. I have nothing to prove.”

“Don’t let any meatheads push you. And pull over if it gets icy,” David said.

“If I can find anywhere to pull over,” I laughed.
A-Levels where empathy, literature, and the cultivation of contemplative space for writing were not priorities. The students completed their work in the knowledge that their futures hung precariously on the results of exams that would be mailed across the world to London to be marked. It was not the kind of learning environment that I wanted to foster.

**Contemplative Space**

While living in China I took a trip to Japan and saw Ryoan-Ji Temple in Kyoto. Ryoan-Ji is famous for its rock garden that is said to represent the cosmos. The garden consists of a clay wall, white gravel raked daily, fifteen rocks arranged in various groupings and a wonderful wooden veranda. The garden is arranged so that viewers can never see all fifteen rocks at once. Ryoan-Ji is one of the most peaceful places I've ever visited. The intentional creation of space and the combination of elements had a visceral affect on me. Ryoan-Ji has been a place of contemplation for more than 400 years. As an educator, researcher and writer I want to recognize the aspects of spatial design that create contemplative moods, and transformative learning spaces, but at the same time, I don't want to enforce my own notion of aesthetics onto others.

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**Dufu’s Cottage**

Dufu’s Cottage hides in the solitude of a lush bamboo forested park near a silent river. When wandering through the park reading the hundreds of poems inscribed into the pathways in granite calligraphy, it’s difficult to believe that you’re in the middle of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. Dufu’s desk is simple, near the window overlooking a bamboo garden. The aesthetic space inspires me the same way his poetry does.

I visited Dufu’s cottage with a group of students while I worked in China. We ambled through bamboo groves surrounding the cottage and read poems inscribed on granite walkways and boulders. We entered Dufu’s cottage and the students were silent and reverent. I asked one student what he thought he would have to do to write like Dufu. He said he’d probably have to turn his ‘cell phone off.’ Another student suggested that she’d need Dufu’s ‘peace’ in order to write. I asked her how she would find that and she said she’d have to ‘live in the forest’ and that she wasn’t prepared to do that. I asked her if she thought it was possible to bring ‘peace’ into her life at school? And she said, ‘There’s no peace at school.’ We left the cottage, but that space and those brief conversations remain with me.

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“It’s a bad stretch. Be careful.”

The TransCanada in Northern Ontario has hundreds of kilometres of spindly, tree-lined roads with no pullouts large enough to accommodate a truck and trailer. And for hundreds of kilometres there is no shoulder and few passing lanes. Regardless of what’s on the road in front of you – moose, deer, coyote or truck – you never swerve because if you do, you’ll either end up in the oncoming lane or a rock cut of the Canadian Shield.

In truck school they showed us gruesome accident footage. But they always stressed that a trucker should never leave his or her lane. The instructor gave us a scenario: What if a bus full of school children came towards you on the highway, would you swerve? The correct answer is ‘no,’ because if you swerve, hit the ditch and kill your co-driver, it’s your fault. So you hit those school children. You hit whatever is in your lane – that’s the rule. The rule is the same in a car, but it’s a scarier rule in a truck because you know you’ll destroy whatever you hit.

“Good night,” David said.

“Sweet dreams,” I said.

David closed the curtain to the sleeping bunk. A ray of soft light shone beneath the curtain onto the floor. Sleet pelted onto the windshield and froze, its staccato rhythm tinny over the hum of the Caterpillar diesel engine. The night was thick. The high beams threw shadows onto the rock cuts, the ancient, weathered faces watched over the
frozen landscape. The dashboard lights glowed blue and yellow. I turned them down. I sipped my coffee, fumbled on the floor for my iPod and pressed play on an episode of *This American Life*. Ira Glass’ nasally, deadpan voice filled my ears.

I geared down as we climbed a long hill toward Raith. Sleet swathed against the truck. I turned off the iPod. I rolled down the window and felt the mirror. Ice. The thermometer read -3. I turned on the CB.

I had driven that stretch of highway at least 50 times, and I didn’t like it. The forest was dense, the rock cuts close, and there were always moose and deer on the side of the road. I preferred the hilly, curved stretch along the lakehead where vistas of Superior graced the drive, or the expanse of the prairie at night where the stars burned late, or even the mountains of BC that had four-lane traffic.

The sleet pounded. Ice built up on the windscreen and distorted my view. I squinted windshield fluid. The wipers scratched against the pebbly ice and then broke though and sent chunks of slush clattering across the windscreen. The high beams reflected in the frigid humidity and blinded me. I turned them off. The highway crouched low and dark. I turned on the fog lights and slowed to 90.

Upsula, the northern logging town huddled beside the highway. Salmon-orange lights illuminated my path for a few minutes as I passed through the sleepy streets. Dozens of trucks dozed along the side of the highway, and...
## Synthesis

This self-study began with a desk in Brampton, Ontario, ended with a desk in Chengdu, Sichuan, was composed at a desk in Hamilton Ontario, and edited at a desk in Georgian Bay Township. Reading through it reminds me of Eliot Eisner’s view that “…writing forces you to reflect in an organized and focused way on what it is you want to say. Words written confront you and give you an opportunity to think again” (Eisner, 1991, p. 34). The themes that have emerged from writing this self-study are so familiar to me that I didn’t recognize them until I asked myself to ‘think again.’

Since I was a child I have been influenced by my aesthetic environment, and believed in the importance of personal space for contemplation. An extension of this is the recurring theme in my life of believing in the necessity of contemplative and aesthetic education for all people.

I have always been an explorer and traveller – even as a child wandering in the woods. It seems that the thread of liminality (living on the threshold) throughout my life has allowed me to often dwell ‘betwixt and between’ different societies – passing in and out as an observer, and from a ‘stranger’s vantage,’ view the world and myself (Greene, 1995).

I believe that this liminal theme in my life has helped me develop my writing and photography, and will help me as a scholar.

Through reflecting on my life experiences and reading through my own vignettes regarding spaces – specifically ‘Mikey’s Desk’ and ‘The Library’ – I recognize that many students do not have the freedom to intentionally design their own creative spaces, nor the training or time to cultivate contemplative practices.

As a former editor, this study has made me recognize anew the power of editing in the presentation of data. For example, I could have taken eight vignettes from my life when I was a “jerk” and written an narrative auto-ethnographic expose on what a jerk I can be. Those vignettes also would have been true. In research, and in writing, what is left out may be as significant as what is included.
Chapter 4
Interviews with Four Practicing Writers

In this chapter I visit four writers in their “writing spaces” to investigate their approaches to writing, contemplative practice and space. My approach to the interviews is sensorial, ethnographic and open-ended.

Kathryn Anderson-Levitt (2006) describes ethnography as “…the study of people in everyday life with particular attention…to the process through which people make (and sometime impose or contest) meaning” and says that ethnography allows us to “…describe the real world complexity of human behaviour” Anderson-Levitt, 2006, pp. 279, 282). Sarah Pink (2009) outlines that “Ethnographers might research practices that are already part of their lives, but that might be experienced and understood differently by others” (Pink, 2009, p. 52). I am a published author, an English teacher, and a contemplative practitioner, but I feel that it will aid my study if I expand it to include the experience of other writers.

All five senses are active in any moment, yet much ethnography focuses on sight as a dominant sense (I used the word focuses and the word see in this sentence already!) To ameliorate the occularcentrism in current ethnographic research, I try to be cognizant of each of my senses while visiting the writers – although I also present photographs of their “spaces”.

Pink (2009) proposes a sensory, or “emplaced ethnography that attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds, materiality and sensuality of the environment” (Pink, 2009, p. 24). In my introduction to each interview I attempt to convey a sensorial impression of the writer’s spaces. Although I describe the writer’s spaces truthfully, I am aware of how all ethnography “invent[s] rather than represents ethnographic truths” (Goldstein, 2008, p. 87).

Sarah Pink calls an interview a “social encounter – an event – that is inevitably both emplaced and productive of place” (Pink, 2009, p. 82). I decided to print the transcripts of the conversations un-interpreted (except for some narrative interjections) within the body of the thesis. The participants in this study all signed agreements in accord with the ethical standards outlined by the University of Toronto. The participants and I both edited the transcripts for clarity.

Barbara Tomlinson (2005) warns of how pedagogy provides a “recurrent purpose” for literary interviews but that many questions “veer away from probing the writer’s own procedures,” and rather ask the writers to recommend practices for others (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 102). Such interviews, according to Tomlinson, “…proclaim authorial “uniqueness,” yet at the same time evidence the desire to have individual authors represent a “universal” approach to the mysterious act of writing (Tomlinson, 2005, pp. 102-103). My aim with this study is not to find “universal” traits among writers. I interview writers from varied genres and publishing histories to explore how social context, aesthetic space, embodiment and contemplative practices affect their writing and sense of self.

As I stated in the Literature Review, literary fans have a history of visiting writers’ houses, as if we believe that place has a significant affect on writers and their work. Linda Brodkey (1987).
We carved through the rock cuts and icy ink lakes and a billion trees, a train of tractor-trailers in the darkness, each keeping a respectful distance on the ice. I led the train. In half an hour I would be able to pull over in Ignace.

Several miles east of Ignace, I climbed a long, black hill. Headlights gleamed skyward from the other side. It was likely a truck. The bright lights illuminated the surrounding trees.

As I crested the hill two sets of high beams glared from the single lane highway. Two tractor-trailers faced me: one in the oncoming lane, and one in my lane. I tried the brakes and began to jack-knife — my trailer swung toward the ditch.

“Westbound, we’re stuck. Can’t move.” A voice screamed over the CB.

“Shit!” I yelled. “Oh shit, shit, shit.” I strangled the steering wheel. I fanned the brakes, slowed to 30 km/h and started to jack-knife again.

I slipped down the long hill toward the two tractors. I fanned the brakes to 25 km/h and started to jack-knife again.

“Hit the truck,” I told myself. “Never leave your lane. If you leave your lane, it’s your fault.”

David tore the curtain to the sleeping cab open.

“Jesus!” He screamed.

critiques how placing too much importance on the “…scene of writing encourages the reification of one moment in writing” (Brodkey, 1987, p. 400). Brodkey states how such an image of writing is “…hegemonic, for its authority prevents us from entering or leaving the scene itself” (Brodkey, 1987, p. 400). And Tomlinson argues against the limited representation writing that only “privileges the moment of transcription, as if it were a synecdoche of writing” (Tomlinson 2005, p. 52). For my study, I ask questions that draw on the writer’s broader social context in the attempt to not reduce the writing act to a “scene” as if sitting down and writing in a specific space were the only variables affecting a writer’s practice.

Introducing Darren Bifford


Darren lives on the ground floor of a two-story walk-up in Montreal’s Plateau neighbourhood. Outside of his flat is hot and bright, inside cool and dark. The pine floors feel clean and smooth on my bare feet. Lola, the fluffy soft-pawed dog barks and licks my leg. Darren offers me a bottle of brown ale. He has a Sapporo. We linger in Darren’s living room beside a display of fifteen paintings. I lean over the table and survey the images.

“James Gordaneer painted those. They’re based on 15 poems I wrote while living at the Zen centre,” Darren says.

“Neat,” I reply.

“You published several of those poems, remember?” Darren says.

“Oh yeah,” I say.

“But, you forgot the stanza breaks,” he says.

I was the editor of a magazine and mis-published Darren’s poems several years ago.

“Sorry about that,” I say. I try to think of whom to blame: the copy editor, the managing editor, or the designer.

“It was my fault.” I say at last.

“It’s okay,” Says Darren, “It just made the poems read as if they were rushed.”

“I know. Space is important to me too. Space and breathing breaks in literature,” I say. I chug my beer. Lola licks my leg.

“Your dog really likes my leg,” I say.

“She normally doesn’t do that,” Darren says.

“Maybe she wants to be in the ethnography,” I say.

“Probably,” says Darren.

Darren is married. His wife Iris’ office is at the front of the
flat but I don’t investigate the room.

“It’s important for me to have a room of my own and my wife to have a room of her own for creative work,” says Darren.

“Just like Virginia Woolf,” I say.

“Just like Virginia Woolf,” Darren laughs.

We glide through the canary yellow kitchen into Darren’s studio. Books, notebooks and dictionaries cascade from the walls, a box of letters fills the floor in the doorway. I’m unsure where to stand. Darren flops into his black “reading” chair.

“It’s probably good you have your own space,” I say.

**Interview with Darren Bifford**

**How do you approach your regular writing practice?**

Habit is important. Regularity. And this idea: that one does not wait for inspiration to strike. I’m very unromantic about the idea of what writing work means. It feels taboo to break these rituals once they’re working. I used to write only between 7 and 12 in the morning. And I would print out what I wrote. And I would revise in the afternoon at a coffee shop. That would be the day, and only Monday to Friday. I became quite neurotic. Not how the spirit moves me, but as the hours dictate. That’s gone very well for me. I lose the habit all the time. It seems like I’m always trying to come back to the rhythm.

Another thing is reading. Writing comes down to reading and that’s it. Writers pilfer, scavenge, have enthusiasms, and imitate poets they like. Most major poets do this. Larkin’s first book is steeped in Yeats. To write, read and scavenge. Be a rucksack scholar. To use whatever’s in your bag.

**How do you create your writing/reading ‘space’?**

I like having a room of my own and in summer months I sit outside at a desk as well. I always use the same pen when I write. Ideally I need more bookshelves in this room. I like to have my books around. But then again there’s the alternative urge to follow Ted Hughes’ advice and get rid of everything extraneous.

**But you like your books.**

Yeah. My friend Warren would be horrified with my desk right now. He says only have on your desk what you’re actually working on.

**But perhaps you have a different approach.**

I do things differently right now as you can see, but I’m not confident that I actually have a different approach. Part of it is space limitations. We don’t have enough shelves.

**That’s easily remedied.**

I know; but I don’t do it. Everything on the desk right now, I’m actually working on…or I have intentions of working on.

**Do you compose on the computer?**

No. The computer has changed in function. It’s no longer a
word processor. The internet is a real problem for me. I’ve begun to be dictatorial on my writing practice regarding the internet: stating no internet for x time to y time.

I’ve also gone back to handwriting. I have different notebooks for different parts of the process. I work in my chair, away from the computer. Part of it is getting back to the physical act of working and recycling and reprocessing and reforming and re-representing the ideas and things I’ve written in various notebooks. Then I see what is occupying my attention. Notebooks are very important, but as Gary Snyder says, they need to be your field books. At the end of the day you have to go back and see what you’ve done. Or else you just forget about it. Which is what I generally do.

You just shelve them?

Yes. These are things I’m doing to get my body back into writing. I also sit in my chair and read and take notes. And then I stand up and move toward my computer to compose. I was scouring my old books and found the beginning fragments of the Milosz sonnets, which ended up in my book.

Darren sits in his black chair. Lola leaps on his lap. He pretends to read, write and take notes in his notebook. He transitions from the reading chair toward his desk. He pretends to write on the computer. Lola hops off the black chair, runs to the kitchen and yelps. Darren lets her into the yard. Lola yelps again and comes back in. Darren feeds her.

I hate my handwriting. It bothers me. Especially after I’ve been marking papers for a long time. Look at my mentor, Jan Zwicky. She has such beautiful handwriting that she’s always shamed the rest of us.

Darren shows me a letter from Jan Zwicky.

She even uses beautiful paper.

Everything she does is attentive.

How did you first become interested in reading and writing poetry?

I had a great teacher in grade 12. Murray Johnson. A large bulldog faced man. He would argue with the poets in class. He took personal affront to the poets and things they said. He’d say, ‘god damn you Milton, how could you say that?’ I still have this image of this man in a small town in Summerland BC, arguing with the greats.

Within minutes, fourteen tractor-trailers stretched along the highway, six of us at the bottom of the hill. We waited two hours for a salt truck to arrive.

David and I crunched granola and listened to This American Life. &
I remember learning literary devices in grade nine: Man vs. Man and all that and I wanted to have nothing to do with it. But Mr. Johnson showed that poetry was serious.

In literature you have to have the sense of, ‘Somewhere beyond myself I’m waiting for my arrival’ and he showed me that. I recently sent him a copy of my book and a letter.

**Did you begin writing poetry in grade 12?**

Actually, I was 15. It’s an experience of what one does with solitude. I wrote it then because I experienced emotions. That has to continue being true. I have to risk sentimentality to say things that matter, that are transformative, that are powerful, that are direct communication from one person to another. The poems I want to write are not poems spoken to a crowd but with close friends, or someone I love.

You’ve caught me in a moment in deep doubt. I’ve been reading lots of poems I’m not satisfied with. Not just my own. I keep reading and thinking ‘Why? Why this poem and not a documentary film, or novel, or a walk?’

Imagistic poems are odd for that reason. You’re describing something, why not just take a picture? I think poetry gets at language in the best way, the most powerful way. Nothing gets metaphor better. It’s has a rhythm. It all comes down to rhythm.

The phone rings. Darren answers. It’s the wrong number. Lola licks my leg again.

**How do reading and writing affect your sense of “self”?**

I suppose the most obvious aspect of that is this: I feel bad when I’m out of my rhythm and not reading and writing, and feel much better when I am. My levels of self-acceptance and confidence alternate accordingly. And both deeply affect how well I’m able to respond to the world.

**Do you have a contemplative practice and does it have a causative affect on your writing?**

I practiced Zen and lived at a Zen Centre. I haven’t practiced at the centre in a couple years. That question moves me. I’m more skeptical of the connection now than before. I think I need attention to write. Quality attention. I think meditation trains the attention.

I think that at a certain point of my life I believed that insights would be gleaned through practice that could translate into art. As if you could raid your Zen practice for your art. I think that the trained attention meditation offers is practical, and I should do more of it.

I raided the voice of a monk or Zen student for a series of poems who had a love affair with a square in front of the Zen Centre: Marie-Anne. Marie-Anne became a fusion of the square and the gorgeous waitress at the bagel.

That’s an important square. A Zen centre in Leonard Cohen’s old house, overlooking Marie-Anne. He wrote a song, “So Long Marianne” too. Did the Zen practice help your writing?

No. It provided a context, a trope, a style of Chinese poetry in translation.
ruined the money order she’d sent me for Christmas.

But the adventure that day wasn’t about St. Joseph’s Oil – St. Joseph’s Oil was easy to obtain. That frigid February fourth we sought St. Peregrine’s Oil. My grandmother had written twice to St. Peregrine’s church shrine requesting a package and had received no reply. I lived in Montreal so it was up to me to journey across town to investigate the missing oil.

My grandma set me the task at Christmas. She scribbled the church’s address on a pink piece of paper. I stuffed it in my journal and forgot about it. My penance was to undertake the journey on the coldest day of the year.

Rue Alexandre de Seve, Rue de Champlain.

“Truman, that’s not a church,” said Joe.

The apartment block framed the sky – two grey towers staring inward, linked by a brown-bricked centre. It hovered dismally, a stark example of Brutalist architecture, dull against the winter sun.

My face stung. My limbs ached. I should have worn long johns.

“Shit.” I said.

Täien unfolded the paper and studied the address, her hands clumsy in woolly red mittens. “It says, ‘1234’ at the bottom; after the street address. It must mean apartment 1234! Maybe the church has an office in one of the towers.”
Introducing Joe Ollmann and Taien Ng-Chan

Joe Ollmann was born in Hamilton but has lived in Montreal for ten years. He is the author of several books including *Mid-Life*, which won the National Cartooning Book Doug Wright Award in 2010. His most recent book is *Science Fiction*. Joe currently lives in Parc-Extension Montreal with his wife, writer and videographer Taien Ng-Chan.

Originally from Calgary, Taien has lived in Montreal for twenty years. Taien authored *Maps of Our Bodies & the Borders We Have Agreed Upon*, numerous films and radio documentaries and recently curated Detours site-specific mobile media project in Montreal. Taien is currently completing her PhD in Humanities at Concordia University.

I lay awake in Taien’s office for an hour until I’m certain the sounds of Montreal’s Parc-Ex neighbourhood will keep me awake all night. I knock on her and Joe’s bedroom door.

“Hey guys, the bus keeps scaring me. I’m moving to the basement,” I say.

“What?” asks Taien.

“Truman is afraid of the Parc Bus. Go back to sleep,” Joe says.

“I’m moving to the couch in the basement,” I say.

Above the couch are drastically enlarged, framed images of old Canadian money: Wilfred Laurier and Queen Elizabeth stare at me. An airbrushed Japanese geisha girl peers from the foot of the couch. Taien arrives and helps me set up a sleeping bag.

Joe clops downstairs in his underwear.

“You guys have a lot of creepy art in this house. There are faces everywhere,” I say.

“Your friends Pepito and Moist Clown are in my office,” Joe says. I peek around the corner at the Mexican puppets. Pepito wears a sombrero and has guns in each hand. Moist Clown looks like a scarecrow clown with a white face.

“And what about Tommy Talker the ventriloquist doll?” Says Joe. Joe moves Tommy Talker’s mouth and makes him speak.

“Take Tommy Talker upstairs or I’ll be scared all night,” I say. Joe and Taien laugh.

“Sorry for waking you guys,” I say.

“Don’t worry,” says Taien, “I wasn’t quite asleep and Joe was watching horror films on his Ipod like he does every night in bed.”

I climb into the sleeping bag and fall asleep in the basement.

Interview with Joe Ollmann

After breakfast at the Pickup we settle into Joe’s writing space in the basement. Bookshelves line each wall. Above his desk hang photos of important people: Joe’s father, who passed away last November and Karl Marx. Joe’s grandmother served as housekeeper and cook for Catholic priests for 28 years. She accepted the job after my granddad died, not for the money, for the company – she was good friends with the monsignor. For 28 years, her kitchen in the Rectory buzzed, tea and butter tarts forever fresh on the table. The monsignor directed parishioners to my grandma’s kitchen for guidance. New priests arrived from Africa; she was their “holy mother” away from home. The archbishop visited monthly for dinner. St. Joseph’s oil flowed.

We tugged the doors of the centre block. Locked.

“Shouldn’t there be a buzzer?” I said.

“Just wait a minute until someone comes out,” said Taien.

A custodian dragged a cart through the atrium. Joe rattled the doors. The custodian paused, stared through the glass and then turned away.

“It’s the beard isn’t it?” Asked Joe.

“You are a scary dear, a bearded Anglophone rattling doors,” said Taien.

“I’m sorry guys. Let’s just go. My grandma is crazy. I’ll buy you lunch.” I faced the courtyard. “Seriously, let’s go,” I said.
The custodian returned, he muttered something in French and forced the doors open.

“Merci, Merci,” Joe and I nodded and bowed.

Taien explained we were looking for room 12-34. The custodian signalled to the elevator with his chin. We trotted past a man in a wheelchair. I smiled. He didn’t.

St. Peregrine lived in 13th Century Italy. Born into a wealthy family, he grew up criticizing the church. He repented and was ordained. He contracted cancer and was cured through a vision of the Son of God. Now St. Peregrine is the Patron Saint of Cancer, or the Patron Saint of Curing Cancer.

At 82 years old my grandma developed breast cancer. She had a mastectomy, refused chemotherapy and returned to her post in the Rectory within two weeks. She attributed her healing to St. Peregrine’s oil, the Miraculous Medal she wears in her bra, and never missing a week of mass in her life.

Parishioners used to ask my grandma to pray for them. Every morning she woke at 5am and unfolded a list of people in need. She prayed for an hour. She prayed for new houses, new babies, and always for cures for cancer.

One night when I was about 18, I woke up to a face full of holy water. My grandma thought she saw a spirit enter my room. Another time, my father slid into his bed and felt sand between the sheets. My grandma said that salt...
As an adult cartoonist, I’m asked to give talks to young people on how to become a writer and my advice is to read everything you can find. Everything. And see every film you can, and look at every work of art you can. You need to have some intake before you can output. Not to copy, just so you can understand the mechanics and see how you can do it differently, or better. That’s the ideal.

I read everything when I was young – even books that bored the hell out of me because I wanted to be smart.

Recently my mom gave me an envelope my dad had saved of all my report cards from school. I opened it and read the report cards and started crying because my marks were so shit. And the comments were awful. I hated school. I got sent to the chaplain once because I’d written a sarcastic essay criticizing how religion can be a comfort. It was in English class. I didn’t think religion belonged in English class so I criticized it. It was well written but they didn’t like me writing a critique. That was a religious education. It permeated everything. Even science. Not to the point of criticizing Galileo or anything, because they did apologize to him 200 years after his death. Ha!

I remember an example in grade school when we were told that we no longer collected for UNICEF because they supported abortion and I was like, ‘What, but they feed hungry people!’ I didn’t fit in. That was how my Catholic education affected me.

In which ways has being a parent affected your writing?

I’ve never drawn explicit sexual or violent stuff because my kids were always looking at my drawings. So that environmental factor has influenced how I write/draw. It’s made me subtle in those areas. Those themes are still present in my writing but I’ve had to become more nuanced in depicting them – which has actually helped my art. I think too much explicit anything makes comics, and writing, tacky.

How has being an Anglophone in Montreal affected your writing?

Can’t speak French well enough to understand much. I feel like the family dog that understands words here and there ‘…they said bacon, they said walk’. I understand on a slapstick
level. There’re so many languages here, particularly in this
neighbourhood. You never know what anyone’s going to
speak. I don’t want people to have to switch to my language.
Living here has affected my observation skills adversely. Now
that I’m moving back to a place where I speak the language I
think my art will improve.

Joe and Taien will move to Hamilton in the summer.

In which ways has the internet affected your writing?

I waste time on the internet. It’s a big distraction. I sometimes
have to move to the kitchen table to get away from it. I
check words online instead of using my old Oxford dictionary
but get distracted while I’m online. And Facebook is a
real timewaster. I recognize that people are being creative on
it responding to posts having discussions. But they could be
making a comic or an essay but it’s all throwaway lines. They
could be making art. But maybe it’s the new ‘art’.

We’ve joked about it before, but do you think that your
work in a box factory influenced how you draw all your
comics in 9 panel ‘boxes’?

I do draw a lot of people in box factories. Box factories appear
in most of my books! It has left a deep impression on me. Maybe similar to Dickens working in a boot blacking
factory – that scarred him for life. It shows up everywhere:
David Copperfield sticking labels on the wine bottles for Mr.
Murdstone. These things shape your output for life.

Do you write all day?

This is the first time in my life I haven’t had a day job. This is
the first time I’m writing and drawing as my job. I used to only
write and draw at night and I would have this fierce drive to
get home to work on my cartoons. After the kids went to bed
I would work so hard. It was a finite time each night.

Now that I don’t have a different discipline to go to I find I’m
not as productive.

You mean it may be helpful to have another job to do?

Yeah, maybe I need to have another, physical labour job to go
to – an alternate job. When I used to work in factories – even
when I was a graphic designer, which is more creative – I
found that when I was working lots of my ideas came to me.
I had time to ruminate and come up with thoughts. I took
notes. Grease stained notes and corners of boxes with notes
on them became ideas for my stories.

Lots of precious little artists think they can’t do anything
except art – they can’t have a job or anything so they’re always
poor. But for me, I think having a job and outside distractions
helped me be more productive.

Do you have a contemplative practice?

My contemplative practice is walking. I walk. I used to walk
and not listen to anything. Then I started listening to recorded
books and it affected my creativity negatively. There was too
much going into my head and I didn’t have enough time to ru-
minate while I walked. So I’ve shifted back to walking silently.

How does it affect on your writing?

out of the Rectory and into a small apartment in town.
Parishioners visited her frequently, at first.

The meaty scent of canteen lunch hung in the foyer. Joe
curled up his nose. I curled up my nose.

Tower B. The 12th floor mirrored its twin on Tower A.
Old people in bachelor apartments watched televisions.

I knocked at the brown, wooden door of apartment 12-34. No answer. I knocked harder.

Two watery eyes peered from the room next door.

“Morte,” said the old man.

“Christ.”

Taien unfolded the crumpled address from her pocket. The old man studied it. He nodded. I remembered the empty bottle of St. Peregrine’s Oil in my bag. I waved it at him, my hand greasy.

He clutched the bottle in his bony fingers, and peered at the image of St. Peregrine. He nodded again.

The woman who once lived in room 12-34, the old man
told us, used to help St. Peregrine’s Shrine post oil pack-
ages to devout Catholics like my grandmother. That was
how my grandmother had the woman’s address.

The old man retreated into his room.

On the sidewalk on St. Catherine Street, I glanced back
Every moment I’m among people I watch and listen how they interact. It’s all gravy for the comic mill. I sponge it up. I interact and observe and eavesdrop!

Does writing affect your sense of self?

My chosen medium, a gutter art form – comics – reinforces my sense of place as part of the rabble. I identify with the masses and see myself as the traditional jester skewering the elite or just pointing out human foibles with this art.

Whether this influences my sense of self, or my sense of self creates this, it’s kind of chicken or the egg, you know?

Interview with Taien Ng-Chan

Taien and I return from lunch at Jean-Talon market and sit in Taien’s office. The desk sprawls with towers of books, audio recorders and two bottles of wine. Photographs of Taien’s mother and grandmother peer from the wall. A small altar of rocks stands in the corner – a testament to Taien’s Wiccan background. A tall window overlooks Rue Champagneur. Parc Bus #80 squeals to a stop outside the window.

How would you describe your writing practice?

For my most recent work, I take the bus to go collecting. For example, I’ll take the bus for a day to look at how sunlight moves. To collect images of sunlight on the bus. When I was collecting images and clips for my investigation of cell phones, I became acutely aware of anyone on a cell phone. I would then try to capture them, on my phone.

You write in public, not here in your office?

I assemble here at home. It’s fieldwork writing. It is on city transit that the city materializes itself. Those routes are the city for us. Other routes through the city exist but we don’t experience them.

But you don’t write sitting at a desk? You write sitting on the metro or on the bus?

Yes, for certain things. It’s a sensory ethnography. I write about the senses on city transit. I capture sound and video and create video poems. Of course, I sit at this desk as well!

What’s a film/video poem?

Film poems date back before the 60s. Stan Brakhage, considered one of the great experimental filmmakers of the 20th Century, called himself a film poet, but didn’t use actual poetry. A video poem comes from a different tradition than experimental film, where performance is the base. There have been manifestos written on what a video poem is. Some people say it must integrate language. I don’t agree. I think that there can be a hybrid of the two approaches. A video poem can be a video recording of a poet reading. It can be performance based. It can be experimental sound or image.

For me, some of my video poems don’t have words but some are based on poems. My background is as a poet so poetics underlie much of my work, whatever the medium or genre. One of my video poems is made from clips of people talking on cell phones on public transit. It’s a jumble of sound, which I still consider poetry.
“Can’t you go alone?” I asked.

“Don’t be rude, Trumey. You were invited and said you’d go, they’re expecting you,” David said.

It was minus twenty, and my only day off that week. A visit to my boss, on his farm, to do an oil change on his truck, was not how I wanted to spend the afternoon. On public transit you are there for the duration. You’re with these people, in compressed space. There’s the drama, the conflict, the connection. Ideally, my video poems, when viewed in situ, draw one’s perception to what’s happening in the surroundings, though I acknowledge that that’s an ideal situation and not one that happens as often as I’d like.

With these found video poems, you draw from a particular space and create your film and then request your viewers to enter that space to watch your poems?

I’m interested in site-specificity and public space and ways in which people interact with each other in the city. Public transit is one of those places where people are forced into close connection with each other. I like to observe how they interact and handle that. On the street you can walk away, or are just passing through a space. On public transit you are there for the duration. You’re with these people, in compressed space. There’s the drama, the conflict, the connection. Ideally, my video poems, when viewed in situ, draw one’s perception to what’s happening in the surroundings, though I acknowledge that that’s an ideal situation and not one that happens as often as I’d like.

Which senses are most active for you in that environment?

Visuality is privileged in our society. Also being a filmmaker, if I’m out collecting sounds and images, the visual and aural are dominant. At the same time, smell is strong in public space. It’s visceral and will assail you. It’s not always there but if you smell something on the metro or bus, if someone is eating, or stinks – your sense of smell takes over everything. Everyone is jostling on a bus. There’s an embodied relationship between you and strangers. Everyone knows not to sit beside someone else on an empty bus.

In which ways has your social context/schooling affected your writing?

I’m from Calgary but have lived in Montreal for 20 years. I came here for school and I’m still in school! So I’m lucky to be in a very open environment with many interesting people who do great work. The cross-pollination of ideas and support from fellow writers, artists and scholars has given me inspiration and opportunity for critique as well. I get interested in different things very easily so I think my social context has certainly widened my “self.”

Being in Montreal as an Anglophone and as a Chinese-Canadian writer makes me linguistically aware of different languages, cultures and rhythms. The “hyphenated identity.” I don’t consider myself Chinese although people often call me Chinese. But I am not from China and culturally, I don’t identify as Chinese. This hyphenated aspect of my identity places me in the margins, but most of the time, I don’t notice.
They rented most of the property to commercial farmers in the area.

“At least the land is frozen and it doesn’t stink,” I said. David shook his head. The last time David and I visited the Dycks the whole county stank of manure.

“We won’t stay long,” David said.

Peter and Elvira Dyck welcomed us inside. A misty portrait of a stern Mennonite forefather stared from the wall in the kitchen. We filed into the bright room beside the kitchen. A small table and four chairs positioned in a circle were the only furniture in the space. Peter sat beside the small table, his knees facing me across the circle. David sat on the other side of the small table, his knees facing Elvira. Sitting on chairs in a circle felt like some kind of remedial meeting – like AA, or a pop psychology class. I placed my palms upwards on my lap and pretended I was in a group meditation.

“We will have some yerba maté first,” Peter said. Elvira nodded and retreated to the kitchen.

Peter and Elvira were born in the jungles of Paraguay to Low German Mennonite parents. Yet both sets of Peter’s and Elvira’s grandparents were born in Steinback Manitoba. In the late 1800s and early 1900s their grandparents and several hundred Mennonites from the Canadian prairies relocated to Paraguay. They joined the Nueva Germania colony. After only two generations, many families like the Dycks returned to the Mennonite community.

There’s this notion of high intensity and low intensity identity that my friend, the poet Ray Hsu, speaks of. High intensity is when you’re forced to assert your identity in someway. It becomes this thing that you perform. But low intensity identity is the everyday, that’s what I’m interested in. These parts of my identity manifest themselves in ways that I’m not always clear on: in the mundane. The ways that I’m not “performing” but “being.”

Are you “Chinese-Canadian” because you perceive yourself as that or are perceived as that?

I’m perceived as that. People often ask me, “Are you Chinese?” People of colour are often asked where they come from. A lot of it is naiveté. Sometimes people just want to know. But other times it does mean something. People don’t realize that we’re asked it a lot and the implication is that we’re not from “here” and that has many ramifications. Though I have lived in Montreal for twenty years, I don’t see myself as a Quebecker because of these perceptions. Though I was born in Canada, often I am still seen as “foreign,” and I try to resist that a lot. I assert my “Canadian” identity often: “Are you Chinese? No, I’m Canadian.”

Last year I did a project with an artist-run centre here called Agence Topo – they do work that lies at the intersection of media, fine art and literature. My project was an artist’s mapping project where I worked with 5 different artists on site-specific maps. I was their first Anglophone artist, ever. That made me aware of my status as an Anglophone artist. It’s okay to present things in French without an English translation, but it’s not okay to present things in English without a French translation. Everything on that project was translated into French. Which is fine, most people here are French. There’s a lot of politics. But this adds a layer of awareness of how I don’t fit into the mainstream, the center. I do speak French, and I gave a few workshops in French, but it was difficult for me and for the rest of my collaborators who are also mostly Anglophone (invariably, the two solitudes don’t mix all that much). Mostly because we can’t banter in French. We don’t do jokes. It makes us very serious. That’s hard for us!

How have these various aspects of your “identity” affected your writing practice?

Probably, it has made me aware of being in the margins, which I react against by re-centering myself and my practice. But also, it teaches me to take a stance there. By not letting myself be “marginalized” but by standing in the margins, I am trying to define poetics of the margins, the outsider, as central. Identity is fluid, though, and most of the time, invisible. It doesn’t exist so much when one is alone. It happens more in public spaces, which is perhaps one of the reasons that I am interested in space and place.

Joe and Sam crash through the front door. Tain tells them to be quiet. Moo-Cow, the three legged cat meows behind me.

See, this is my office, but it’s also in the same room as the living room. I look forward to having my own office when we move. Joe said I could have the basement office, but I’d rather have a window than my own space. In our new house I’ll have my own room with two windows!
How do your contemplative practices affect your writing?

Yoga and swimming help me stay in shape. If I don’t get out and do something physical, my brain is foggy.

But when I go downtown, the 40 minutes on the bus is a contemplative space for me.

For my PhD dissertation, I’m researching public space, city transit, and public space on city transit. Some of the research on commuting calls commuting time “gift time.” That part of commuting intrigues me. I see that “gift time” as a contemplative space. You have that time and nowhere else to go. It’s time for me to think about things, to observe, to sit and be.

Introducing Talya Rubin

Parc Lafontaine sprawls cool and moist at the base of Talya Rubin’s street in the East of Montreal’s Plateau neighbourhood. The street is quiet, tree lined, with spiral staircases on each three-storied building. Talya leads me to the kitchen where I meet Nick, Talya’s Australian husband and Misha, their 9-month-old son. Misha eyes shine blue. The floor is surprisingly unsticky considering there’s a baby in the house. The flat is airy and spacious.

“Do you want a coffee?” Asks Talya.

“Sure,” I say.

“We’re out of regular milk. Do you like almond milk?”


“Oh but this coffee is so bitter,” Talya says.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” I say.

“My coffee making has been terrible lately. I stopped drinking it while I was pregnant with Misha,” says Talya.

Talya won the Canadian National Bronwen Wallace award for poetry, for the most promising writer under the age of 35. She also writes plays and has toured internationally with her live performance pieces *Ariadne’s Thread, The Girl With No Hands* and *Of The Causes of Wonderful Things*. Talya trained as a Secondary English and Drama teacher and is currently completing her MFA in writing from UBC.

Originally from Montreal, Talya lived in Australia for twelve years where she and Nick started their theatre company – Too Close to the Sun. They recently relocated to Canada and continue to produce plays in both countries.

Talya hands me a mug of fresh coffee.

“I hope it doesn’t taste bitter,” she says.

It doesn’t taste bitter. Misha squeals and Nick laughs as we move into the living room.

on the icy Canadian prairies.

Elvira entered with a tray. It held a horn cup, a package of yerba maté, a golden metal straining straw and a plastic jug jiggling with water and ice cubes. She slid a tray onto the table beside Peter. I like yerba maté and I hoped they would make the “warm” version. They didn’t.

Peter stuffed the Yerba maté tea into the ivory cup, poured ice water onto the leaves, and mashed the brew with a metal filtered straw. He sucked on the straw, gulped hard and topped up the glass with ice water. He passed the cup across the circle to me. The bitter tea numbed my mouth, froze my throat and iced my stomach.

“Mmm,” I said. Out the window, the white prairie was minus 20 degrees before the wind chill and we drank iced yerba maté.

I passed the cup to David. He took a sip and passed the cup to Elvira. Peter topped up the ice water. A sunbeam glared through the window. The tints on Peter’s and Elvira’s matching transitional glasses darkened. They looked like a pair of poker players. I guess if you don’t have blinds you just wear your sunglasses indoors. We passed the Yerba maté around again.

“Now we will do the oil change. You can stay here. Elvira will show you pictures of the boys,” Peter said to me. He spoke to Elvira in Low German. Elvira nodded. David and Peter clopped through the house and slammed the garage door behind them.
Pictures of boys,” Elvira said. Elvira loaded two plastic binders of photographs onto my lap. I flipped open the first book. Four images of a motor-cross track with helmeted racers filled the page. Elvira pointed to a red suited racer and said, “Joseph, young son.” She pointed to a blue suited racer and said, “Michael, old son.”

For fifty-five minutes I gazed upon faceless, blurry images of Michael and Joseph Dyck riding motor-cross. At one point Elvira vanished into the kitchen and I stared silently out the window onto the prairie.

“We will eat now,” Peter announced from the kitchen.

I trotted to the counter, free from helmeted photographs of the Dyck children and the desolate prairie.

“Ribs!” said Peter. Peter drew a rack of sizzling ribs from the oven, and a tray of baked potatoes from the stovetop.

“No ribs for me thanks. I’m a vegetarian,” I said.

David, the Dycks and I sat down to lunch. They chewed on sinews, blood and flesh. I ate a baked potato.

“You should eat meat,” Peter said.

“Oh, I’m okay,” I said. “I’m pretty healthy.”

Elvira slurped, smacked and sucked on her rib. Peter tore at his rib, its juices splashing onto his moustache. Peter spoke Low German to Elvira. She watched me. She

Interview with Talya Rubin

In which ways have your social context or background affected your writing?

My background is Jewish and in Judaism the storytelling tradition is strong…but for me, regarding social context, it’s more the Anglophone issue here in Quebec. Asking where do I belong, where does my voice get heard? I found it easier to be in Australia and be really “foreign” rather than being here in Montreal, in the place I’m from but don’t wholly feel like I belong. I ask myself where will my voice get heard? Is there a venue for my work here?

Does it affect the way you write?

You need to know that your work is going to go somewhere. I want to know that there’s an audience for the work I’m going to do, even though I don’t write with an audience in mind. My work became rigorous in Australia because of the standards and I knew that people were going to want to see the work and would expect something from the work. Whereas here, the Anglophone theatre scene is different, it’s smaller.

I think originally, my writing may have emerged by feeling a bit of an outsider. You feel foreign in your own home so you become an observer. And writers are observers. Now not all Anglophones in Quebec become writers but I definitely think it doesn’t hurt to be pushed into that corner. Or be from a family that survived the Holocaust or have been displaced in other ways. And feeling: am I ashamed of that history, or can I own it? Where do I fit in a culture or community? I’m sure all of that informs my writing. But it doesn’t for me in a political, or conscious way. It’s more who I am. I know that all of that informs me and that I can extrapolate a lot from it, but I also could be making up a story, although I know it’s true. What really informs who I am as a creative person is what’s going on internally.

I have one poem that’s about my Polish grandfather in Siberia. During WWII my family escaped Poland to the Ukraine and then to Moscow. When Stalin and Hitler made a pact they were sent to Siberia as POWs. That poem is the first time I’ve written about that part of my family. I’ve thought of returning to Poland to their town, Lublin, do theatre and see where my family was from. I normally don’t situate my work that way. But I might in the future.

How have contemplative practices affected your writing?

One of the things that would really distract me when meditating was that I would get these poems in my head. The stiller I became the more materials would arise. Then I would think, this has got to be wrong. As time has gone on I’ve realized those are my materials. The more internal I go, the richer my material becomes. It doesn’t become silent – I don’t mean noisy either. It’s more of a tuning into what’s there. And what’s there is this poetry and theatre. I’m not putting it on. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t have to.

In a meditation retreat you’re not really allowed to use words. I kept coming back to words. I couldn’t write them down. I had to let them go. In some ways I think Hatha yoga is more
spoke back and Peter clapped his hands.

“Elvira wants me to tell you about my hunting days. I used to hunt in Paraguay.”

“Okay,” I said. “I don’t have a problem with hunting. Many cultures hunt. They used to hunt buffalo on the prairies.”

“One day I went into the forest with my gun and killed many birds,” Peter clapped. “Many many!”

Peter pushed away from the table and lunged into the empty space by the counter. He opened his legs wide, squatted slightly and cradled his arms as if holding a heavy gun. Peter’s left hand pointed toward me, then David, then Elvira jerking up and down to the beat from his mouth.

“Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!” He said. He swayed. He spun and shot out the window, into the frozen pastures, into the living room and back to the table. “Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!”

Elvira clapped.

“Guess how many birds I killed one day with my brother?” He asked.

“Fifteen,” I said. Peter raised his eyebrows.


“No! Three hundred!”

I haven’t been compelled to say ‘that’s my practice’. I feel now like meditation will help my body/mind settle – like the sediment settling to the bottom of the glass cup so I can see what’s there. Especially since I’ve had my baby – and this chaos of life. For me, writing and theatre work are similar to yoga and meditation in that they are all inner practices. I think they compliment each other and help lay the space. Natalie Goldberg has written about the relationship between Zen and writing practice.

I think her teacher said, “Why do you sit Zazen when you should make writing your practice?”

Yes. I think I’ve come to a similar conclusion with the fact that I’d sit in silence and these words would come to me. These words seemed to be calling me.

Misha cries from the kitchen.

Your baby is crying in the other room, how does that make you feel?

I find it challenging. I find that either he has to be out of the house, or I do. Sensorially, he has a large affect on my writing. Even now, I feel like I should see how he is. Even though he’s with his dad and he’s fine. He’s intense. He’s fabulous too. But he’s intense! I’m learning how to balance it. I need to have a divide between looking after him and writing. I cannot write in the same space as him.

Misha crawls into the room with smoothie on his face. He wants to see his mother. Nick asks if Talya thinks Misha is hungry. Talya tries to nurse him. He’s not hungry. Misha reaches for the audio recorder.

This is what happens if I’m trying to write. A closed door is not enough. He knows I’m here.

Nick carries Misha back into the kitchen. Talya and I walk to the front of the flat into Talya’s writing space. It’s a bright airy room with a wooden desk and a fabulous suitcase full of Talya’s props.

Is this your ideal writing ‘space’?

This room is close to ideal. I like looking out onto leafy trees. There’s nice sunlight. I need a clear space. I enjoy having a clear desk and balance in a space. And I also like to have things around me that inform the work. At the moment I’m working on a collection of poetry that involves a particular island and all sorts of birds. So I’ve tried to embed myself in drafts of writing, images of birds nearby, or a chalkboard with key themes with where I am going.

What about when you write for theatre?

I write by speaking and moving and acting. A lot of my “writing” is a devising process.

What is devising?

Devising is when you come into a room with objects and themes and you interact and speak. You’re given a provocation
of some kind. I feel like I’m conjuring characters and voices and moments. It’s physical and happens in space. It’s a time/space approach to creating. I will write at a desk, after I’ve done a lot of devising.

**Do you record yourself?**

Now I do. In the past I used to have a friend take notes. Then there’s a major editing process and a reshaping process. And I’ll write more, sitting at a desk. Much of the stronger writing I’ve completed has happened sitting at a desk, but most of it has emerged from ideas I devised while moving. That’s how I approach writing for theatre.

I am interested in how writers connect more with their physicality. How writers can get unstuck. I taught a workshop where I got writers up and interacting with objects, authentically moving and then had them write about what they gleaned from the movement. We spoke a lot about where writing comes from. What is the liberation we’re looking for in writing? Many of the writers wanted to continue with the movement process afterward. Writing is connected to blood, to heartbeat and movement. If I’m writing creatively, I still have to write by hand. I can’t use the computer.

**Internet?**

I have to get away from the Internet! It destroys thought and creativity. It’s a tool that we don’t know how to use properly. I sit at my computer and fiddle around on the Internet.

“Three hundred?” David asked.

“Three hundred doves,” Peter said.

“Three hundred doves,” said Elvira.

“Doves?” I asked.

“I had an automatic rifle!” Peter said. “Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!” He swung his invisible, automatic rifle at me, David and Elvira.

Peter grabbed another rib from the pile, Elvira offered me a potato and David cleared his throat. I thought of white feathers falling in a faraway forest.

*Elvira and Peter Dyck are pseudonyms.*

‘Talya shows me a poem she’s writing; she feels it is almost finished because it is so ‘well spaced on the page.’ I take a picture of it. Misha crawls into the room. He grabs my toe. He pulls books from the lower shelves of Talya’s bookshelf. They fan around him on the floor. I take his picture. Talya shows me her donkey prop from her play. Misha reaches for the donkey.

**How do reading/writing affect your sense of self?**

When I am writing or actively creating theatre or about to perform a work I have a very different sense of self to when I am engaging with these materials in my mind.

I do find that my sense of self is influenced by what I read or a film I watch or a piece of theatre or performance I see. Like you insert yourself so fully into that thing that you feel like your eyes are different afterwards. You read Virginia Woolf and all your sentences become very lyrical. I am very influenceable that way. Although I think who I am as a creative identity is finding its home now.
Synthesis

Visiting these writers and conducting interviews affirmed my understanding of the complexity and singularity of writing practice, and how social/aesthetic environments and the act of writing affect/co-create a writer’s sense of self.

During the interviews, each of the participants approximated and then shattered the modernist view of the writer as a solitary figure etching away on retreat somewhere. They showed me how space, place, aesthetics and cultural background all influenced their writing practices. Yet each of the writers had a singular approach to his/her own practice and use of space.

While each of the writers I profiled was different, I did garner some generalizations from the interviews.

Each of the writers expressed how the Internet is a bane that adversely affects their writing practices.

Each of the writers had some form of “contemplative practice.” The writers stated that their contemplative practices helped their observation and concentration skills as well as helped them maintain physical shape. While this profile shows that contemplative practices are not necessarily causally related to better writing (Darren thought that Zen meditation worsened his writing although it made him a “better person,”) contemplative practices are helpful in creating a balanced, more aware lifestyle, which may affect writing. Some saw their writing practice as a form of contemplative practice, echoing Natalie Goldberg’s (1986) story about her Zen teacher asking, “Why do you come to sit meditation? Why don’t you make writing your practice? If you go deep enough into writing, it will take you everyplace” (Goldberg, 1986, p. 2).

Each writer spoke of feeling like an outsider or “observer” in the world – as an Anglphone in Montreal or as a “minority” in a larger ethnic milieu. They all seemed aware of the contingency and affects of their social/aesthetic environments on their writing practice and sense of self.

Although I began this study with the belief that I could represent – through words and images – writers, and writers’ spaces, part way through the editing process I decided not to “represent” the writers in pictorial form. Instead I chose to present photographs of non-human objects in the “writing spaces” rather than having the writers be the only “subjects” of the interviews. This allows for an intra-human thread in the printed interviews and draws attention to the notion of space creation between various human and non-human subjects, rather than viewing space as something people occupy.

According to Sarah Pink, an interview is a “social encounter – an event” that produces “place” (Pink, 2009, p. 82). With the reproductions of the interviews I produce another “place” on the page, a place for the reader to interact with what is said and create his/her own meaning.

Open the body to forces. Create new bodies. Think of writing as activism...Turn collaboration into transduction. Work with affinities rather than subjects (Manning, 2008, p. 19).

A pedagogical analysis of these interviews might include me attempting to codify, generalize and suggest school-based applications of the writers’ responses. The problem with this form of representation and analysis is that it treats data, the interviewee and interviewer as fixed. It puts me, as researcher into the position of “meaning maker,” asserting, cutting and assigning meaning through what I draw attention to and what I neglect. I’ve already taken liberties with the data through editing, and through steering the conversation with the questions I asked in the interviews.

As I attempt to synthesize the data from the interviews I’m left with the sinking feeling that there is a flaw in the whole notion of synthesizing research because it leaves little room for the reader to encounter and make meaning of data. It treats the reader as a passive receptacle waiting to be told what something means.

I know you are capable of making your own meaning from the interviews.
Chapter 6  
Continuing Thoughts

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books; You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me: You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself.

~Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

I have a superposition of feelings on how to conclude this thesis. I will present some of them.

Conclusion

This study illustrates how contemplative practices and aesthetic space affect writers, their writing practices, and sense of self. I triangulated my methods of inquiry and used a theory-supported literature review, self-study and creative writing, and participant interviews with practicing writers to explore my research questions from various angles.

This study shows that it is useful for students in schools (and others) to learn:

1. Techniques or contemplative practices for recognizing “co-dependent origination” of themselves and the interrelation-ship of body/mind/speech and that such knowledge could have positive affects on their writing and lives.

2. To recognize how aesthetic environments affect writers as observers, individuals and creative personae.

3. To recognize how the act of writing also affects the sense of “self.”

Such knowledge could be transformative both within schools and without to help loosen the “…ideological formations that structure the lived experience of oppression” (Orr, 2002, p. 481). And such knowledge could also become a tool for cultivating creativity in students and educators.

Making multiple sense is research-creation at work (Manning, 2008, p. 12).

A specter haunts curricular research, the specter of pedagogical necessity. This “pedagogical imperative” or “will to pedagogy” compels researchers to sum up findings in generalized packages, ready to boost test scores across the province (Dobrin, 1994, p. 63).

Or worse, the pedagogical imperative manifests in anecdotes about pseudonymed students in pseudonymed schools magically “transformed” through a two or six month study.

I worry that pedagogical necessity, or what Freire calls “narration sickness” – adhering to a master narrative of what pedagogy means – haunts me as I attempt to conclude this thesis (Dobrin, 2011, p. 191). So in closing, I will take a post-pedagogy view of educational research.

In “post-pedagogy,” rather than seeing pedagogy as a “new way of teaching students how to write [or think or act] in any literal classroom sense,” I will instead ask what my research for this thesis has taught me “about [my] discipline”
as a researcher and writer? (Dobrin, 2011, p. 190).

I will explore what I un/learned through this study and what I would do differently in future.

**Un/Learn**

Regarding contemplative practice: I would have liked to critique how certain traditions of Buddhist/yogic teachings have branded their contemplative practices in, and outside, of schools. I agree that any practices brought into schools should be taught by teachers with personal experience in the methodology. However, I am wary of lineages claiming a monopoly on practice, trade-marking their practice, and conducting research that vindicates and validates their specific contemplative practice. Contemplative practices have transformative potential, and need to be introduced and taught by experienced and non-dogmatic practitioners. As they grow in popularity, there needs to be a critical overview on how such programs are funded, implemented and researched.

Reading through the studies in this thesis, I realize that I began the research with an admittedly modernist approach to what a “writer” is, and how writing takes place, irrespective of my previously stated stance on co-dependent origination and the notion of the “self” as always in flux. I thought I could represent, through words and images, writers, and writers’ spaces – as if “writers” pre-existed waiting to be represented and “spaces” pre-existed waiting to be represented. I struggled with the synthesis of the participant research precisely because I did not want to sum up the interviews and tell readers what they meant. I thought that readers could glean their own interpretations from the interviews.

Although the writers I profiled shared some processes in common, there was little generalizable information I gathered from them except that they each had a writing practice, that the internet had an adverse affect on each of their writing practices, and that they were all good observers.

The participants in my study had different understandings of what “contemplative practices” meant and how such practices affected their lives/writing. I realize that the phrase “contemplative practice” can be interpreted a variety of ways and that in the future I should be more specific when using the phrase. But at the same time, perhaps I should broaden my understanding of what “contemplative” means. Perhaps good observation skills are more important to writing than being a contemplative. Or perhaps being a contemplative leads to good observation skills.

Each participant thought space was important, but in a variety of ways. They all wrote but in different forms, with different motivations and origins of their writing practice. Each writer had his or her own approach to writing. Rather than attempting to create a pedagogical application to such knowledge, it has been important for me to recognize the diversity of approaches to writing and space, and allow that to mingle and complicate my understanding.

In my auto-ethnography, I began with the thought that I could convey an understanding of my self-development and research interests through vignettes and stories. Yet after reading through the vignettes, I recognized that I had chosen vignettes that “supported” this claim, when there were myriad episodes from my life I left out. This forced me to recognize the importance of editing in data collection: of course the vignettes I chose suited my research area; it would have been nonsensical to add vignettes that veered too far from my research area. But at the same time, I had left so much other data out because I thought it was “irrelevant.” How can I be sure what affected my development as a researcher and writer and what didn’t? I realize that while everything in the thesis is “true” it is evident that it is, and will always be “incomplete,” and it is evident that the power of editing needs to be explored in more detail in educational research methodologies.

Chapter 5, running beneath the text of other chapters, pressing upward, adds another dimension to the already unstable representation of a tidy, codified, generalized study. Those stories are presented more haphazardly than the “data” from my self-study. In Chapter 5 I included all of the stories I am working on currently – unedited for relevance to the themes of this thesis, yet inextricably linked to the themes of this thesis because they are an exploration into the act of “writing,” provoked from memories I recalled during contemplation, written in my self-designed writing space.

I have witnessed my own sense of “self” shift throughout writing this thesis. While this experience supports my claims at the beginning of the “self” being in flux, it is difficult to carve a pedagogical imperative out of these findings. Except perhaps that this study might help with
research methodologies rather than with school-based implementation of research studies.

My understanding of methodologies and data changed while conducting this study. I begin to recognize some flaws in representational forms of qualitative research:

Representation serves the ‘dogmatic image of thought’ as that which categorizes and judges the world through the administration of good sense and common sense, dispensed by the autonomous, rational and well-intentioned individual, according to principles of truth and error (MacLure, 2013, p. 659).

In the Literature Review, Chapter 2, I explored how I perceive myself as not “autonomous,” although arguably I am usually rational and always a well-intentioned individual! I realize now that instead of attempting to represent data in a fixed and explanatory form, I can use data creatively to help me think of new approaches to learning.

I attempted this in Chapter 5, as well as in the graphic layout of the thesis.

But there is space for more experimentation.

“In Research-creation, the outcome is not outlined at the beginning,” my supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Springgay said as we clamored over ribbons of granite and pink quartz last week on an artists’ residency in Georgian Bay.

The outcome is not outlined at the end.
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