Not a Freak Show, Growing up Gay in Rural Ontario: An Arts-informed Inquiry

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis provides a lens into the climate of growing up gay in rural Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s when there were no images, narratives, or roles models upon which to build one’s identity. A full-size painted circus tent forms the basis of the research and the accompanying written thesis is in the form of an artist’s catalogue. Through these forms I present my narratives as a sexual minority and provide strategies for how the present climate of homophobia might be understood and shifted if different stories were created to challenge the oppressive ones that now surround and frame this population. To examine the phenomenon of growing up gay during this time period I began an Artist-in-Residency in a Toronto District School Board High School, where I used an autoethnographic methodology to paint and tell my own story, so I might hear it, share it, and investigate how I and others understand it. This studio provided a site where the narratives of my life, which homophobia had silenced and made invisible, could be revealed. Through the production of a major program of painting I challenged others’ ideas of what growing up gay was like, I addressed a missing element of Canadian gay history, and I made methodological advancements through bringing together Arts-informed and Autoethnographic methodologies. After completing the painted project I wrote the major narratives that emerged from creating the studio space. The written thesis is presented in a storied form to make it accessible to a broad range of readers and to leave space for readers to consider their own stories. Through this research I came to understand how I made sense of my world, ways my
community can change the narratives that are told about them through telling their own, and the value of art as a mechanism for social change. This research contributes to the fields of art for social change, history of sexual and gender minority people, notions of belonging, and furthers Arts-informed and Autoethnographic methodologies.
This research is dedicated to all of those Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer activists who came before me. Thank you for being bold, struggling hard, and achieving so much. It is dedicated to the generation that stands along side me now, more comfortable in their lives due to the work of those who set this in motion, and hopefully stretching their activist work further afield globally, where the struggles are still so daunting. It is dedicated to the younger generations of sexual and gender minority youth who actually imagine a world without struggle. Hats off to you. And here is hoping you will tell your own stories and wonder what all the fuss was about in the first place.
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Kayla thanks for walking into one of my classes and teaching when to push really hard and when pushing hard is too much. I learned a lot from you as one of my students and hope I will learn a lot more from you as a friend.

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To my students at OCADU, from whom I learned so much, thank you.

Two years before I finished, Richard walked back into my life. I blame him for it taking so long. If anyone reading this is writing his or her own PhD I advise you not to get married in the middle of it as it will really slow you down. I would also say follow your heart as I followed mine. Richard, I do not know how you put up with being married to a PhD student, but I am sure glad you did.

OISE/University of Toronto and the Ontario Graduate Studies Program were very generous with funds so I might do this research. I cannot thank you enough.

A couple of years before finishing the writing Andre Grace
invited me to Camp fYrefly in both Alberta and Saskatchewan to be the artist in residence. As a gay person this was my first real experience with camp. (Only some will get the joke.) The experience was life changing as I think that camp is for all. I thank the campers, the staff, and volunteers, you are brave souls and all beautiful. And Bev, where have you been hiding?

LGBTQ or sexual and gender minority youth, how ever you want to categorize yourselves, who crossed my studio door and shared part of your life; who were too afraid to cross that threshold, but peered in and considered it, reminding me what I felt like at your age and reminding me what this is all about; who attended any one of the talks I have given or used the media around this work to start a difficult and liberating conversation, Thank you. Sharing stories makes us see how beautiful and valuable we all are. I hope I have honoured you well with this project and I hope you will tell your stories whenever you can.
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Memories are complicated webs of information. They are full of the details of our lives. Wrapped in the relationships we had with others and ourselves. Charged with emotions. And understood through the lens of hindsight. Though some moments stand out as critical incidents (Sbrocchi, 2007, p. xxiii) they are interwoven with the things that lead up to them and the outcomes they provoked. Rarely can we fully separate out or disentangle most moments from the web in which they sit.

Some of my earliest memories take place in and around my grandparents’ farm. They are more easily separated as the farm was sold before I was five and though events, feelings, and sensations before and after the farm was sold meld into each other, the memories that exist there are framed in a very specific period of time and geography. They are also observed, constructed, and remembered from the height of me as a small boy. Though I was very young many of the images and sensations I have are quite rich and textured.

Feeling the old Buick dropping from the asphalt onto the gravel section of the road and seeing the dust clouds curl up around the back end of the car told my sister and I we were almost there. When you opened the car door, the smell of the fields, that around the back end of the car told my sister and I we were almost there. That smell of the fields, that the memories that exist there are framed in a very specific period of time and geography. They are also observed, constructed, and remembered from the height of me as a small boy. Though I was very young and the memories that exist there are framed in a very specific period of time and geography. They are also observed, constructed, and remembered from the height of me as a small boy. Though I was very young many of the images and sensations I have are quite rich and textured.

On the farm I loved the taste of the vegetables that I pulled as I had been taught he was as gentle as the barn cat that slept beside the workhorse who was at least ten times my height, but if I treated him this way the feeling of belonging. I had jobs that were mine. I did chores. I learned a lot about growing things, caring for animals, and how relationships worked. When I finished my chores or whatever Grandma or Grandpa wanted to teach me I explored. I had adventures. I was very free. There I felt anything I dreamed of was possible. I felt quite certain of who I was. It seemed happy and confident. Nothing in those memories is without a sense of love, support, wonder, and possibility. Although most of the rest of my life has been and still is as full of love, support, and wonderment, the time on the farm and during my early years are the underpinning of my positive sense of self and the resilience I carry as a gay man.

Soon after the farm was sold I began school and learned that not all the world was embodied with such positive sensations. Here I started to see through the lenses of others. As I started to explore who I was, I started to consider my sexual orientation, even before I was aware of such words, the world provided me with many messages that these ideas and feelings were odd or wrong and dirty and disgusting. I was taught these feelings should be kept secret and should be couched in shame and at the very least they were neither welcome nor normal*. I quickly learned to keep my understanding of myself private, for safety sake, although I did not believe I was odd, bad, or anything but normal**. I listened to others’ ideas and notions about sexual minority (Grace, 2013 & 2009) people and could understand some of their discomforts if the people were not restricted to the garden, but also came from inside the house where my grandmother seemed to change basic things into incredible banquets. Grandma had secrets she shared with me so I too could be rich with her knowledge. From the root cellar she would bring up green tomatoes wrapped in newspaper, that she had stored there just before the frost came, and place them in the kitchen window to ripen in the bright sun so you could have a fresh garden tomato in the dead of winter. I loved how the sense of wonderment I had there trickled into all parts of my world but always brought me back there to explore and to ask more questions.

At that farm I felt a sense of belonging. I had jobs that were mine. I did chores. I learned a lot about growing things, caring for animals, and how relationships worked. When I finished my chores or whatever Grandma or Grandpa wanted to teach me I explored. I had adventures. I was very free. There I felt anything I dreamed of was possible. I felt quite certain of who I was. It seemed happy and confident. Nothing in those memories is without a sense of love, support, wonder, and possibility. Although most of the rest of my life has been and still is as full of love, support, and wonderment, the time on the farm and during my early years are the underpinning of my positive sense of self and the resilience I carry as a gay man.

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well. These narratives of hate partially became how I knew myself and became the constant stories I felt I had to contradict.

This doctoral research works towards unraveling my identity from the unkind ways I have been imagined. It replaces the negative narratives that have been told about my community and myself with the stories that are how I know myself and experienced navigating the world around me. It is a poststructuralist (Berger, 1973; Denzin, 1997; Lather & Smithies, 1997) and queer theoretical (Butler, 1990) rememorying of my life attempting to pry apart my understanding of my world from the negative ways the world imagined me.

Combining Arts-informed (Cole & Knowles, 2008) and Autobiographical (Chang, 2008) methodologies I gathered information, re-accessed my memories, and created images and narratives which allow readers/viewers to become more familiar with the world as I saw it, and question how others viewed and tried to explain it. I set up a studio in Geroges Vanier Secondary School, a Toronto District School Board high school and began to paint my memories. While painting these images I told stories, sometimes as an activist for those who believed contradictory narratives to what I was telling; sometimes as a mirror to those who were similarly othered, being sexual or gender minority people themselves; and sometimes working in the confusing places in between for those who had not yet formed solid notions of what it truly meant to be a gay person.

The synchronicity of completing this research through combining these methodologies and my already established research practice of painting both reflected the complicated intertwining

* Seen by the hegemony as regular and not out of the ordinary (when speaking of my sexual orientation and how the hegemony wanted me to think of it).
** Differing from the hegemonic understanding of normal, this includes the everyday navigation of the world by those who cross-dress, transition their genders or live somewhere in the middle of the male/female binary, by gay men, lesbians, bisexual people and so on. Though the hegemony may see us as other our lives do not stand out as being anything but normal to those of us who live them (when speaking about how I saw myself).
*** A population made up of those who are sexual or gender minority people and their allies. Though some neighbourhoods become populated with a greater percentage of these people, it should be understood that members of this community exist across all geographical and emotional boundaries (when speaking of my community or the sexual and gender minority community).
elements of identity I was trying to unravel and the growing body of contemporary queer literature (Reid, 2013 & coyote, 2012) that wraps its characters in resistance, resilience, and possibility, while discarding the elements of shame and secrecy previous generations had to struggle through and navigate to create more equitable and safe communities. The back-and-forth nature of the resulting painted and written dissertation and the invitation to the audience to move from one to another reflects the fluidity of contemporary notions of queer identity. The resulting artist’s catalogue both meets the requirements of a more traditional doctoral thesis and queers what is possible.

The painting completed as both a means of information gathering and sharing of findings was a circus sideshow tent. The exterior and interior of the walls of the tent were painted in a manner to explore how I was perceived, how I perceived myself, and the tension between these two. The narratives that make up the text of the artist’s catalogue are reflective of the more epiphanic moments in my life discovered and remembered (Hooks, 1989) through the research. They are not arranged in chronological order, but rather arranged to best guide the readers/viewers through the unfolding of how I came to understand my life though the completion of this project. In and around these narratives are some observations, realizations, and journal entries. They sit all on their own on separate pages and are places to stop and ponder the complexity of navigating identity. They too are not chronological but rather sit as thoughts or signposts as to how some of this project happened.

When I first began to undertake anti-homophobia work I was frequently asked, “when did you first know you were gay?” and I often internally chuckled at the thought of waking up one day as if I had never thought of being gay before, but in an instant I then knew I was. I hope that the arrangement of images and narratives in my research will allow the readers/viewers to consider my truth in unraveling and coming to terms with such an identity. The narratives I have told in this research reflect the “story I could live with” (Winterson, 2011).
To have a full understanding of this story you need to know four details.

When I was young, only three, my grandfather called me fearless. He said this often because he would find me in peculiar places with a smile on my face and an inquisitive look in my eye. Whether up a big oak tree on the lane stretching into the farm, hanging from the barn rafters, or shoulder deep helping fix a piece of farm machinery ten times my size, I was in there.

“Fearless,” he would say, although I didn’t know what he meant.

When I was young, I was very small. I was short. I was skinny. Some called me tiny. Others called me spritely. I liked being small as it let me into places and under things where others could not go. I got to see things from different angles than others did.

When I was young, I loved to climb. My family often found me in precarious places. Whenever possible, if I could climb to a higher height, I would do it. Climbing things was a challenge; it was a problem I could solve. And when I did solve it, I could see the world from new perspectives.

When I was young, I liked to be naked. I took off my clothes whenever and wherever I could get away with it. This was not some haphazard thing I would do. I would simply decide at different moments of the day to disrobe and stack my clothes in a neatly organized pile. This allowed me to later quickly gather them out how I could keep the tree straight and still get higher, but as the cutlery did not bend, I came up with no solutions. After lunch, I decided to let go and see if I could safely land on the lawn.

So, I climbed higher. Higher equalled closer. Now close enough, I decided to let go and see if I could safely land on the lawn. This time, further up, I realized I was getting an even stranger view of the neighbour’s yard beside our house as the tree just kept bending. I was now hovering over their front lawn. I climbed around to the other side of the tree and I still hung over their lawn, just a little closer to it. Pausing meant I bounced up and down a bit, which was fun, but did not help the conundrum I was caught in. So, I climbed higher. Higher equalled closer. Now close enough, I decided to let go and see if I could safely land on the lawn.

Feet first I dropped. The tree made a whizzing noise as it sprung from my hands and back into the sky.

Bam, I hit the ground, on a foot and a knee, but without falling over. I threw my hands into the air as I had seen my friend Danny do when he jumped from the shed behind his garage.

I marched over to the tree and started my ascent again, this time less concerned with how high I could get or what I could see. Who cared about my sister? Now I was more concerned with the quality of my landing when I dropped.

As I climbed, I thought about why the tree always bent in the same direction. “What was the science in this?” as my father would say. If I was to hang from the tree, holding tight with only my hands, maybe I could make a more accurate landing. I positioned myself for this and as my feet touched the ground, my arms flew up.

“Tah-Dah!” I congratulated myself and headed back to the cedar. I am not quite certain how many times I climbed the tree and dropped with a resounding “Tah-Dah!” before I started to get tired with the work of climbing and bored with the repetition of my act. I had to make it more exciting and I needed to figure it all out before Connie got home. I was going to impress her.

As I stood on the sidewalk and pondered the tree I noticed the bottom of the tree was not very far from the house. Closer to the top, the tree trunk got thinner and was farther out. But I wondered if it was really that far from the edge of the roof of the house.

I counted off the steps on the ground. I tried jumping from the edge of the house to the branches of the tree to see how close I could come to the centre, with quite a bit of success. I went to the other end of the house and up the climber tree to get a better look.

I climbed from the carport roof onto the slow incline of the split-level and walked down to the other side. I stood near the edge and pondered the jump. I threw some stones I picked from the eaves trough knowing I was a better jumper than I was a thrower. They hit the tree and farther. Deciding I needed a running start, I headed back to the carport and climbed down. A few attempts at running the length of the house and then jumping showed me I would land close. I knew the science of throwing something off a bridge and watching it arch. With the combined speed and jump, I could most definitely make it. I climbed the cedar tree one more time to look at the roof and assure myself that I had it plotted out right. Then I dropped to the neighbour’s lawn one more time to build my confidence.
“Tah-Dah!” with a perfect landing. Back at the carport end of the house, I climbed. I walked the distance from the one side of the house to the other and counted out the steps, like I had seen someone do on Walt Disney before they made a big jump. I looked at my target. I made binoculars with my hands to make it seem like more of an adventure. I walked back to the other end of the house where I would start my run and held my finger in the air to see which way the wind was blowing. I had seen this on Walt Disney as well, though I could not really figure out how it worked or why it mattered.

Without much pageantry, as no one was around to notice, I started my run and when I reached the edge I flung myself as far out as I could. My right leg hit the branches first before the rest of me crashed into the center of the tree. As I expected the tree continued to bend as it had before, but rather than dropping onto the neighbour’s lawn, I was flung out onto it.

Smack! My feet and butt hit the ground and, though it had not been one of the graceful Tah-Dah moments, it confirmed that my calculations were good. With a little practice, I was quite sure I could make it turn out the way I wanted.

I stood and headed back past the cedar to the climber tree and up onto the roof. The second attempt would be more calculated and with less fear. I decided to fling myself out like I was cannonballing into a pool so I could fly through the branches before I grabbed the trunk. This would let me then straighten my legs as the tree bent and help me land feet first. I crouched on the far edge of the house like runners at the start of races. I imagined the gun going off and I gave it my all.

My method was perfect. Off the side of the house, I hurled myself toward the tree. A great grab bent the tree and a relatively good Tah-Dah landing was achieved. I launched three more attempts before I decided to really make it the best it could be.

While heading back to the climbing tree, I stopped on the front stoop to disrobe. It was time to do this naked. The feel of the wind on my body would be extraordinary. The sight of the perfect landing would be more outstanding than any of the previous jumps.

I folded my shirt, shorts, and underwear onto the cement. I kept my shoes and socks on for better grip while running on the roof. I headed to the climber tree and once on the roof I crouched in my starting spot.

Running like this felt freer. Propelling myself like this felt more aerodynamic. Grabbing the tree seemed easier. The landing was perfect.

It was during the second naked attempt and probably my tenth in total, that my mum, who was doing dishes, heard the strange noise and saw an odd shadow racing across the neighbour’s wall from above. She draped the towel over her shoulder and headed for the front door. On to the front stoop, noticing my pile of clothes, she became a bit worried. I heard her call out my name as the front screen door snapped closed. I was just reaching the top of the climber tree as she crossed over to the neighbour’s lawn across the street. She turned to look back as I pulled myself up onto the roof.

I waved to her, knowing she would be amazed at what I had taught myself to do. I took a stance like the bodybuilders I had seen on television, flexing all of my muscles. I stood up straight as a soldier and saluted. I waved again and then got down like a runner about to start a race. As I turned to see how thrilled she would be to see the spectacle, I heard her scream, “STOP!!!!!!”

And for a second I considered it.

In the next second I realized I was going to show her something she had probably never before seen or maybe never even imagined. I was going to show her how amazing, brave, and fearless her son really was.

I took off.

I leapt better than I ever had before. I caught the tree perfectly. It bent with my weight out over the neighbour’s lawn. I let go and landed one foot in front of another, facing across the street to my mum. I threw my hands in the air and yelled “TAH-DAH!"

I was small. I was naked. And I was fearless.

Mum must have run as well because in seconds she was hugging me tight to her body. She was amazed! She then shoved me away holding tight to my arms and bellowed, “Don’t you ever do that again!” And then hugged me tight as if she had not seen me in a long time. Maybe she wasn’t amazed. She shoved me away and shaking me, her face did not look thrilled, but rather angry and shocked.

“Do you know how much you frightened me?” she screamed.

Then I was tight against her chest again, where I could hear the gurgling noise of her beginning to cry. I am not certain how many times this hugging and shaking went on, but I do know her tears continued even after she marched me back to the front stoop to gather my clothes and then into the kitchen, where I was told to be quiet and where I passed the rest of the day. Though she kept looking at me with varying expressions, neither she nor I spoke. I understood I was to think about what I had done and see if I could figure out why she was both frightened and full of love.

I spent quite a bit of that day thinking about how we saw things differently. I thought a great deal about how I could be so excited, proud, and amazed by this new great feat I had accomplished. And how she could see it as terrifying. I could see it as an accomplishment, and a true part of being fearless. I could both feel her great love from the way she had had cried and held me. I could also see how horrified she was, remembering the tightness of her grip as she shook me and made me promise to never again do what she had witnessed.

Today, I see that this was the beginning of many things about my identity that I would admire, and that would trouble my mum and others.
PLATE 1
FEARLESS: Spencer at Age 4 with Grandma Harrison, on Harold Drive, Peterborough, Ontario, 1966.
While facilitating a discussion of the Mental Health Working Group at OCAD University and trying to get the committee to come together as a cohesive group, I asked everyone to state who they were and why they were there. When I answered the question myself I said, “As a gay man, my community has a history of heightened alcohol and drug abuses as well as a much higher rate of youth suicide. It is part of how I am identified. I am on this committee because I want to rewrite that narrative. My research and my practice are about telling a different story from how I am imagined and aiding others who are similarly identified to share new narratives.”

(August 12, 2013, OCADU, Toronto, Ontario)
I walked around the tent one last time. The first exhibition was to open in about an hour. Deana Sumanac from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, (CBC) and her cameraperson had just left from their initial interview with me. It was the first time I had been alone to collect my thoughts in the last two days, as many people had been involved in trying to help me get this exhibition ready. This was a perfect time to pause and reflect on what I had originally set out to do, examine what I had thus far achieved, and further consider what I still had to complete.

The tent looked quite massive exhibited here in the studio it was produced in. Having been painted in sections, it now stood in the centre of the space so you could walk around and inside of it. Standing 14 feet high at the centre post peak and stretching 19 feet across, it had an impactful presence in the space. The guide wires were secured from the tops of the twenty outside posts to bright red sandbags acting as ballast on the floor. This both added to the first impression the tent made and extended its circumference as it stretched out another three feet all around. When I first got this round and brightly coloured tent I thought it was perfect for the project, and seeing it erected I was thrilled by how much it felt like a real circus tent. Originally the tent was not designed to stand indoors. It took a great deal of planning and experimenting to raise the tent, now indoors. However, standing in this space it was quite intimidating and looked humorously out of place. The opening of the tent that faced the studio door where the audience would come in created a welcoming yet peculiar sensation; the subtle warm light inside when seen through the entrance would invite viewers into the space and into the tent. There was about ten feet of space for the audience to view the overall tent at the front and back of the studio and only about five or six feet at the sides. My intention of ‘queering’ the space (Butler, 1997; 2006) by showing a structure that was meant for the outdoors in an enclosed indoor space was both quietly subversive and very powerful. From the hallway into the classroom where the tent was located, there was no indication of the space’s contents. I felt this was the perfect metaphor for the unimagined sexual and gender minority students within the school population, and everywhere in the world.

I adjusted one of the fluted flaps of the top of the tent so it hung less carelessly. I admired the detail of the red piping which ran the edge of the fluting, reflecting the red of the pattern I had painted as a continuous element around the inside images of the tent. I appropriated images from Ringling and Barnum Bailey’s circus posters and advertisements for their circus and freak shows, hoping to show how those who were once gazed at as oddities are now simply seen as members of our communities. I intended to juxtapose these images with a few images of myself, which would position me as the one in the gaze, questioning the necessary shifts in beliefs and perceptions of gay people. As I walked around the outside of the tent, considering the completed appropriated images I worried that, because I had not yet finished the self-portrait images, the audience might not fully understand the project as it stood in this ‘work in progress’ exhibition.

Those panels, where the images of me would be, remained blank. The overall impression of the outside of the tent was quite circus feeling, with all its bright colours. Renderings of Dolly the fattest lady in the world, Jean the sword swallower, and the tattoo artist greeted the viewers (Daniel, N, eds. 2008). Flatly painted to stay true to the original images that they were directly appropriated from, they now metaphorically spoke of the shallowness of the judgements made about the people they portrayed. When the project was completed they would also speak about discrimination towards and judgements of gender and sexual minority people of today.

Images of winking clowns appear painted as decals on some panels as hints to the viewers that on these there are some more subtle innuendoes about sex and other peculiar situations. Text wrapped around the tent, drawn from posters and original, historical advertisements, speaking of ‘multiple stages,’ ‘strangely queer’ details, and assuring viewers that those they are about to see inside are alive. The original advertisements continually spoke of the freaks or attractions being alive so their audiences would know that these characters were real. Incongruously now, the repeated images of the word alive speaks to the audience with an activist tone showing the strength of gender and sexual minority youth in staying alive, while also speaking to the levels of self-harm and suicides the media are...
reporting at this time. The authenticity of the images and the garish colours of the figures as well as the bright colours of the panels of the tent they are painted on are reminiscent of any small town fair. However, being reinterpreted and changed with new meanings they suggest a very different narrative.

Stepping inside for one last inspection I adjust some of the lights that illuminate the space. My electrician father designed and constructed the lighting scheme. I wanted something that would cast a warm glow on the images, create no shadows that would obstruct the viewer’s ability to see and read what they were exploring, and reflect the circus-like feel while being reminiscent of a time past. I wanted to create both a sense of warmth and comfort as well as have the piece suggest a different period of time so as to indicate that once inside the tent this is a history. The system he created was of smaller, bare 15-watt bulbs that simply hung from the wires invisibly stretched between the outside of the walls of the tent and the fluted fabric which over hung them. The bulbs are reminiscent of the lights strung between tents at local fairs; however, in this setting their combined heat slightly warms the inside of the tent giving the viewer a different physical sensation than when he or she was standing outside. Circling the interior of the tent I noticed that the lights also warm the paint ever so slightly, mixing its aroma with that of the smell of the raw canvas on which the paint has been applied. For me this scent triggers memories of being inside tents at our local county fair.

When painting the inside of this circular tent multiple elements were at play. I hoped the images inside the tent would tell the story of my life from my earliest memories around the age of three or four to the school year between being 14 and 15 when I first met another person who identified himself as gay and I knew I was not alone. I also hoped to create a few panels which would speak to the time between these memories in the tent and present day, identifying the positioning from which I am producing the project and providing clues to the ethnographic looking back at a community altered by the human rights achievements that have happened between then and now.

When I began to paint the tent, I started by free writing notes and narratives on the interior panel walls. The original act of free writing was intended for me and me alone as I planned to paint completely over the words with the images this method provoked. The free writing would be the underpainting of the finished images. I thought this process would retrigger memories which, when coupled with the act of being in the high school environment, would deepen the meaning making possible in the project. But, as is often the case in Arts-informed Research, the process played a major role in helping me to discover what I was actually researching. The embodied act of free writing helped me articulate an added layer of the narrative I was telling.

The writing was painted on very wet surfaces. Individual panels of the tent were painted first with water to saturate the surfaces and then, with a mixture of acrylic paint and water, the words were rendered on the walls of the tent. This allowed the text to be rendered and, yet with the liquid quality of the paint, flow down the surface of the panel. It was hoped that metaphorically this would recreate the action of remembering memories, as the narrative would be less steadfast and more elastic. I wanted its transient quality of rendering to reflect the hunches I had of what the research
was really about. Once I began painting I realized that I needed to go back over the text which was washing down the surface of the tent walls, to make some of the words more definite yet still leaving others illegible.

While painting these texts I realized they were also going to play a role for the viewer as I was going to allow portions of them to bleed through the images, both narrating the painting and troubling the viewer’s ability to fully make sense of the text. I realized allowing the viewer to only read fragments of the stories would reflect my inability to always tell my story. The words, which were not decipherable to the viewer, would become the actions of oppression which disabled me from safely telling the truths of my life as I came to know them. The finished images, enhanced and interrupted by the text, would create the sensation of being forced to tell multiple stories, altered stories and untrue stories similar to what happens to many gender and sexual minority people when they are forced to shift their narratives in consideration of their own safety.

Standing inside the tent alone I began to read, as the viewer might, the fragments of the stories and noted the destabilizing sensations the voids in the narratives created. Also intermingling with the texts and partially obstructed texts that wrap around the tent is a motif of flowers painted loosely reminiscent of the wallpaper from my father’s parents’ dining room. This visual motif makes the inside panels cohesive. It also makes the viewer lose sight of where the narrative begins and ends as it spins around the whole inside of the tent. If entering the tent alone, these two motifs leave the viewer without a place to begin or end. There is not a chronological or linear layout of the images for the viewer to follow. In fact it is quite the opposite. Purposefully the images are arranged to allow a viewer to begin anywhere. Due to the figurative nature of most of the images the viewer is aware that there is a narrative of a life going on in the varying renderings that make up the inside of the tent. With the size of these figures being similar to that of the viewer, those inside the tent are prompted to consider their own narratives in relation to what they are viewing. Painted in warm brown tones there is some suggestion that the images are historical in nature. In five portrayals inside the tent images are in full colour suggesting there is a deeper significance to these representations. In almost all instances the viewer does not believe the images to be true because they are rendered realistically but, they are painted in a loose format which makes the viewer aware they are painted. Thus the viewer is aware of both the body of the artist making these images and their own bodies exploring them. This embodied experience allows the viewer an entrance point into the work as well as asks them to question what their positioning is in relation to the narrative the work provides.

An area of the tent has been covered with painted images of the wallpaper and then stained to imply years of aging. However, the staining is such that it looks to have surrounded photographs or paintings once hung on the walls, but that are now missing. This section of the tent is considered to be a reflection of all the gay people I knew growing up. There were none. This asks the viewer to consider the instability of growing up without images, narratives, or role models upon which to build an understanding of my identity.
A photographically real image of a boat on the ocean has been rendered hanging on the wallpapered sections of the tent and the mapping of my mother’s childhood farm. In real life, this was a photograph that hung in my father’s childhood home. It is an image of the boat his parents immigrated to Canada on as Barnardo children (Bready, 1930). It is positioned in the tent as an indicator or a point of conjunction between the two families. It is rendered with a shadow painted below the illusion of the frame around the photograph, to suggest to the viewers that a more realistic interpretation of the narratives should be considered. This is part of the tension that exists within the tent, giving the viewer information assuring them the interior narrative is real and then provides them with elements suggesting to them that it is not real by revealing the process of painting. This heightens the viewer’s awareness that nothing in the tent is steadfast, but like memory, it is movable or bendable.

A section of the tent is heavily laden with photographic images. These have been produced using a method of photo-transfer which adheres copies of original historical photographs directly on the tent walls. These are direct historical, and family references and they act as citations within the work making the viewer aware that the narratives they are attempting to read are not conjured from imagination, but rather, autoethnographically depicted from the life being presented in this research. A large portion of these images is imbedded in and around a mapping of a farm and a garden. This farm is the farm my mother was born and raised on and where I first started to make meaning of my life through interactions with my grandfather. This juxtaposition of photographic images with the painted mapping of the farm again heightens the previously mentioned tension of reality versus memory. An image of my grandfather is rendered on a panel nearby and with text surrounding him that questions what he would think of me now.

My mother created drawings of the farm after I asked her what the garden, where one of the major narratives of my life took place, looked like. They were drawn with such accuracy that, after they arrived by mail, ‘rendered on scribbler paper,’ I knew they should be included in the interior images of the tent. When I called her to tell her this she told me she had thought more about it and there was one gooseberry bush missing and wondered if I could please add it. These drawings prompted me to take her with me and return to the farm as part of my field study.

Walking on the old family farm retriggered both of our memories. It was a large component of how I conducted my research and tried to make sense of my childhood understandings of the world. Looking at my mother, standing inside her childhood bedroom and seeing the memories emotionally flood over her and the tears well up in her eyes, I came to realize the greater implications of this research. She and I both realized that all that had happened in her life had influenced and affected my life. Her life, seen in context, let me see mine in greater context. Her life on this farm and the years that followed, helped create the possibilities that allowed me to become the person I am. Standing in her childhood room, looking around
and at each other we could both see how her understanding of her world spearheaded my ability to see my world through the lens this research uncovers. I then knew that the mapping needed to not just be loosely drawn from her sketches, but rather be projected and then rendered directly on the walls of the tent in a way that the depth of the research could be realized by the viewer.

A large panel of the tent is made up of a rendering of an image of me surrounded by my friends from the street I grew up on. This image gives many references to the date of its origin, based on the styles of the architecture and the clothing worn by the children of the time in which the events portrayed took place. There is a string of broken text on either side of this rendering that speaks to the roles my father and my mother played in my early childhood. This adds to the image because it opens up the idea that, though my family was nuclear in its make up (mother, father, and two children), my mother was the first woman to work outside the home on our street and in doing so at that time, she led to my belief that there were other possibilities outside of the neighbourhood families I knew.

A single panel tells a story of early heroes of mine being both my grandfather and the artist Rembrandt van Rijn. The image in this panel is of me proudly wearing an Elizabethan collar I had made. In the narrative revealed in this panel my grade one teacher, Miss Judd allowed me to wear the collar in secret, protectively performing my formulating gay or gender bending identity. This is the panel where the most text has been left legible, indicating to the viewer that this is one of the main themes among the other images in the tent.

A four part, two-panel section of the tent has images which are central to the larger history being told. These are four of the images that utilize colour to suggest their importance. They are rendered with a visual framing device suggesting they are images taken from older photo albums. This suggests that they come from the past and this asks the viewers to consider them in a deeper way as they must carry some historical significance to the larger narrative made up by the collective images in the tent. The images are of my public school, my high school, my church, and the table set for my family Christmas dinner.

Three panels of the tent are a rendering of my childhood home. More specifically the central image in this portion of the painting is of a tree with its branches outstretched in front of the house. This was the tree that, when I first heard the term Family Tree, I imagined as mine. I protected it from being destroyed when our swimming pool was being installed. This is the tree under which I first kissed a girl and a year later first kissed a boy. The significance of the tree is illustrated to the viewer by the way the leaves have been rendered. The leaves of this tree are made up of photo-transfers of images from my childhood, family members, and close friends. I was close to finishing the process of presenting these images before the tent had to be erected for this exhibition; however, some of the surfaces where not yet clarified, leaving some of the photographs obscured from full vision. I told myself that, for this exhibition, viewers would be able to experience the process of transferring the images as well as some of the images themselves.
The last four panels are not finished for this exhibition, as I want to experience an audience viewing the project before I attempt to make sense of the project to its fullest and decide if the last panels in the circle are to act as a conclusion or not. However, there are a few things that I do know that I want in the last panels. I intend to have a few more photo transfer images of important former partners from my life. I want to be sure that when young gay men are inside the tent they can see hints of a love life. This is important because one thing that is still missing from the narratives now being told in and about this community is about the existence of romance and relationships.

I also knew there should be an image of me caught between the inside and the outside of the tent walls although I was not yet sure how this would look. I imagine it looking like a cut in the tent wall that I am somehow present in, but I had not fully imagined how it would look. I am also not yet sure at what stage in my life I should appear in that image. I cannot be sure whether it should be me at a young age, at an age where I am first fully realizing my sexuality, or at the age I am now looking back through the history I have laid out on the tent walls. I also think there needs to be some sort of focal image to the narrative of my life presently, as I see it. There needs to be some sort of reminder for the viewer that these images are a remembering of my past, not rendered during my past (Sbrocchi, 2007). There must be a reminder that the narrative that is being told here is being told through the veil of memory as these stories could have not been told at the time that they were lived.

Looking up to the roof I see the colours of the outside striping bleeding through the raw colour of the canvas. I want to render the narrative of my grandfather and me looking up at the stars. I want to find a way to tell that story, but have it look different from the rest of the tent. I need the viewer to realize that there is something in that narrative that is more significant than the others. I hope the viewers will look up at the roof of the tent and feel the same sense of childhood wonder that I felt looking up into the stars. I am not yet certain how to tell this story.

While thinking about this, and while thinking about not being able to tell the stories of my life as they were happening, I begin to look around the tent, almost spinning. As I look from image to image, in no particular order, I am struck by how the different narratives string together in different configurations and with different themes. It is very clear to me that allowing the viewers to make sense of the images without a chronological or linear order also makes possible a greater personal reading for them. I am certain that the tent really works the way I hoped it would and that the viewers realize they are looking at a segment of history, my history, a window into the narratives of a gay man born at this time in history. My eyes continue to dance over the images until a knocking at the studio door interrupts me. I check my watch. It is about fifteen minutes before the show is to open. I step outside of the tent to answer and prop open the door of the studio. I expect it will be a group of students who will be guiding parents and visitors from the front door of the school and the parent-teacher interviews being conducted in the cafeteria.

To my surprise it was not someone from the high school. It was Tony Storey the Director of Development from Trent University, where I had completed my Master’s degree. While shaking his hand I see Joe Gottdenker, one of the Holocaust Survivors I traveled to Poland and Germany with, on the March of Remembrance and Hope, walking up the hall towards me. Within minutes a few more friends, classmates and family members arrived. The spaces around and inside the tent were now being viewed by some of those whom the narratives reflected. People from all corners of my life were arriving and beginning to explore the tent.

Deana and the cameraperson from the CBC came back after their dinner break and immediately wanted to speak to my PhD supervisor, Ardra, who had just arrived and was looking around in the tent. I took her coat and introduced them to her. They slipped a microphone on her and I moved away to talk to some of the audience who were now beginning to talk with each other and were also asking me questions.

As I moved around the tent I began to feel the excitement of an art opening, but I was aware that others were feeling the excitement of being at the fair or at the circus, prompted by the tent they were now viewing. People were talking and pointing out things to each other as they moved around the tent. They joked and laughed at the more circus-like images. The noise level was celebratory and almost felt like being in a crowded country fair. The renderings were fairly easy to recognize and some of the text clarified what people were looking at.

I was asked by one of the student’s younger sisters, why it said alive so much on the outside the tent. This of course was a set-up by Arash (some names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identities of members of vulnerable communities), her older brother who had come out to me as being gay earlier on in the year and told me of his struggles with suicidal thoughts. Arash had confessed that seeing me in the cafeteria standing right beside the bullies made him feel stronger. He had told me that coming into the studio, being able to talk with me, and seeing the tent get made had given him the support he needed. He promised me that now that he had met someone who was willing and proud to say that they were gay, he would never consider suicide again. He winked at me and smiled so powerfully as I explained the images and the words to her. I could tell that he felt proud to be one of the kids who had made it through this difficult time.
As I said goodbye to them I rounded the tent and came to the entrance. Outside the tent seemed like a party but the mood was different inside. I stepped in and was enveloped by the silence inside. It was like being in a library. Some people were silently crying. One woman wiped away tears as she pointed at the rendering of me in the collar saying, “He was only a little boy.” People were communicating in whispers and pointing at things as they recognized elements or as they questioned each other about what they were observing. Through the murmurs and muted conversations I realized they were not just talking about the renderings and words that they were observing, but rather they were narrating how they themselves were related to these images. Viewers were telling their own stories. The tent itself was connecting people with each other.

The light was soft and warm and comforting. The temperature was different inside with the combined heat of those in the tent and the lights which illuminated the interior of the project. People were in groups of two or three. They moved around the tent viewing the narratives in front of them and pointing back to things they had already seen. They were comparing and connecting the images that surrounded them. They broke from their groups and asked others if they knew what some detail was or about the story behind a particular detail of the painting. Some tried to piece together the context as they watched or took part in the activist work I am doing, as people explored the tent. Whether someone knew me or not became irrelevant. Some of my friends talked to those from the school asking them what it was like to have me here as the artist in residence. Students from the school began to realize who some of my friends and family were and they began to ask questions about my life based on what they knew about me from the tent.

Hearing a commotion outside of the tent I ducked my head down and went through the door. Deana from the CBC told me they were finished with Ardra and asked if I was ready to have the opening ceremonies. She made it clear that they had a deadline to make if they were going to get the piece edited and get it on The National that night. I got some of the students to gather people from inside and outside the tent as I headed off to get Jan, my boss from OCAD University; Peter, the superintendent from the Toronto District School Board; and Ardra, all of whom would say a few words to officially open the project.

People gathered in a hallway outside my studio. We stood at the far end away from the studio. Jan, Ardra, Peter, and I looked forward towards about one hundred people. Behind us gathered a large group of students and parents coming from the parent-teacher interviews in the cafeteria at the front of the school. Most of the students stood at the front of this group and donned the red foam clown noses I had given them earlier. The lights from the television camera went on and we began to speak.

Peter welcomed everyone to the opening of the project and, with a really big grin on his face, thanked me for choosing Georges Vanier as the school I wanted to work in. He congratulated the school and me for a job well done. Jan told the crowd about the relationship she has with me, of hearing about the project all along the way as I made it, and how she loved seeing people inside and around the tent, as I was getting closer to completing it. She spoke of the power of art to change the world and, when the crowd of students behind us applauded and cheered, she turned and said, “Yeah you know what I mean! You get it!” Ardra said some important and powerful words about Arts-informed research. She spoke of mindfulness and how Arts-informed research creates opportunities to make change. She concluded by saying how wonderful it was to see the project progressing and see such a large audience interested in the work.

And then it was up to me. I spoke of the great community who had come together to help me make this work and cited the school, the principal, the students, the crew who helped me erect the tent, and my friends and family who stood by me when I said I wanted to paint a freak show tent as a PhD thesis. Everyone laughed. As I began to speak of my nephew Trevor, who had welded all the plates for the tent poles to stand indoors and helped me build the structure on which to hang my research, I choked up. Tears began to flow as I awkwardly told the crowd about how much healing had taken place and how it was only with a community that we could move forward with social change and human rights. I saw my mother standing in the crowd with tears in her eyes, as is often the case as she watches or takes part in the activist work I am doing, but knew this one was a little different. I thought back to her in her childhood bedroom like me also overcome with emotions. I was struck by how, in such a short amount of time, human rights for gay and lesbian people could shift so much. I was struck by how my family members were homophobic at certain times in and around my coming out. And finally I was struck by how much this research was just beginning to have the effect I wanted. There was much more to get done. I suggested we all head back into the studio and have a look at the tent, my research that they had come to see.
PLATE 18
FREAK SHOW: Tent Exterior Panorama.
PLATE 19
FREAK SHOW: Tent Interior Panorama.
PLATE 20
FREAK SHOW: Tent Interior Panorama.
PLATE 21
FREAK SHOW: Tent Exterior Panorama.
“The first opening of the Freak Show was in my studio in the high school. Family, friends, along with students, teachers, and staff from the school as well as people from the university I taught in, some of my PhD committee, and some local and national media attended. I looked out into the crowd when I was making opening remarks but when I saw all of the supportive faces intermingled with those of the gender and sexual minority kids who had secretly come out to me while I made the project, I wasn’t sure that what was painted on the walls of the tent mattered, only that I had brought all of these people together so they could later share this moment in their own stories.”

(Reflecting on how I felt on opening night of the Freak Show at Georges Vanier Secondary School, November 25, 2010)
“André? Are you there?” Ardra asked from the head of the table, just to my left. Gary sat across from me and to my right, and André was in Edmonton, but hopefully present at the meeting through the speaker-phone.

“Yes, I’m here. Hello everyone,” André’s voice came through in such a manner that we could hear the smile he had at the other end of the conference call line.

“Hello André. It’s Gary. Are you well?” the second reader on my committee said, with his depleted New Zealand accent, and another familiar smile echoing his words.

“Hi, André. It’s Spencer speaking,” I said sounding as nervous as anyone meeting with their committee to discuss their proposed research and completing their comprehensive exam qualifications might. Although I too had met André, and could quite easily put a face to him, imagining his expressions as he spoke, I was by far the least familiar with him.

“Oh, André, it’s Ardra. We will get started here. And I think while we have such a good connection, we will begin with you. Do you have any questions for Spencer?” With that the discussion began. Questions were asked about certain texts I had read, with further suggestions about ones I might want to look at. Questions about how I would define my methodology were posed. Comments were made and questions were asked about the progress of the tent. And after what seemed like hours of back and forth, it was by far the least familiar with him.

“Okay, André, it’s Ardra. We will get started here. And I think while we have such a good connection, we will begin with you. Do you have any questions for Spencer?” With that the discussion began. Questions were asked about certain texts I had read, with further suggestions about ones I might want to look at. Questions about how I would define my methodology were posed. Comments were made and questions were asked about the progress of the tent. And after what seemed like hours of back and forth, it was by far the least familiar with him.

“Well, look, the tent is clearly the dissertation. It is the research. You have proposed quite a lot, possibly too much, some unnecessary, but the written part that goes to the oral exam must honour the work you are doing,” Gary said. “Not a standard thesis. That would just be duplicating the process. I think it should be in the form of an artist’s catalogue.”

The sensation of support mixed with the fear I felt before the meeting was ending, and a different fear was beginning. I had to decipher how to create an artist’s catalogue that, as Gary had said, truly honoured my work. I had to clarify for my readers what research is and explain how I had challenged some of the very ideas of that to make my work more artful, stronger, and inclusive. I also wanted to be sure I would not simply replicate more traditional artist’s catalogues whose standard formula follows a pattern of a curator’s comments, an essay, or interview of the artist in which the reasons behind the work and methods of its production are explained, followed by images of the exhibition and an artist’s curriculum vitae or exhibition schedule to conclude. My tent is my thesis. And seeing how I have challenged what a dissertation might be, having painted mine to be a small freak show tent, it seemed only fitting that I too would make the catalogue somewhat creative and much more reflective of the work I had undertaken. The task became quite clear and yet challenging.

“The truth about stories is that, that’s all we are,” I said to myself silently, repeating Thomas King’s words as the mantra they had become.

Research

Most of what I know about research I learned in public school. In Grade Seven I did my first experiment that involved a Bunsen burner. I did not actually get to work the burner because I was only in Grade Seven. My teacher, Mr. Werner, did, with groups of students gathered around him. Each group of four ‘science buddies’ would come to the front of the class and he would light the burner over which he would hold two metal containers, one containing salt and one containing sugar. We would all watch the thermometers in each container and then record the different melting temperatures of the two substances. He said that, because we had done the experiment seven times and four people in each group wrote down the results, that when we compared our twenty-eight answers and found they were similar for salt and similar for sugar that we could conclude what the correct answer was. We could find out what the true melting temperatures were and this would be the proof of our experiments. He said that what we were doing was research.

Also in Grade Seven in the same week my class was asked to write book reports about a novel of our choice. We were to explain the plot, describe at least two characters, and state the main themes in the story. Mr. Werner told us that writing about the plot and characters were descriptions but, because we had to analyze the stories to come up with the themes, that part of our paper was research. How we saw and understood something was what we were answering in our reports.

In a Grade Twelve physics class, Mrs. Stevenson wanted to demonstrate the principles of a vacuum by holding a metal can that was completely sealed over heat. We watched as the sides of the container caved in due to the shift in temperature and due to the burning off of the oxygen within the canister. She described this as pure science and explained that, in similar conditions, the effect would always be the same. This was the proof of how a vacuum worked. She explained that, because the experiment will always have the same results this type of research was called quantitative. The repetition of an experiment to come up with a provable conclusion is quantitative.

Mr. Woods, my history teacher that same year, asked us to conduct research about the Second World War. Specifically he wanted us to use primary sources that described what it was like to be in the war. He hoped that, if we combined the information we each found, that we would be able to gain a better understanding of that historical event as well as the tensions and the realities of what transpired. He explained that, working from primary source accounts and bringing the information together, was qualitative research. Through that research we could bring the time period to life so that we could see and understand it more clearly.

Although much has been gained since these events, the four moments are the basis for all of my understanding of research. Mr. Werner and Mrs. Stevenson identified the need to conduct an experiment repeatedly and to prove the outcome. In Mr. Werner’s assigned book report and Mr. Woods’ primary source examinations both were looking at another form of research. They intended us to bring greater understandings to something we were studying with less conclusive proofs. Historically I have tended to be more interested in qualitative research. In a 1997 article, nurse and scholar, Judy R. Norris described my research through a painted project about gay bashing in Canada, stating:

HOW TO READ THE THESIS: I PICK UP A PENCIL
In his 1996 gallery exhibition, Spencer J. Harrison, a Canadian artist, used various forms of installation art to disseminate his learnings from 30 interviews with gay and lesbian people on their experience of being gay-bashed. His intent was not to portray violent acts but to provide a vicarious learning experience so that others can, “Understand what it’s like to carry that stuff around on a day-to-day basis and how that affects your personal identity” (Mandel, 1996, p. C14 as cited in, Norris, 1997, pp. 87-88).

Further, Norris (1997) explained that the enduring meanings made from the encounter with the artwork are not immediate, but rather learned through a reflexive process. In conducting that and further research I am interested in two levels of reflexion. The first phenomena I am contemplating is rendered through the process of drawing or painting so that I might see and understand it more. The process of mark making is similar to the process of working through hunches in a more standard qualitative research paper. The mark making becomes a site for information gathering and making sense of what is being considered. As in writing, editing takes place; a reductive and constructive process that allows me to get closer to the truths I am exploring. The second level of reflexion occurs when the viewer or reader of my work engages with it and contemplates those same truths I am trying to render. Their pondering and subsequent carrying forward of impressions, considerations, and questions left upon them by experiencing the art are the sites I believe where the greatest, most epiphanic moments occur. For if I have been successful in my research-painting process the audience becomes engaged with the art in a way that they take an active role in considering it.

Ardra Cole in her 2004 article, Provoked by Art describes this reflexive process when engaging with the artwork of Edward Kienholz (1927-1994) and Nancy Reddin Kienholz (1943- ), “I am immediately drawn in — intellectually, emotionally, and even physically — as I am, at times lured to actually participate in the representations” (p.12). This second moment of reflexion is similar to what my Grade Ten history teacher was referring to when he spoke of bringing our research together so that we might bring the time period to life. Producing it through the process of an artistic practice, however removes the veil of words we might find in more traditional qualitative research. This type of sharing of information through art creates a space for readers/viewers to experience their own impressions. Though this can be created through any artistic form, as a professionally trained painter, this is the practice I most commonly use.

Coming into my doctoral program I would have described my studio practice as a way of making sense of the world through the creation of paintings which are aesthetically considered as well as communicating a message. I might not have so clearly described my practice as research, although there has consistently been a form of information gathering in most of my work (Death of Romance, 1987-1990; Heroes, 1991; Queer Project, 1995-2004; Erased His/Story, 2004). Once I began empirical and methodological reading in my doctoral program I began to shift my language towards that of Arts-informed (Cole & Knowles, 2008) and Autoethnographic (Chang, 2008) research methodologies. This shift allowed me to fortify my already developed practice of art making where information gathering and interviewing could be heightened. This shift began positioning my studio practice more in the realm of research where the outcomes would be less aesthetically considered and more located in meaning making. This shift also brought about the more complicated questions as to how I would speak about my work in the professional field of my original training. But finally, this shift answered some of my questions regarding what I felt was missing in my ongoing studio practice.

Formally trained in a Bachelor of Fine Arts program, my studio practice was well grounded in art history, the exploration of contemporary issues in both subject matter and studio production, and process based work where aesthetics and content are critically considered. As previously mentioned this education provided me with a strong background to produce work but, for me as a researcher, a component of my practice felt as if it was missing. Discovering research like Cole’s (2004, p.12) began to fill that space as it helped me consider the deeper levels of research I was interested in and build or adjust my language so I might better articulate my processes of investigation. My fellow artist colleagues often speak of their research as being what takes place in the process of making their work. This is a rigorous process of experimentation, creation, and analysis; however, my practice is rooted not only in the advances of my knowledge in studio production, but also in the process of investigation and research through the lens of what I understand through my practice.

The basic tenets of Arts-informed research are that it enhances the understanding of the human condition through alternative processes and representational forms to make the research more accessible to multiple audiences. Producing qualitative research with an arts-informed methodology allows some defining elements to further what can be achieved. This methodology is reflexive and acknowledges the presence of the researcher within the research. It pays close attention to whom the audience is. It relies on or honours one or more artful practices in one or more of the processes of information gathering, analysis, or reporting of findings. It works more towards understandings and unearthing of further questions than attempting to come to conclusive endings. Most closely linked to my original studio practice is that it relies on common sense decision-making, intuition, and general response to a natural flow of events and experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2008, pp. 59-61). As a painter I would refer to this as letting the painting make some of the decisions. Now, as a researcher using my process of painting, I would consider this following research hunches.

In his text, Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts, Graeme Sullivan (2005) makes sense of the crossing over of disciplines between the research an artist might undertake in relation to how artful practices can be employed as a viable qualitative research process. Sullivan states: “When seen as historical inquiry, the study of visual arts builds on links between art history, fine arts, and the humanities, which means that established methods of research can be used and this ensures a level of institutional credibility” (p. xii). He also proposed the conundrums which separate art educators from those in the humanities by opening up, “A challenge for many teachers in art programs is to define their studio-based teaching and art-learning practices not only as
a form of professional training, but as scholarly inquiry" (p. xiii). He finishes this introductory explanation of how the demands of visual arts theory and practice are advancing, positing that, “visual research methods can be grounded within practices of the studio and these are robust enough to satisfy rigorous institutional demands” (p. xiii).

If considered in this way Sullivan leaves room for me to both honour my training and practice as a professional artist while moving away from only aesthetic growth, towards knowledge creation. He positions (Sullivan, 2005) this newer way of understanding possibilities in the studio historically and locates it within the field of education, stating:

Within educational settings, a trend to emerge in recent years is a similar attempt to expand the domain of inquiry, this time to more adequately accommodate discipline interests in the arts. Loosely labelled “arts-based” research, those advancing this view call for a broadening of research practices that can take advantage of the way the arts offer unique insight into human knowing and understanding. (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Eisner, 1991: Jipson & Paley, 1997) (p. xvii).

Sullivan is not making light of other methods of research as viable ways of creating new knowledge, but rather, pointing towards the possibility of further means or lenses of knowing research utilizing art practices for additional insights. The researcher or his or her reader may come to information gathered to draw some conclusions but, through arts-based research, there maybe other possibilities of knowing and understanding. Sullivan shares the notion with Eisner that there is a transformative power of art, stating:

For Reimer, addressing the epistemological argument is only part of the issue, for the arts learning also has to be seen as a normative process that is central to claims about what it is to be human. To date, however, arguments that claim artistic ways of knowing to be distinctive modality of human engagement that is set in opposition to other forms of knowledge construction run the risk of denying the complexity of what it is to know, to see and to understand (Reimer, 1997 as cited in Sullivan, 2005 p.86).

This is not to confuse the finished object with the outcome of the research (Sullivan, 2005), but rather, to imagine the artist and viewer, through the work, share a human interaction where knowing through questioning can become possible. I do not, in my studio, create answers in the outcome of the production of my art. Through the process of making, I come closer to asking questions. I share the process of the work with the viewer, when they too contemplate the questions through the works of art I produce. The more conclusive elements can then be achieved through a lived experience (Sullivan, 2005), where the audience member can interpret the work to make meaning from it. The robustness of such a relationship brings the research to life, joining research and audience as the meaning makers.

In more conventional research the collection of data, analysis, and then conclusions, are achieved by the investigator. In Arts-based or Arts-informed research, the process of creation is echoed by the interpretive decision-making of the audience (Sullivan, 2005). This process of interpretation is not a passive reading of the text, but rather, a combination of many actions on the part of the viewer: constructive, conceptual, contextual, reflective and transformative to name only a few (Sullivan, 2005).

Where the more traditional researcher relies on publications as the means of exchange of information, the equivalency for me as an artist/researcher is the exhibition (Sullivan, 2005). I use the sites of artist residencies and exhibitions to come in contact with my audience and share the process of meaning making. The engagement with the viewer during the residency is similar to that of working with an editor where the ongoing public interaction informs the work as to the plausibility of understanding, meaning making, and knowing. Residencies operate similar to the critique process (Sullivan, 2005) I experienced in my formal education in that it is a constant flow of questioning and being reflective upon how the work is being read. It is different from my fine art education though, as the audience in a residency does not question the quality of the technical production, but rather, constantly challenges the images and narratives that make up the work. This allows me to reflect on the information I am sharing and through a constructive or reductive method, bring the narratives in my work closer to what I hope the greater discourse will be.

The exhibition is the point where the information is more finalized in its rendering, but this site differs greatly from that of the published work of the more conventional researcher in that it still requires the viewer to experience the work and complete the process
of creating knowledge. This is the place where this methodology could be challenged in that it calls into question, “Where art knowledge is believed to reside: Is it in the process of making art, in the artwork itself, or in the mind of the viewer?” (Sullivan, 2005, p.124). I could also suggest a further layer to Sullivan’s question as to where knowledge resides in the creation of the tent as I added a process of interpretation and responding in my residency. This reinforces the agency of the viewer and is the main crux of why this methodology was utilized in my doctoral research. As an artist/researcher/activist I often feel sharing information or knowledge through words allows the reader to intellectualize the data and not act upon the knowledge they have gained. One of the basic tenets of Arts-informed research is to better the human condition (Cole & Knowles, 2008), whether this be the healing of the researcher, the bettering of the researcher’s community, bettering the greater population or all three (Reason & Marshall, 1987). I believe and suspect that Sullivan would agree that this is more possible through the arts.

Through the arts, information can be shared which then works towards possibilities of change. Maxine Greene (2003) states, “Art can’t change things, but it can change people who can change things.” She talks of the “imagination as the place where the possible can happen; a place of ‘resisting fixities, seeking the openings,’ where ‘we relish incompleteness, because that signifies something still lies ahead’” (pp. 22-23 as cited in, Sullivan, 2005, p. 115). In this research project I set out to come to a greater understanding of how I formulated my identity in a world that provided no examples into the experiences, making them feel and think. At the core of this methodology is the researcher both acting as an agent within culture and observing, interpreting, analyzing, and storying the findings so that the reader may have greater access to the culture. This then allows readers to consider their own experiences and narratives in response to what they are reading. This breaks the realist, neutral, authoritative, and scientific voice and brings to life the voices of the community or culture being explored.

Reading Ellis and Bochner’s text in a graduate methodology course helped me to realize what I was doing and gave language to my earlier Master’s work (Harrison, 2003). In that thesis I theoretically explored the impacts of violence against gay and lesbian people while telling the stories of moments which wrapped around both the accounts of my life and the scenarios and learnings that happened while conducting the research. Without knowing it I began to act as an autoethnographer. This research also helped me to question and more fully understand my combined studio and activist practice. In my studio I painted self-portraits as a way of making sense of who I was, which began in my Fine Arts education and continues through to today. As an activist I research and tell stories of my life as a way of understanding how I navigated a homophobic world while still maintaining a strong positive sense of self. I do both now as a means of activism. Ellis, when explaining the outcome of autoethnographic research states, “On the whole autoethnographers don’t want you to sit back as spectators: they want readers to feel and care and desire… well, maybe that’s a sign it’s making a difference” (p. 24).

I knew in my doctoral work I wanted to restory (Ellis 2009) my life so I might better understand it, rememory it and create a narrative that I could live with (Winterson, 2011). Reframing the narratives through hindsight would allow me to consider them on a deeper level (Ellis, 2009), and create stories which audiences could respond to and possibly change how they perceived themselves (Bochner & Ellis 1996, Ellis, 2009). I considered how I could use the methodology of autoethnography from an arts-informed perspective. Ellis makes clear that one of the main advantages of autoethnography is that it is not evidence but, rather, an accessible and authoritative, and scientific voice and brings to life the voices of the community or culture being explored.

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At almost the same time I came to the work of Heewon Chang (2008). This work truly resonated with me and provided me with a deeper understanding of how I would conduct my own research. Chang’s interpretation seemed to lend itself more closely to telling the story (Bochner & Ellis, 1996; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2009) using visual imagery. Chang’s (2008) reading of autoethnography led me to explore my cultural position and the prospects of a pedagogy of hope and transformation.

Autoethnography (Chang, 2008) is an approach to research that invites the exploration of one’s own story to make sense of a broader world and as a lens into a community or phenomenon to which the researcher belongs. Qualitative researchers often operate on the assumptions that all research is in some ways inherently autobiographical (Cole & Knowles, 2008) but Autoethnography asks the researcher to consider many views of their storied lives, not just by gathering information from a single (auto) perspective but from the perspectives of those around (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography relies on the reading, writing, and self-narratives presented in examining one’s own story (Chang, 2008) to gain an understanding of one’s own ethnographic positioning within a larger culture, “because culture results in human interactions with each other” (Chang, 2008, p. 16).

The benefits of this type of research are quite clear and for the most part negate any hurdles they pose. Once I determined the initial questions I wanted to consider in looking back upon my own narrative, both the ability to recall moments of my storied life and the ability to make meanings from these narratives became possible. Through the acts of painting and recording these narratives, and then further analyzing both I am able to connect with the deeper elements to this method of research. Returning to locations where narratives took place, I do not have to acquaint myself with the geography of the narratives. I can gain understandings of the relationships between those involved and myself to further consider the implications of these interactions. Most lives are not lived in isolation so contextualizing the information is a key element to this method of research. Returning to locations where narratives took place, I do not have to acquaint myself with the location, but rather, the reacquainting can trigger more moments and understanding of both the context and the story. For example, I returned to the church, the schools,* the farm, and my childhood home that are the main sites of the major narratives. And, in one instance as I was very young when my grandparents’ farm was sold, I returned with my mother so she might fill in any gaps I found in understanding the location or the narratives.

As Autoethnography requires me to explore further into my own narratives than I am able to see just by recalling the stories I must examine my own life through the contextual information I can gather from other members of my family, my friends who surrounded us, and the geography of the narratives. I can gain understandings of the relationships between those involved and myself to further consider the implications of these interactions. Most lives are not lived in isolation so contextualizing the information is a key element to this method of research. Returning to locations where narratives took place, I do not have to acquaint myself with the location, but rather, the reacquainting can trigger more moments and understanding of both the context and the story. For example, I returned to the church, the schools,* the farm, and my childhood home that are the main sites of the major narratives. And, in one instance as I was very young when my grandparents’ farm was sold, I returned with my mother so she might fill in any gaps I found in understanding the location or the narratives.

I believe the breadth of this research allows the reader or audience to engage with the participants and their narratives in a way that no other research allows. In the analysis autoethnography allows the readers or audience in many ways to experience the meaning making achieved through the research as if they were there themselves. Chang suggests, and I agree, that the transformative nature of this type of work is strong. She also indicates that one of the greatest benefits of this type of research is the unique voice with which the story can be told. I believe this is one of the strongest healing elements and transformative implications of my doctoral research, for it allows me to hear my own voice telling the stories and it gives voice to a silenced and invisible community.

As the researcher of this project I began knowing the elements I hoped to consider about my community by identifying some of the knowledge I felt was lacking. I was, however, uncertain as to what the exact focus of the research would be. Through a combination of Arts-informed and Autoethnography methodologies, I was able to narrow the focus. Through telling, painting, retelling, and repainting I was able to identify what was missing and what this scholarartistry (Knowles, Promislow, & Cole, 2008), work could contribute. These methodologies made possible the employment of my already established methods of painting while requiring me to deepen my research and reconsider the language and context of the narratives I painted and wrote.

In my established studio practice, Autoethnography would be most closely tied to the form of a self-portrait. In research it is a self-portrait where much of the information gathered comes from others and explains details around the figure being portrayed. When the two methodologies were combined through the process of constructing my dissertation in the form of a painted freak show tent, the result establishes an expansion of “our capacity to privilege multiple voices and realities, and to present knowledge for which we do not yet have adequate words or that cannot be experienced directly” (Eisner, 1985, p 37).

In my established studio practice of combining research and painting I began a process of providing spaces for audiences to engage with knowledge for which there are not yet words,

* My grade school had been torn down and replaced with a larger school in the same location; however, the school yard was largely unaltered.
asking them to vicariously experience moments I and others have lived through. Judy Norris elaborated when speaking about the Fag Project, an earlier body of my work, “Art forms allow us to provide vicarious, situated learning experiences for our audience, inviting their involvement in dynamic interpretive evolution of our texts” (Norris, 1997, p. 88). Norris describes how I went about this by positioning the viewer inside a circular painted project which vicariously repositioned them as victims of gay bashing. In the more recent project, I vicariously position a viewer inside the collage of my thoughts and feelings from my formative years allowing them to be apart of the narrative and asking them to consider if they are part of the problem, innocent bystanders, or victims in the silenced and erased sexual and gender minority community of the 1960s and 1970s, allowing them to be part of the complexity.

The Artist’s Catalogue

The artist’s catalogue component of this thesis began with a narrative of an early part of my life. I wanted to start with this story to establish for the reader my character as it was long before I had to think about my identity as a gay person. I was proud of all I tried to accomplish. I was inquisitive about everything. And I was fearless. I wanted to provide readers with this impression so that they could keep it in the back of their mind as they read the thesis and reflected upon the images of the painted project. I hoped that beginning with this story would show readers how I saw myself, how I saw the world, and how the world saw me. Although the latter shifted as others started to think about my sexual orientation, this fearless character is how I have continued to know myself.

When reading through this catalogue and considering the painted dissertation, it must be remembered that homophobia, or any other discriminatory identifications (Riordon, 1996), are more about those making the judgemental visions and less about how the person or group being judged sees themselves. We do not only see ourselves using these narrow, negative fragments of how we are identified, although their oppressive impositions have some effect on how we imagine ourselves. We know our own deeper, textured identities (Riordon, 1996, 2001, 2004).

I started with the Fearless narrative because I wanted to contrast the more common judgements made about my community with those of how I saw myself. Similarly, I wanted the painted project presented in this catalogue to contradict some of the narratives or perceptions that many in my life have held about me. As an activist, I also wanted to contradict the negative ways I am imagined by many people in the school where I painted the project and in other places where it would later be exhibited, with a truer representation of who I really am. When a reader or an audience member envisions a fearless kid, almost naked except for his shoes, propelling himself off the top of his house into his favourite tree and to the waiting ground below, I do not think this image is consistent with what they imagine someone growing up gay in rural Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s was like. But, it is the image I have of myself during that time period.

I also do not think this is the picture contemporary media tends to portray when they are talking about sexual minority people, even when speaking of the bullying of sexual and gender minority youth today in our school systems and the greater society. Although I understand that this image of a young gay boy is amusing, it would not sell many papers or fit within in pathologies or tragic models many use to portray gay youth. The image of struggle is far more common to those outside the sexual and gender minority population when referring to this community than it is to those within. We are far more likely to see our lives for the day-by-day moments they are made of. The characterization of us as fragile and tragic people, fighting for our rights aids the hegemony in picturing us as needing help and aids in continuing the systemic positioning of the sexual and gender minority populations as powerless. This further imprints on those inside and outside of the community the power by which we are held down. This negative portrayal is part of the self-perpetuating negativity which surrounds the community and that is one of the elements which keeps our community still listening to the stories which get told about us rather than increasing the number of stories we tell each other about how we see ourselves (C, Geertz, as seen in Inglis, 2000). Painting the dissertation, the tent, and creating this catalogue as the book of stories of my life is direct activism against the narratives that are being told about members of the sexual and gender minority community and that hold us back.

Great human rights advancements for gay people have been made in Canada since the 1960s: decriminalization (Kinsman, 1996; Rayside, 2008; Smith, 1999), removal from the American Psychiatric Association’s diagnosis as a mental disorder (Kinsman, 1996), and gay marriage (Bourassa & Varnell, 2002) to name only a few; and yet the more common stories which are being told about the community are not reflective of these advancements. Rather, they are still stories of the struggles for human rights and the tragic lives we live.* Oppression is still a very active agent in many sexual minority people’s lives in Canada, not to mention more hostile places in the world, but most of us do not lead tragic lives on a day-to-day basis. Even at the worst of times in confronting homophobia, I was always that kid propelling myself from the rooftop into whatever adventure awaited below.

But, why would a doctoral thesis begin with a story? I hoped it would allow the reader to consider both the importance of stories in how we know ourselves and others (Karpiak, 2008; Jennings, 1994), and how we understand the world around us. I wanted to prepare readers for what they will encounter in the images of the tent in the artists’ catalogue by laying the groundwork of the type of creation of knowledge in this dissertation. I wanted to aid the reader in seeing that the members of the sexual and gender minority community have far more layered identities than those of the more surface ones we are often presented as having. I wanted to allow the viewer/reader to consider the transformative nature of painting such stories, of telling such stories, and hearing them.

A panorama of images from the exterior and interior of the painted dissertation follows the opening narrative. These are the walls

* Jamie Hubley, a fifteen year old Ottawa, Ontario boy who committed suicide on October 15, 2011 after being bullied. His suicide received massive media attention. Shaquille Wisdom, a thirteen year old boy committed suicide on October 20, 2007 after being bullied, put in a garbage can and rolled around his high school after coming out to a friend, in Ajax, Ontario. National media attention was paid to this death. Matthew Shepard, a twenty-two year old man who was attacked, tortured, and left to die hung on a fence in Laramie, Wyoming on October 12, 1998. Worldwide media attention was paid to this event and a foundation was created in his name.
of the freak show tent that I painted as the means of investigating how I feel I am perceived (outside the tent and subsequently the outside of the panorama), and how I remember perceiving myself (inside of the tent and the interior of the panorama) from my earliest memories through establishing my identity as a young gay male. They allow the reader of this catalogue to have somewhat of an understanding and vision of what the tent was like if they did not experience it firsthand. The panorama of images allows the reader to see the magnitude of the project while engaging with the complicated layering of identity, which was explored in the making of the project. The panorama lets the reader see the pieces of the narratives that I felt were important to reveal in the initial telling of the story and my research into the greater stories of the project.

These images let the viewer see how I imagined my world, not through a veil of words or descriptions, but rather through representations of impressions from my memories. I rendered the images which I felt were the most important to begin telling the story. These images allow the reader to see the integral role my friends, my grandfather, my family, and the rural geography of my upbringing were to my identity. They provide lenses into some of the other larger narratives of my life. The intermingling of painted images, text, and photographically transferred historical images posit the complicated layering of identity formation. These images, both interior and exterior, show the complications of navigating the world safely for youthful gay people in rural Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which are still present today.

The variety of artful reflections in this panorama, representing the actual tent walls, bear witness to how I remember moments in my life, moments searching for a community, and moments in the world (Reason & Marshall, 1987). They allow the reader to consider images as research and research findings, while foreshadowing the narratives that make up this catalogue.

The narrative that follows the panorama presents to the reader an impression of the school environment the research was conducted in, the varying levels of engagement others had with the project along the varying stages of its progress, and an account of what it was like to stand inside the tent. This helps the reader/viewer have a richer understanding of the images in this printed artist’s catalogue. It allows the reader to have a vision of not just what it looked like, but what it felt like to enter the tent, to attend the first exhibition, and to be part of the audience.

I wanted this narrative to allow the reader to think about where and how the painted project was made and to have a sense of some of the hindrances, as well as advantages, of doing such work in a public venue. It gives the viewer/reader some sense of the climate of support and barriers I experienced in this location. This narrative allows the viewer/reader to consider how active the studio was while the tent was being painted and the peculiarity of the project being produced and exhibited within the walls of a high school setting. It shows some of the transformative qualities the project had on me, members of my community, and the larger community it was made within.

This story also begins to suggest to the viewer what it was like to re-memory (Hooks, 1989), the site of a high school with differing impressions than the earlier homophobic ones I experienced. I had not fully realized my own gay identity when I was in high school, although I was grappling with the possibility of it and others were responding to me as if they were certain of it. I was not out or public about these developing ideas. This did not mean that the high school experience I navigated was not riddled with homophobia, for even though I had not yet fully forged my identity, many members of the school were responding to me with that identification (Ruffalo, 2008). Many thought of me as a talented artist. Many thought of me as an athlete who was also an award-winning actor. Many thought of me as the good student who was always willing to pull a joke. Most thought of me as having many of these traits and as being the kind and caring person I was; they were willing to think of the many different characteristics that made up who I was. Some could see none of these parts of my identity. They only saw me as gay. Although gay was not always the way I was imagined, homophobic identifications were not the only things I was labelled with, one could be certain they began to have an impact on me, and my self-perception as that fearless kid.

Returning to a high school setting to conduct this research and experiencing this site of homophobia as part of the process of making the project allowed me to re-navigate these emotions from the perspective of someone who now has far more coping skills. It created a space to be both present and reflective. Although the process of producing the tent in the school, in a public studio was more difficult than if I had simply made it in a private studio, the ability for the project to have a transformative quality for me, members of my sexual minority community, and the broader population that came in contact with the work (Reason & Marshall, 1987), was considerably greater. The affect upon me was large. The impact of this activism on the school was massive. The narrative of the first opening reveals some of the impacts of the project on me personally as well as the ways, even while in progress, it was life altering for those in the community who saw it, and the greater world that the media was able to touch with the discussion about it.

These three initial components of the catalogue set the stage for the reader/viewer to interpret the project with all of its layered considerations of identity as well as allowing the methodologies I worked with to create the possibility of considering the types of stories we know about sexual minority populations, the types of stories which have been omitted from the larger narrative, and the methods by which we have come to know these stories. Using Autoethnographic (Chang, 2008) and Arts-informed research methodologies (Cole & Knowles, 2008) allowed me to create research which enables the reader/viewer and audience to think differently about or re-imagine the stories that are more reflective of my life. From the onset I determined I would work with the combination of these methodologies for they allow me to work with my already established means of research, through my studio practice and I felt they somewhat queued (Butler, 2006; 1997) the more positivist methodologies with which sexual minority communities have typically been studied. This too felt like an appropriate movement towards activism, for it asks the reader/viewer to consider methods of knowledge creation which both are more reflective of the lives of those being considered (Cole & Knowles, 2001), and more fruitful in being able to speak to this community of the findings.
What follows in this chapter is an explanation of how I went about conducting this research. It is a discussion of drawing, painting, reading, storytelling, and being in a school as methods of investigation. Although it provides a methodological explanation of my project it is somewhat narrative in nature to further the methods through which I came to understand a great deal in this project, and I hope to stay true to the ways I felt the information could be best shared. It will show both how I came to rely on these methods as a way of researching and why I feel they provide access to my meaning making.

This artist’s catalogue and the painted project combined are a story. A story of survival. A story of building an identity in a void. And a later story of reimagining and rememoring my narrative without the binary of us versus them, gay versus straight, but rather, a more healed story of my life all mixed together. This mixing is reflective of how I have lived my life. Many gay men, born in a similar time period to me, migrated to larger cities where they could be more anonymous, find like-minded people with which they could be themselves, and build communities of gay men which would resemble them but isolate them. I stayed in rural surroundings trying to integrate the many aspects of my life with the many differing identities that were around me. This story of it all mixed together also mirrors the way I went about the research and thought through the many aspects of the project. When I entered the high school and set up my studio. I positioned myself within that community as an out, gay man; however, I let the many other aspects of my character be as dominantly visible. My ability as an artist, my activism for equality in areas beyond sexual orientation, my ridiculous sense of humour, my overtly colourful way of dressing, my strong interest in Aboriginal heritage, and the Holocaust, to name only a few characteristics that were as visible, if not more visible, than my identity as a gay man. I wanted the community at Georges Vanier to integrate the many aspects of my life with the many differing identities that were around me. This mixing is reflective of how I have lived my life. Many gay men, born in a similar time period to me, migrated to larger cities where they could be more anonymous, find like-minded people with which they could be themselves, and build communities of gay men which would resemble them but isolate them. I stayed in rural surroundings trying to integrate the many aspects of my life with the many differing identities that were around me. This story of it all mixed together also mirrors the way I went about the research and thought through the many aspects of the project. When I entered the high school and set up my studio. I positioned myself within that community as an out, gay man; however, I let the many other aspects of my character be as dominantly visible. My ability as an artist, my activism for equality in areas beyond sexual orientation, my ridiculous sense of humour, my overtly colourful way of dressing, my strong interest in Aboriginal heritage, and the Holocaust, to name only a few characteristics that were as visible, if not more visible, than my identity as a gay man. I wanted the community at Georges Vanier Secondary School to know me as a gay man, but to consider that as only one element of who I am. This is both the way I navigate the world and the way my narrative has played out. This is my own activist positioning towards homophobia and my understanding of denying the binaries which separate us. I want the reader of my narratives and the viewer of the painted project to understand the images and have easy points of entrance into the stories.

I Pick Up a Pencil: A History of an Artistic Practice as Researcher

I pick up a pencil; I have something to figure out. It is a math problem; something simple but something too large to do in my head.

I pick up a pencil; I have something to figure out. It is a question of science; an experiment if you will. If I figure it out on a scrap of paper first I can see how I understand it before I try it and possibly make an error.

I pick up a pencil; I have something to figure out. It is a reminder of something I already know, but without jotting it down I will most likely forget.

I pick up a pencil; I have something to figure out. It is an arrangement of things within a room; heavy furniture that I want to move but am not sure quite how it will look when I am finished or if it will fit. If I measure and then draw it out first, I will better understand the relationships of the things in the space before I move them.

I pick up a pencil; I have something to figure out. It is directions for someone. A sort of ‘how to get from here to there,’ but I cannot remember the names of the streets though I have gone from here to there for most of my life. I know if I try to explain it, it will be too much to remember, but if I draw a diagram it will be as clear as if that person too has travelled this path before.

Processes of problem-solving are all quite natural to me as I have been doing it most of my life. I think most people pick up that pencil and jot something down. A name. A number. A diagram. A set of directions. A ‘figuring it out’ or an ‘explaining it to oneself.’ I am not fully sure where I learned it, though I can clearly remember my grandfather in the barn showing me how the combine works, with a pencil and scrap of paper. My father was always drawing diagrams of the things he was going to build, then tucking them in his pocket, and headed off to the lumber store. And, though my mother could figure out numbers in her head faster than I could even write them on the page, she sometimes stopped and calculated the larger equations on something she called ‘scribbler paper.’

Mrs. Patterson, the first art teacher I remember having, always made us sketch things out before we tackled them with the more expensive supplies.

She said, “Grab a pencil and jot your ideas down before you begin. It will help you make sense of what you are thinking, seeing, and doing.”

I hated those words because for me things happened in the bigger work, with the more expensive supplies, that did not happen in the initial sketches. Those initial sketches seemed to be a waste of time. They were drawings that had little affect on the finished project. Though she knew these sketches frustrated me, she was very persistent. She assured me I would learn something through the process of drawing which could not be learned from getting directly into the major components of the project. She talked about it as a way of truly seeing what we were trying to produce and truly understanding all the elements. Although I do not think she could fully understand the impact her persistence would have on me, I now see her insistence as a way of prompting me to begin with research before I attempted to draw the major conclusions. It was her way of teaching me that there are multiple lenses with which we can look at the same situation.

Mrs. Patterson’s persistence initiated in me a process of investigating the world around me, making sense of that world, and making deeper meanings of that world through drawing. Although I was not using language like ‘research’ when speaking of the process of drawing in my early teen years, it is clear to me that is what I was doing then and what I am doing now.

When I began my formal education in fine art, I had ideas that I would develop a strong set of tools to render whatever I wanted to produce. I would become a better painter or sculptor. I chose a school with a program that emphasised printmaking, sculpture, and painting with all three having a strong focus on drawing. Experts in each field taught me to explore ways of seeing, understanding, and producing. The school had a well established reputation for teaching, through one of the most intense studio programs in the country delivering hands-on skills that allowed its graduates to be
technical experts and very successful artists. I received an incredible education but as I worked my way through the program, I kept feeling that something was missing. Learning the formal elements of drawing, painting, printmaking, and sculpture was not enough to fulfill what would become my research-based studio practice.

During my studies I enrolled in a summer art history course in Venice, Italy. It was during that trip I discovered what was absent. A few weeks into the program the class was ushered into San Zaccaria and asked to focus our attention on Giovanni Bellini's 1505 Altarpiece. By this point in the trip I had seen enough images of the Madonna and Child surrounded by a variety of saints, so while my body faced the lecturer and the altar piece and my pencil seemed to be taking notes, my eyes gazed elsewhere. I was taking notes but the main marks on my page were quick sketches of the nun who was attending to the ritual objects and drapery on the altar in front of the Bellini painting as the professor kept lecturing. As she continued to complete her tasks of changing and lighting the candles, she shifted the professor to many different locations in front of the painting. Conscious of, yet oblivious to, the class and the professor behind her, she knelt down to pray. At that moment, through my drawings, I saw what was missing from my fine art education thus far. In front of me, in my lap, were a series of quick drawings of the nun and my professor and although each contained some aspect of the form of the altar, painting, and frame, there was no detail of how the discussed painting was rendered. I had been studying and perfecting the technical elements of producing a work of art and not fully considering what the art meant. I was becoming very proficient at rendering anything with whatever material I wished to use, but the meaning making of my work had thus far been ignored.

Professor Stuart said, "Notice Bellini's ability to render refracted colour and light from the book in the saint's hands onto his garment below."

Although this is a great skill, the nun on her knees had no interest in these details. She was praying to the child in the Madonna's arms. Professor Stuart asked us to consider the use of paint and refracted light, but the nun wanted us to consider her God.

Through the drawings I had seen something that no one in our group nor I saw by simply looking at the painting and the characters in front of us.

At this exact moment my studio practice changed. Drawing became a way of seeing that which was right there but often missed. Drawing and later painting from the drawings, became the tool for researching and digging deeper rather than merely making marks and plotting out what I would do in a larger work. Mrs. Patterson's words of 'making sense of what I was seeing and doing' rang true. My drawings could no longer only revolve around issues of technical skill and beauty; they had to help me see more clearly and understand more deeply the world that surrounded me.

I finished my fine art degree with little fanfare. Faculty members were more interested in technical ability and I was more interested in subject matter and what the work could say to those who viewed it. Though I was recognized as being successful with my graduating exhibit, I was not seen as one of the top students. My interests in making sense of the world around me were not recognized as important.

Shortly after graduating and around the time of my first major solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Peterborough (Tammplin, 1990), another exhibition of artist Christian Boltanski's work took place at Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in Toronto. My reaction to Boltanski's exhibition, coupled with the comments my father made at the opening of my exhibition, would clarify my interest in my work acting as a vehicle for communication. These exhibitions deepened my interest in considering my drawing and my painting process as a means of researching.

As If Love Letters was my first solo exhibition and it was mounted in my hometown public art gallery (1990). Thirty-seven paintings, drawings, and sculptures examining issues of contemporary romance, using an antiquated rowboat as its central image adorned the gallery walls. Discussions of the richness of colours, precision of drawing, and quality of painting were overtaken by the deeper conversations of the emotive subject matter of the work. Many were moved and made tearful by this exhibition, which explored my rather tumultuous feelings of affection. Near the end of the opening, my father, who is a man of a few words, approached me to check-in and see how I was doing. He commented on the size of the crowd, how much he had enjoyed meeting everyone, and how proud he was of me.

He then asked, "How many of these people, tonight, did you know?"

"Maybe ten percent," I replied.

"People were really moved," he said and then finished with, "You made them see and feel things they had never seen before. And I don't mean the boats."

To fully understand the impact of this comment I must state that my father is an electrician who had little if any use for or experience with art. He sees things from very clear black or white positions. He is a very intelligent man and, though he cares greatly for his family, he does not have a strong ability to share those emotions. But at this exhibition he fully understood my desire and ability to help people understand the world which surrounds them. His emotionally reserved means of communicating did not stop him from seeing and comprehending how the audience was moved by my work and provoked to think not only of my ideas of contemporary romance, but also of their own ideas. The exhibition was making them consider these issues on a much deeper level than before they engaged with the art.

Shortly after opening that exhibition and still in the mindset of producing work which would further people's understanding of the world while always considering elements of beauty, I attended a 1990 exhibition of Christian Boltanski's (1944 - ) work. After this exhibition the direction of my work would make a major change, or to be more accurate, shift my understanding of the reasons behind making art. The exhibition itself was a collection of many of his recent works. Using photographically reproduced images from crime scene magazines, metal boxes constructed as archives for the images they propped up, tiny wire and metal figures, and collections of used clothing, all in precariously lit presentations heightened their discourses around issues of trauma.

Many of the pieces addressed the Holocaust, but not with graphic images from the camps or the other atrocities. The small wire and metal sculptural figurative drawings adorned one of the
was sure I was hearing whispering. As I looked around the walls of Kanada and within seconds I stepped out into the other gallery room and saw that there and saw none. But the voices seemed to be coming from within the walls that I had not noticed earlier. I looked around for speakers one or the piece itself had some sort of soundtrack embedded in the room. Around about my fourth or fifth drawing I heard voices of notes.

I stepped back into the middle of the piece and began to take some notes.

Around about my fourth or fifth drawing I heard voices of others I presumed were entering the piece. Without looking I began to move aside to allow them to view the work unobstructed by me and so I might continue drawing, bringing little attention to what I was doing. I raised my head and saw that no one was there. I thought to myself that either there were others in the room right outside this one or the piece itself had some sort of soundtrack embedded in the walls that I had not noticed earlier. I looked around for speakers and saw none. But the voices seemed to be coming from within the room. I stepped out into the other gallery room and saw that there was no one there. I stepped back into Kanada and within seconds was sure I was hearing whispering. As I looked around the walls of used clothing seemed to be moving slightly. Stepping to the centre of the room I felt the clothing moving in towards me. It transported me back to the actual room in Auschwitz and the walls of clothes became those piles of clothes. The whispering continued. I passed out.

After being revived by one of the gallery attendants using smelling salts, she explained to me that she had seen me drop on the security camera, and that I was not the only one who had reacted in this way. I began to get my bearings, but before getting up I asked if there was a sound component to this piece. She assured me there was not, but also informed me that most of the people who had passed out had spoken of similar experiences. I gathered my belongings and stood. The walls were clearly just draped in used clothing and were not piles of clothes in a Holocaust camp.

I knew I had not truly been transported back to one of the camps or tricked by the exhibition of this piece, but rather I had been vicariously moved to a position of experiencing trauma by a work of art. Boltanski’s work utilized many very simple elements in its production. The power of the art was in the narratives it created and its ability to aid a viewer to not just think about the facts of what it portrayed but to experience some of the emotions which surrounded those facts.

I then knew that I wanted to research through the process of painting and drawing. My want to push people to see and understand the world in ways that they had thus far not, and my want to create a vicarious experience of the narratives around other issues had been solidified as my own studio practice.

**Drawing: A means of research, information gathering, and bearing witness**

Autoethnographers and life history researchers often use images of the populations they are exploring as a means of information gathering and further scrutiny. Using an Autoethnographic methodology, I too have gathered a variety of childhood through adult photographs, which I am utilizing to trigger memories of my lived life. Different from anthropologists, who examine historic images as a lens through which they can explore the community they are investigating but are not part of, I am the main subject of most of the images I am considering. The community I am exploring is my own. More specifically, the world around me and the ways I made meanings in that world is being investigated through photographs and other visual imagery. These images were taken by a variety of photographers, most of which were family members. They are not images taken by professional photographers or researchers to specifically study a segment of a population. They are images gathered as mementos of family vacations, holidays and to document specific moments in a family’s life.

Although most people from a similar class and geography in western cultures have almost identical collections of family photographs and, on occasions, will find themselves looking back through them being reminded of moments of interest or significance, those actions would not likely be recognized as research. I used the photographs as a starting point of exploration. I developed a means through which I could use the photographs as a window into my own past, exploring that period on many levels. I used the process of drawing as a means of researching and being conscious of the filter of the present that I am looking back through. The act of redrawing the images, using specific materials, was the point where merely looking at photographs shifted to using them as an entrance point into researching what they portrayed and suggested.
Images were rerendered using graphite on opaque Mylar. I chose the surface of Mylar as it resembles the finish of a photograph and provides a material which graphite will both easily mark and be erased from. The images contained in the photographs were recreated, redrawn, or reregisterd as if I was repeating documenting the original images accurately on the Mylar today. This process is time consuming and allowed me to reaquaint myself with the memories contained in the images. The act of drawing such small images (3 ¼ by 3 ¼ inches) was an intimate one. Each mark had to be carefully made to present the images true to the original photographs. Because of the intimacy of the process, it allowed me to notice minute details I would not have seen, and to remember feelings or sensations I would not have thought of if I were just looking at the photographs. Flowers from my father’s gardens, the old stove just inside the back door of the house, three childhood friends I had not thought of for more than thirty years became clear again and part of my renewed memories. Drawing allowed me to step back to the moments, locations, settings, and people contained both inside the image and outside of that which was captured in the photograph. The process both retriggered memories contained in the images and sparked further memories of the same people, places, or things.

Similar to how a researcher steps into an archive, explores a set of documents or images, or completes fieldwork, this artfully reflective process (Gosse, 2005) allowed me to jot down first impressions, consider hunches, analyze, and then record more detailed and deeper understandings of the material being explored. Instead of taking field notes, collecting information, and gathering details to later cite, I made preliminary sketches, blocked in the main components, and then filled in all of the details.

After rendering each image I wrote a small narrative about what was taking place in the drawing, on the Mylar that surrounded the depiction, to further the viewer’s ability to understand the visual information with which they were presented. Often having remembered details about where or why the image was taken, what the relationships were of those in the photographs, or things taking place outside of the picture plane, these narratives provide further insight into the drawings themselves and would allow the viewer/reader a deeper understanding of what they and I were exploring. Other narratives were more focused observations as to what it is like to be looking back through the filter of time re-exploring or possibly for the first time seeing what was truly in the image and what was actually going on when the camera’s shutter clicked.

As an adult gay male looking back onto some of the images of my childhood, my teenage years, and even my early adulthood, I can see and consider things the images do not contain. I can find details that another viewer/researcher/reader may not be able to gather from the images. These memories or rememories of details the photographs contain but cannot reveal are also rendered in the texts.

These texts too are part of the drawing. Related to the researcher’s fieldnotes, they are observational, they ask further questions and, they are indicators of more in depth considerations. However, when registering them on the Mylar, the quality of mark making used is considered in the same way as the quality of mark making when registering the images they surround was contemplated. In these texts, on these surfaces I am as concerned about the subject of the words as I am the visual impact they have on how the image and entire piece is viewed/read. Some words were registered, then reconsidered and altered for their meaning or their appearance as marks.

Once the images and texts were completed I took a short break from making the piece and made notes about what I had observed or understood during the drawing/research process. A photograph was then taken of the drawing for further consideration and historical documentation. This process was part of the research.
Then I began the final action of the drawing/research. Using an eraser and smudging tool, I removed portions of the image and text. In some of the drawings the erasing is quite aggressive impacting both the image and the text. In others larger portions are left for the viewer/reader to engage with. This erasing part of the process is in fact also an act of drawing and activism. I am drawing the erasurism of my community’s and my own history. I am drawing the voids of oppression imposed by the hegemony upon my community and me. I am drawing that which is missing. The act of drawing in this way impedes the viewer of these pieces from fully grasping all that could be gained through this process of drawing/researching. This act of erasure drawing reveals to the viewer what it is like to navigate the world with portions of history erased, encased in shame or made to be secretive. This act of drawing provides a lens into what can be discovered when researching my community and what is also enforced to make the community less visible.

These drawings are displayed with the final painted project to aid the viewer/reader in both understanding the project and understanding the risks involved in producing the project. They act as research documentation and activism. An extra layer of understanding occurs as I am not recreating the moment in the memory but rather reinterpreting it through the act of drawing and the veil of looking backward through knowing how the story turns out. I am not just present in the image but able to compare some of the ideas I had during the time period the original photograph was taken and to think through where I came to be, now that the time has passed. This led me to the starting point for both the underpainting/free writing of the tent and the more finished components of the painting as well as the story telling that would come out of producing the painted project.

Painting: Creating my world so others can see it

When I paint I am not just considering the form and placement of objects, but rather, I deliberate over colour, light, and relationships between elements of the painting. Different from the process of information gathering in drawing, I think of painting as an act of revealing and creating light. I am not an observationally realistic painter, meaning that I am less concerned with observing a landscape, person, or arrangement of objects and trying to completely recreate them with the illusion of paint. I am more concerned with the formal aesthetic in a painting and the story it can tell. What I am painting is truer to how I see and understand it than how it actually is in the world. I am not a realist per say, although I do want my viewers to recognize what it is that I am portraying. I am also not an abstract painter. The guide I always use for myself in front of me or in my head so that I might later see it. If this information gathering is quick it can be diagrammatic in that it is a plotting-out of information as reference points which can be later expanded. If done more slowly, it can be a form of capturing details so my understanding of what I am looking at, and possibly the audience’s understanding is clearer. It is a way of mapping out what I am observing or imagining so I might be able to later figure out a space, perspective or detail.

The act of drawing begins with a surface or structure on which I then build the forms and ideas I am rendering or creating. Drawing differs from painting in that the surface on which I am rendering is the light which shines through the drawing; whereas, because of painting’s opacity I am covering the surface and needing to create the illusion of light. This is a major difference and yet the two are very interlinked.

Being trained as an artist in Canada, in Western culture, and being someone who lives in this culture and, therefore, sees the world using the illusionary understanding of deep space originated in the Renaissance period (McCarthy, 1978), both my drawing practice and my painting practice rely on this way of knowing. In some cases, in both drawings and paintings, I choose to deny deep space arrangements as a means of questioning relationships in what I am rendering. This is evident in both some of the forms of drawing inside and outside of the tent.

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when determining if my painting is successful is imagining whether my father can look at what I have painted and understand what it is. I use a realist’s vocabulary of mark making but allow the final painting to supersede the images it is based on.

For these reasons, I think of the process of painting as revealing information rather than gathering it. Drawing is like witnessing and painting is like creating. For me, the act of painting always comes after some sort of act of drawing. I will consider what I have drawn out, or I will first draw with paint and then later bring these people, places, or objects to life by not only rendering them, but also painting or creating the air that is around them. In a drawing I may consider the space in which the subject of my rendering exists and use techniques like perspective to make similar relationships on the page with mark making. Painting, on the other hand, is an act of bringing the air to life around those subjects. Painting is a process of pictorially making real that which is not. Even in the areas of my paintings which are more abstract, the relationships of the areas of colour or varying marks must consider the space within the picture plane.

In painting I move from a more monochromatic process to a fuller colour process that considers light and shade to animate what it is I am painting. Even in a drawing rendered with materials that are coloured, there is a dominant monochromatic process, that being the colour of the structure or light bleeding through the mark making. Different from some of my drawings and always within my painted surfaces, I let the paint itself make some of the marks, breaking the illusion created in act of painting. This reminds viewers they are looking at a painting not at an actual arrangement of subjects. A viewer is always aware of the mark making within the drawing and therefore consciously or subconsciously aware of the artist’s presence. In painting the marks I allow the actual act of painting to make brush strokes, drips, and imperfect relationships between the underpainting and that which is painted over it to make the viewer more conscious of the artist and therefore more aware of the biases the artist imposes on the subject matter that is being painted. I never want the viewer to forget that what they are engaging with is an illusion, as this allows them to read the imagery while, at the same time, making greater space for them to interpret what they are engaging with. This type of interaction with the painting allows viewers to have a more active role in interpreting the narrative in the painting.

Painting allows me to create greater depths and textures. It allows me to consider what I am rendering more deeply, than if I was simply drawing it. In contrast to the process of information gathering in drawing, painting seems to be more of a revealing process. It is a way to bring forward what I have seen or imagined and present it to viewers for deeper consideration while reminding them that it is an illusion that has been painted rather than the actual objects being portrayed. I see this as a way of telling stories. I see this as a way of reanimating my thoughts or memories. I see it as a way of disseminating what or how I see the world, but also providing the viewer the lens through which that understanding was created. I have a way of influencing the way they too can then see the narrative I am revealing.

Rarely is a painting completed in which some element of drawing is not included, whether that is sketching before the final painting is begun, drawing to then further fill out the painting, or drawing with paint as part of the process of painting. The latter is more common, where the initial paint acts like the bones of what I am painting and then I lay on the rest of the muscle and tissue to the painted drawing. In this process the three-dimensional quality of what I paint is partially achieved with the strength of the skeletal structure I created in my drawing and then furthered as I build on that skeleton. The air around the object or illusion of the object is then achieved in the combination of drawing and painting. Viewers must remember this when examining the images of this project for in some cases the painterly quality of three dimensions is achieved and in other portions of the tent it is purposely ignored to create a different quality of message. These differentiations in process add to the overall story being told with the tent.

The Tent

In this painted project there were two separate and distinct areas of painting. The exterior of the painting reveals someone else’s stories using their visual vocabulary. It is an illustration of how people who were different were labelled freaks and put into the public gaze. The interior tells my story of someone considered a freak, but using my own vocabulary. It does not position me as a freak, but rather presents how I saw and made sense of the world I inhabited. The combination and contrast of the two is where most of the learning for the viewer can take place.
Exterior

When I painted the exterior of the tent I wanted to pictorially stay true to the historic images of Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey’s Circus advertisements. I translated them to the exterior walls of the tent without alterations. They remain flat and without detail. Their colours are harsh and garish and do not reflect the subtleties we see when we observe the real world. They look like posters. The images borrow the language and forms of text used in these advertisement-like images. Though I used direct texts from these advertisements, in some cases I juxtaposed a phrase with an image that is different from the original, I injected my own name within some of the texts, and I omitted some of the text which did not aid the discourse being considered in this project. These subtle manipulations allowed me to begin asking some of the questions about identity the project addresses.

Intertwined with these advertising images are three semitransparent self-portraits. Rendered see-through with washes of white they are shallow in their depictions. This is reflective of the oversimplified and empty narratives they reflect. They portray the judgements made about my character and ask the viewer to consider whether these images are reflective of me, while suggesting they are actually demonstrating the narrow visions of the stereotypes imposed upon my community.

The overall impression is bold and circus-like. It both attracts the viewer with its celebratory carnivalesque imagery and repulses them with its crude painting style and othering of those deemed as freaks from a time gone by. This contradiction begins for the viewer the act of questioning identity.

Interior

The feeling inside the tent is welcoming and quite different from that outside. The multilayer approach and variations of methods of painting construct a deeper telling of the story; the methods suggest a richer identity than that of the singular, judgemental identifications of a gay man visible on the exterior of the tent. Text, both fully legible and in some cases indecipherable, is throughout the interior of the tent, illuminating some of the painted narratives and in other cases forcing the viewer to work without the overall story and be aware that they are not able to access what is there. Personal, historical photo-transferred images are arranged throughout the painting inside of the tent giving the viewer other lenses into the larger narrative. They serve as citations in this research solidifying the story in truth. Tonally monochromatic paintings of many moments from my life establish for the viewer points of geographical and historical reference. They enable the viewer to begin to construct a fuller narrative of my formative years. Full colour painted images

PLATE 26
FREAK SHOW: (exterior detail contortionist).

PLATE 27
FREAK SHOW: Tent, (exterior detail, transparent self-portrait as a clown).

PLATE 28
FREAK SHOW: Tent, (interior detail).
suggest to the viewer some of the narratives most integral to my character building and identify the more epiphanic moments in my life. The painted environment surrounds the viewer, vicariously positioning them within the narrative.

Text, in the form of free-writing, was inscribed on the interior walls of the tent as the beginning moments of the painted project. Writing like this allowed me to consider the hunches I had about what I would render in the tent with few implications if the final product was not used. These texts helped me move through the earlier nervousness of conducting the research while at the same time, they aided me in clarifying which components of the narratives were imperative to tell. Painted or drawn, without caution, they allowed me to consider the imagery I would render and contemplate the audience who would engage with the research.

The initial research decision to free-write on a wet surface so that they would both register and become impermanent allowed me to be daring in how freely I considered elements in my project and take risks I might not otherwise have taken. Undecided initially, but realised through the process, this very wet mark making onto a dampened surface, and then letting the marks become less solid, is reflective of the process of remembering. Like memory, some things are quite clear and solid, while others are more fluid and less concrete. I incorporated this more and more in the way I was executing the free writing, leaving some of the story out so as to not have to fully remember it and to also allow myself some junctures of privacy in the research. Later in the painting process, areas of the text were covered over with images, purposely disallowing the viewer to see the full story. This would make real for them the action of living as a person who through oppression is asked to hide, erase, or not tell their entire story.

The photo transfers were arranged amongst the interior of the tent, both randomly and in organized fashions. For example, I cut out images of family and friends and transferred them onto the tent walls as organic shapes, acting as leaves in the image of a family tree. I decided on the transferred images arrangement solely for the aesthetic of how the shapes would work as a leaf, rather than how the images the transfer contained would relate to each other. This spoke to both the interconnectedness and often confused relationships of people in memory. Some images were repeated to be reflective of the multiple ways we remember the same moment or thought or the variety of ways we think of those in our lives.

In other instances I applied the photo-transfers quite differently as the subject matter of the images was greatly considered. Images of my mother and her immediate family were organized and arranged on the mapping or drawing of her family farm which had been drawn with paint onto the tent walls. These images help to animate the farm for the viewer while also providing other information about the geography of the location, the relationships of some of the members of the family, and the time period that these images reference. I also arranged photo-transferred images in relation to the text which they juxtaposed. For example, images of my father were transferred next to text which addressed his relationship with me and with the world.

In all cases where I use photo-transfers the breaking of illusionary Renaissance notions of deep space takes place. This aids viewers to read or see what they are engaging with as a collection of multiple layers of information rather than one stable linear image. The photo-transfer process both provides passages of information which allow the viewer to see the content of the tent as a collection of truths rather than just an imagined or conjured aesthetic, and confuses the reality of the painted images by breaking this reading of space. This pushes the viewer to take a more active role in making his or her own sense of the plethora of information provided. This also vicariously positions the viewer within the narrative of untruth an oppressed person is forced to inhabit. It provides an empathetic lens into what it is like to not always be able to tell your story.

In the final panels of the tent an image of a goose stands surrounded by very articulated text. The image draws attention to the text almost as if it is indicating some conclusive elements of the narrative. Viewers are left to ponder the significance of the goose and yet they are very aware of the words rendered here on the tent walls and their meaning. The text is harsh and speaks to the dangers of navigating others’ homophobic perceptions of me. It is somewhat aggressive in its questioning of why this might be. The odd image of the goose implies, something significant is going on and, yet even in the written artists catalogue, it goes unexplained. This furthers the sensation that I, as a gay man, must keep elements of my life secret, though they may in no way be related to my sexual orientation.
Beside the goose is a panel with a fully painted image of me at two different ages. One is an image of me as a young child dressed in a clown’s costume. The other is of me as an adult now staring back at the viewer. They are both captured in the same painting as if the two time periods could coexist. The child looks away into the space behind the wall of the tent where the adult looks directly out from the space. These images position me at both ages, caught between the outside of the tent and how I am perceived, and the inside of the tent and how I perceive myself. As a child I was less aware of how the world did or would see me. I innocently stare into the space between the two worlds as if oblivious to either of these perceptions and those who have caught me in their gaze. I am quietly inquisitive about the world in which I exist.

The adult version confronts the viewer. Looking back at the viewer I am clearly questioning what role the viewer plays in all of this. I neither acknowledge the outside of the tent or the inside. I am present, between the two as if somehow caught. The image of me stares out of the space where I am held asking viewers to look at the larger narrative and question the ways their perceptions impact this.
In the end I hope the interior of the tent acts as a bulletin board where many clues are pinned. Like me, viewers must make sense of the relationship between the text, photo-transfers, and drawn and painted images. I think it reads as an old photo album where the person leafing through it has a sense of familiarity and yet is left nostalgically questioning what the stories are that exist between the images. I want the interior of the tent to read like a map with multiple clues as to how I got from one point to the next. I think it reads as place to investigate, giving permission to the viewer to look deeper into my artful reflections upon how I came to be the person I am. Finally, I hope it is a place of contemplation and questioning where the viewer and I are further provoked to tell stories with the richness that is needed for us to understand each other and ourselves. I hope it leaves the viewer with a greater depth of understanding of the richness of my identity and questioning why I might only be perceived like the very surface ways the outside of the tent suggests.

Reading: Searching and Researching

When I was young I was encouraged by my teachers and my parents to read. My teachers wanted me to read because it would increase my literacy and knowledge. My parents wanted me to read because we were not well off and, through reading, they knew I could see and explore the world that they could not provide for me in any other way. I had a library card for the branch that was only a few blocks away from our house. I travelled to that library with my parents and sister once every other week or so and would almost cover the back seat of the Buick with armfuls of books. The library allowed me to take five at a time, when we first went there, but once you had borrowed books for a full year and returned them on time and without issue, you were allowed to borrow up to twenty. About the same time that I reached that milestone I also reached the point of trust with my parents to travel the five blocks unaccompanied. This meant I could go by myself, but being small and having to travel the distance, made signing out that many books almost impossible. I continued to travel with my parents and my sister whenever I could convince them to go. When I went alone I usually would pick books off the shelf in the children's section and sit on the steps that surrounded the 'learning zone,' where special events took place in the library and, look, read, and head home without a book. I often felt quite important when I was leaving empty handed and the librarian at the front desk would say, “Nothing for you today Mr. Harrison?” and I would smile and raise my seven year old hands in the air to show they were empty. Sometimes, I tried to talk to the librarians about a book I was looking for that I didn't know the title of but thought if I told them some of the story they might know it. Truthfully, I didn’t know the title because I didn’t know if such a book actually existed. The story was really one of someone just like me.

The head librarian of that branch lived in a house just behind my maternal grandparents' and so when I visited them I often visited her as well, not really knowing that I should only talk to her about the library when she was at work. We would talk about the book I hoped to find. She would jokingly tell me that she thought I should someday write that book as she thought I knew the story quite well. “Keep reading,” she would say, “you will eventually find what you are looking for.”

After many books in the children's and teens' sections of the library were signed out, brought home, and read through, and after many books in year after year of English classes were also read as required, for the most part, I stopped reading. It wasn’t that I did not like reading. It was that the story I was searching for eluded me and I became discouraged to never see anyone like me in these books. I thought maybe the librarian was right; that I might just have to write it myself.

Years later, when I began my doctoral program I initially talked about finding the missing gay and lesbian history. When asked to articulate what history I was talking about I referred to a history of the lives we lived, not solely of the history of struggles and battles for human rights we had fought and continued to fight. The latter of the two I knew quite well and could cite times and locations of shifts in local, national, and world events around many struggles both won and lost. The first though eluded me for there seemed to be almost no images or narratives of the daily lives of my community. Although I felt I was able to articulate very well what I was looking for, it seemed I was often challenged with fragments of stories that others thought already fulfilled my research quest. These fragments, however, seemed to really just be more stories about the struggle.

Though my thesis committee had approved my research topic area and I had assured them I knew what I was doing in setting up the Artist-in-Residency at the high school, beginning to paint, and beginning the larger discourse around my work, I really was at a loss as to what my research questions truly were. My supervisor suggested I stop worrying about that while encouraging me to keep reading. “What do you do when you are working on an exhibition and having trouble?”

I replied, “I just start painting and see what comes out.”

“Try that to get past this hurdle,” she suggested and I headed out to my studio to paint.

As I began the free-writing with paint on the walls of the tent, I also started to read recently published Bildungsroman novels and sexual minority youth literature. In the writing I was trying to sort through the multiple ideas and memories I had about growing up and working through my identity formulation. In the reading I was trying to find the right tone to be able to tell these memories and stories. The writing was a very new experience for me and I was quite surprised to see what thoughts, questions, and emotions were coming to the surface. But I was more surprised with what I found in the reading I was doing. Although I knew there had been great shifts in my human rights as a gay man, I did not realize that one of the impacts of these shifts would be the availability of novels where the characters I had been looking for as a very young reader were appearing in abundance.

While reading Pryor Rendering (Reed, 1997), I was struck by a specific moment, an exchange between two characters, where I could feel what they were feeling. I pored through the rest of that novel with tears rolling down my face. For the first time I was seeing myself reflected in some of the characters I was meeting in these novels. I became a voracious reader of these books as part of my research process. I obsessively bought book after book and though...
initially I thought I was looking for a tone with which I could paint and tell my stories so that sexual minority youth would most easily hear and understand them, I realized I was rememorizing my teen years with the books that had then not yet been written.

Two years into painting the tent and after reading well over a hundred novels (see Narratives in Bibliography), I was leaving the local sexual and gender minority book store one day without a new book, when the owner said to me, “Nothing for you today Mr. Harrison?!” and I raised my hands to show they were empty. I was no longer leaving empty-handed because what I was looking for did not exist, but rather, because I had read all that they had on their shelves.

Reading literature became a method of searching and researching. It became a way of not only finding the correct tone to tell my stories, but also understanding and articulating what exactly my research was about. It helped clarify who my differing audiences were while aiding in questioning the larger impacts of the research. It became a place of support for the work I was doing. Like my earlier teachers had wished, it became a way for both increasing my literacy and increasing my knowledge. Like my parents had wished for when I was young, this reading took me to places they could not take me and introduced me to people I did not know. Unknown to either my teachers or my parents, it introduced me to aspects of myself when I was younger.

Looking back to why reading was promoted to me as a young child and thinking through the role it played in this research, I am aware of the lack of resources I had as a child and youth and how this hindered me from fully understanding myself and those around me (Karpiack, 2008). I had no stories to reflect upon aspects of my character. There were no gay or lesbian role models. I also am left questioning if this lack somehow aided me in building different paths of happiness, self-identity, and resilience because it forced me to construct my own story without the negative images and narratives sexual and gender minority youth are confronted with today. Back then I really only imagined myself as fearless.

In the past, working as an anti-homophobia educator delivering these assemblies, I would begin with imagination exercises where I would tell a story but with the details changed so that every person in the story was gay or lesbian and they were the only straight ones. I would roll out detail after detail about the world, but reversed so the heterosexual people were the minority and then tell them some of the details of my life. When I would ask them what they then thought of and how it made them feel, some would express the discomfort they felt and then I would open up the floor for questions. At this point students would ask a real variety of questions in an assortment of directions. I would answer these questions by telling more stories of my life.

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Telling stories as a way of hearing them

Have you ever told or retold a story that someone told you and in the telling you added the part you thought would help it make more sense to the person you were telling? I am not asking about making up a story, but rather, telling a story with more of the details so that your audience can have a fuller picture of what you are trying to tell. Finding just the right amount of detail so your audience can both get the gist of the information you are sharing and leaving enough space for their imagination to make their own sense of your story is indeed a skill.

As part of the activism this project entailed I delivered school-wide anti-homophobia assemblies in the high school where my studio was located. This made clear for all students that the teachers and the administration at the school would not tolerate bullying or harassment of sexual and gender minority people and that my placement in the school would provide both knowledge and support for all students grappling with these issues. It also, for the first time in this school, acknowledged the existence of gay people within the population, with the hope that this would make other sexual and gender minority people within the school feel more safe. I had volunteered as part of my residency to deliver these assemblies and the principal knew of my history of this type of work. She provided the venue and times for these presentations and simply trusted what I would say would be enlightening. What she did not expect is that I would tell stories that had been triggered by the images I was beginning to paint as my way of helping make sense of these life stories.

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The presentations at the assemblies I delivered at Georges Vanier were different. Although I felt my past process was effective, mainly because it established a familiarity between the audience and myself and then let them ask the questions they really wanted to know, I was moving forward as a researcher and the beginning of my project made me realize more could be gained without the imagination exercises. I began these assemblies with more stories. I told them the more epiphanic moments of my life, but not as facts, more as stories. Students and staff in the audience are all used to telling the stories of their own lives, but like me, they were not used to hearing stories of the lives of sexual or gender minority people. Telling these stories pulled them past the very one dimensional facts or imaginings, often laden with homophobic judgements, they had in their heads. Telling the stories, like bringing them inside the tent, created for them the multidimensional, multilayered, multifaceted person that I am. This contradicted what they negatively imagined about the details of my life when I first told them that I was gay. After telling these stories the richness of the texture of my life became evident. They could begin to compare themselves to me and in doing so my identification as a gay man was replaced with my gay identity. This provided a platform for much more rewarding questions. Often someone would begin a question and, before they had completed asking it, they would stop and rethink what they were really initially after in their query. This was a direct result of shifting the core of the assemblies from the exercise to the stories of my life. This was evidence that a storied delivery of information...
I was imagining doing this work, and if I was putting myself in anyone. I wondered if this location was less safe as there would be where you will get some privacy away from the rest of the school.”

I picked this room partially because it has an alarm, partially because whose name I did not yet know, which was followed by, “We “Do you know the alarm code?” Karen asked the caretaker, “Fine. It is fine. I guess this is where old furniture comes to die. Can I know any of it I want, that I think I can use?” I questioned. “And then, how soon can we get the dumpsters here?”

I picked my way through the room thinking it was a huge space once it was cleared out and that after sweeping the floor it would make a great studio. For me it seemed over-stuffed, but that the traces of the old welding shop gave it a somewhat romantic feeling of the loft studios we all stereotypically imagine artists living in. I thought forward to the work that would need to be done to get it functioning and felt sure this was going to be an adventure. “Fine. It is fine. I guess this is where old furniture comes to die. Can I keep any of it I want, that I think I can use?” I questioned. “And then, how soon can we get the dumpsters here?”

She and I each pushed open one of the two doors to the outside on the opposite side of the studio. Karen looked up making note of the number above my new studio door and pointed to the surrounding parking lot saying, “I will get them to put the dumpsters there,” she said, pointing to the space around the doors. Rick, the art teacher and Colin, the tech teacher both poked their heads in.

“Wow! There is a lot in here. I can get you some students to help clear this out. They are excited you are joining us,” Rick said.

Colin started to pick through some stacks of paper and other junk, some of which I think he had put in the room unbeknownst to anyone else, while Rick tried to introduce us again. We laughed as we shook hands and pretended we had never met. “It’s a bit overwhelming,” he said as he looked around the room and we all headed out into the hall.

Most of the moments in this studio felt like this. Exciting, a bit overwhelming, impossible, and pioneering. I was constantly aware that I was doing something very different and new compared to any research project that had been undertaken in the past, but common sense prevailed and I became very capable of responding to almost anything that happened in the studio. Even at this moment, as we looked back into the mess and talked about clearing it out, discussed what the first announcements and assemblies would be like, and thought about how I would load in my supplies, it was clear I would have multiple roles at Georges Vanier.

“To the best of my knowledge there has never been another Artist-in-Residence in a high school in Canada, whose sole responsibility, was to be in the school and make art,” Karen said, and I laughed a bit back at her. “All of the examples I know of other Artists-in-Residence included some sort of teaching happening in the artist’s studio.” She continued and I laughed a little louder. “You can just come and go as you like and students will stop by and become more human.”

Now I really laughed. “I think there will be lots of teaching in this studio. I think there will be lots of juggling emotions, myths, and knowledge. And, I think it will be a bit more effort than students just dropping by to become more human. We all sort of chuckled with varying ideas of what I was referring to and went off in our own directions. The caretaker gave me the keys to my studio and for the alarm and we headed back to his office to meet the plumber who was going to get the sink in my new studio running.

The idea of conducting my research within an Artist-in-Residency program in this Toronto District School Board location was multi-pronged and I felt a key element to the project’s success.
Producing the work in a public arena like this would require me to continually paint to be understood by my audience, listen to my intended audience’s responses so I could be certain what I was doing would achieve what I hoped it would: truly understand the Autoethnographic questions I was asking myself, narrate the stories that I was rendering and those around the images in ways that I could be certain they were comprehended, and be the activist I always am in my work. I hoped being in a high school setting and in the studio would trigger the memories I wanted to recant, provide me a place to rewrite some of those narratives, and would provide me a place to confront some of the homophobia I had experienced earlier in my life. In short, the studio setting provided a place of healing for me, a place of support for the youth in my community, and a place of moving forward for the greater population (Reason & Marshall, 1987).

Painting can be a process that one can fall into, where the mark making, colour manipulation, and synchronicity can become all that the artist is conscious of. Intuition plays a major role in the making of a painting and when combined with heightened skill level can reach a point where a type of magic is achieved. As an educator, I can teach anyone to draw and use paint. As an activist, an educator, and sometimes just as a friend I can be inspiring to those around me. The combination of the two is where art begins to be made and that I cannot teach.

When I began to paint in the studio I met many individuals who dropped in just once to see what I was doing and others who met about 60 kids who came out to me as being sexual or gender minority. When I asked each of them if they thought there were others like them in the school all replied, “No, I am the only one.”

The major challenge in doing this work in this high school was that most often people were actually interested in what I was doing but they did not want to be viewed by others as being interested for the implications it might initiate. To quickly change this nervousness or hesitation I added a large bowl of apples, just inside my studio door. This created the opportunity for a student or staff member to enter the studio and engage in whatever type of conversation with me always with the opportunity to depart unattached to what I was doing in the studio, only claiming to come for a free apple. This provided a safety net for those sexual and gender minority students and staff to come and go under the guise of getting the apple. This allowed those who were homophobic to also come and challenge their ideas or mine, always under the guise of getting the apple. And finally it allowed those who were in the school simply needing food to get some and when encouraged to wash their apples in the sink that was now working they would find themselves in the studio looking at the work or engaging in the discourse around the project.

“Thanks for the apple.” “Hey, can I have an apple?” “Thanks for the apple Spencer.” “Thanks for the apple, sir!” “What are these apples for?” “Thanks for the apple.” “I heard we can get a free apple here.” “Hey, thanks for the apple.” “Yeah, thanks for the conversation and the apple.” “Can I have an apple, sir?” “Hey, thanks for the apple, Mr Harrison.” “Thanks for the apples, sir!” were the words most often spoken in the studio. The difficulty for me was trying to promote equity, make a safe space for sexual and gender minority kids to be, promote my project, and keep everyone’s secret. In my first year in the studio I gave out twenty-eight bushels of apples and met about 60 kids who came out to me as being sexual or gender minority. When I asked each of them if they thought there were others like them in the school all replied, “No, I am the only one.”

The type of secrecy and nervousness around my studio for the students who came and went was very helpful in retrigerring my memories and emotions. The space became a large part of my methodology as I painted, told stories, and listened. Moments of my own identity struggles were brought to the forefront by the interactions and silences that took place in the studio. Some students and staff began to visit me on a daily basis, but their visits varied in length and likelihood of being noticed. Some came before school began. Some came during lunch or after the last bell at the end of the day. Some came during class claiming to be going to the washroom. Some skipped class to visit. These visits provided lenses into my own feelings of safety when I was originally in high school and trying to determine who I was and where I fit in.

Of those who visited the studio and looked at the painting in progress, many asked questions. Some of these questions were asking me to explain an element I was painting. Some of these asked about the underpainting of text. And some asked me to further explain the narratives the tent images were providing, or the greater discourse of the whole project. These ongoing interactions aided me in seeing which images were reading well, which details were confusing, and which elements needed to be strengthened or shifted down depending on the impact I was after. The students and teachers in the school were both an early audience for the work and the measure by which I could determine the success of the project on-going.

There were many moments in the project where the varying engagements with the students sent me back to my family to clarify details, returned me to moments in my memory that I had somehow forgotten, or prompted further self-reflexive periods where I could think through the significance of the images I was painting and the stories I was trying to animate. As earlier stated, one of the downfalls of Autoethnographic research is determining which facts, details or moments are the most significant and which will have the more transformative impacts on their audience. In short, being both the one conducting the interview and the one being interviewed made for a closer relationship with the information and a more difficult time sorting it. The coming and going of visitors to the studio enabled me to determine which significant tensions, factors, and elements needed to be elucidated in the project.

In keeping with my want for the research not to provide conclusions, but rather, to open up narratives which would in turn create the deeper questions the project was working towards, I needed to become a stronger storyteller. The residency provided me
with the venue for this. Whether presenting the anti-homophobia assemblies, guest lecturing in classes in the high school, working in the studio, or simply interacting with people in the halls, office, or cafeteria, I was constantly telling the stories of my life. Telling these stories is direct activism. Providing a far more textured identity than the narrow and uninformed ways I might be imagined allowed those with negative impressions of sexual minority people to confront their own ideas. Constantly talking about my life growing up, the work that I do, and how I live day-to-day now allowed, and in some cases forced, people to shift their initial impressions. My belief that the stories of our lives being shared both gives a window into how we are the same and makes spaces for others to tell their stories and then reflexively compare the two, was presented in all aspects of me being in residence at the school. I honed my craft of telling the stories and presenting the narratives of my life, not by changing the facts within them but by learning how to best narrate them. Although my history as an artist is tied very closely to that of being an activist, the residency provided me an opportunity to identify the audience the project was most geared towards. I was continually confronting those who do not believe that everyone deserves similar human rights. My life’s work thus far has been focused on speaking to the hegemony outside of the sexual and gender minority community with the hope of bringing a different understanding of who we are from the negative ways we are commonly imagined. When I first conceptualized this project I was initially working in this direction but, as I began to clear out the studio, understand the lay of the land of those in Georges Vanier, and began to think about painting the project and telling my story, I had never seen in here before. Where did all that stuff go?” she said.

“It’s out here in these dumpsters,” I said as I pushed open one of the doors to outside and pointed to the three full bins.

“Wow, cool.”

“Hi, I’m Spencer,” with my hand extended to shake hers.

“Hey, I’m Jackie,” and we shook. “So what exactly is an Artist-in-Residence and what are you going to do in here?”

“Well, I am going to paint the story of my life, from my first memories at about the age of three or four, up until about the age of fifteen when I first met another gay person and knew I wasn’t the only one. I am painting about growing up gay and the differences in how I see myself and others see me.” I explained. I had just come out to the first student in the school and I felt scared and excited. I could tell by the look on her face I hadn’t done a very good job of explaining myself and that I needed to very quickly change what I was saying so it would make sense.

“Sounds like it is going to be a pretty big painting. Anyway, I have to go or I will be late for Mr. Ramsay. Can I come back? Like can I eat my lunch in here and watch?”

“Sure I will be loading in all my stuff and starting over the course of the next week. Come by anytime the door is open. Tell your friends.”

“Oh, I will tell them all right,” she said as she left the studio and headed for Mr. Ramsay’s room next door.

I shut the door behind her, turned off all the lights and stood in the dark of my studio, shaking. This was going to be tougher than I thought, or maybe easier and it all depended on how I carried myself and how well I could tell my story.

The next morning I opened the studio at around ten. Classes were already started so I wouldn’t have to see anyone right away and I could do some things to make myself feel more comfortable. I was trying to quickly settle in. I was tired, as I had not slept much the night before thinking through how I was going to better and more quickly explain what I was doing in the studio. Though it seemed a bit corny, I had bought myself some flowers and was putting them in a jar I had found while cleaning out the studio. I set them up and said just loud enough for me to hear, “Well that’s a bit queer, isn’t it?” I rearranged some of the furniture and started to unload some of the boxes with supplies I had brought from home. I was at it for only about ten minutes when the bell went off and the hallway outside the door filled with students. I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination that everyone who passed seemed to be staring in and that I felt like a bit of a fish in a fish bowl, but the crowd quickly died down. The studio was at the end of a hall in the back corner of the school. The only thing that was past my studio was the tech class so once the students had left and the new ones arrived it got pretty quiet. I continued moving stuff in and around until I heard a very soft, quiet voice behind me.

“Excuse me are, are you the artist?”

“Yes, I’m an artist,” I said repeating the quietness of his questioning voice and then getting louder and sounding more confident as I reminded myself of all the things I had thought through the night before. “I am the Artist-in-Residence in your school and this is my studio. Come in if you like,” and I gestured for him to come. He stepped forward but stopped. He stood on the edge between the hallway and the studio as if it was a tight rope.

“Are you the gay artist?” he almost whispered and looked back from his rope into the hallway seeing if anyone was around to hear him.

I guess we are starting this, I thought to myself, not knowing if he was friend or foe. “Yes, I’m the gay artist.” And he burst into the studio running towards me. He threw his arms around my middle and squeezed ever so gently, “Thanks, I’m gay too,” and he ran out of the room.
“But the thesis that was placed in my lap was like none other I had seen. In content, it was as scholarly and rigorous as any other. Yet in form, it was more alive, more readable, more truthful to its subject matter, and thus more open to possibilities for the reader’s interpretation of its reading. Part picture book, part prose, and yet solidly located within other scholars previous thinking, it took me on a visual, visceral, and engaged journey.”

(Taken from my journal notes about the first meeting with the directors of the Centre for Arts-informed Research, OISE/UT August 2005).
At first I loved going to church. But that is not how I always felt about it. We attended Grace United Church which was about three blocks away from our house. Although it was a short distance, we would rarely walk. Most Sundays we would go directly from church out for brunch to the Rock Haven and on my favourite Sundays we would also go to my grandparents’ after church. For either of these we would need the car to get there. The church was on Monaghan Road directly across the street from where my sister and I would eventually go to high school. Some of my earliest memories of church were how tall the building looked inside, how uncomfortable the pews felt, and how beautiful the coloured light was that came in from the side windows that were at the front of the sanctuary.

When I was younger I went downstairs to Sunday School which was great because I didn’t have to sit on those uncomfortable seats for as long and I didn’t have to listen to the sermon, which I found to be either confusing or boring. I started going to Sunday School before I could walk, but when I was between six and seven I was asked to leave. Although I guess in some ways it made me quite original to be kicked out of Sunday School, I don’t think my mum was really too pleased the day it happened. Our teacher showed us a picture of whom she said was Jesus and I put up my hand, like you are supposed to when you are going to ask a question.

“How do they know what he looks like if they didn’t have cameras back then?” I asked.

Her answer didn’t seem to really make sense. “People told their grandchildren, who told their grandchildren and so on until there were ways that people could draw him accurately,” she proudly told the class.

“He wouldn’t have had blonde hair,” I blurted, forgetting to put up my hand. “People didn’t have fair skin and blonde hair where he was from. They had dark hair, dark skin, and dark eyes. That is what I was told by the head of the Sunday School last year when I wanted to be Jesus in the Christmas pageant.”

Truthfully, I think they just didn’t want me to do it, because the pictures up on the walls all around our church were the same one as she was showing me now and in those pictures he was blonde.
just like me. When I asked my grandpa, after they had turned me down for the part, he confirmed that Jesus would have been dark, even though the pictures around his church were the same ones as around ours. The son of the head of the Sunday School got to play Jesus.

“Spencer, stop disrupting the class,” she ordered and while she wanted to continue with her lesson I was not finished making my point.

“That man is blonde and his skin is pale,” I shot back. “It is not and could not be Jesus!” And bam, that was it! I was marched past my sister’s class, upstairs into the church, even though it was right in the middle of the sermon, and right to my parents. I was no longer welcome at Sunday School because I was disturbing the class. The following Sunday I decided the sermon wasn’t that bad and I didn’t mind staying with my parents. My parents told me it was my choice if I wanted to go downstairs with the other kids or not. I eventually went back but it was a few Sundays later.

I am not fully sure how many weeks later it happened, but one Sunday I noticed how the choir looked like angels in their choir dresses. I loved angels. They could fly. They got to talk with Jesus in heaven. And, they got to wear white flowing dresses with long flowing sleeves. The day I first noticed that the choir looked like angels, I decided that when I was old enough I would join the choir.

Being in the choir was fun. You got to go to practice. You got to learn new songs. And, you got to stand at the front of the church, just behind the minister and looking like an angel. I also liked that on the days you practised you often got to see the minister in his normal clothes, without his dress on. I really liked our minister and he seemed to really like us. He often sat in the back of the church and listened to us practising. He also often reminded us that if we ever needed anything to not be afraid to ask, saying our pastoral care was part of his job.

I sang in the choir for a few years before I heard one of the singers telling someone else about the choirmaster, “He is gay. He has a boyfriend who picks him up in his car and I have even seen them kiss.” From that moment on I paid closer attention to what the choirmaster was saying and doing. Maybe he was like me and wanted to marry a man. I thought if I watched enough and talked to him enough I might learn more about myself. I started to really pay attention to him. About three weeks later, after practice, I saw him kiss the man in the car that always picked him up. A man that wasn’t from our church. I thought about this through most of the rest of the week. The following Sunday I missed almost all of the cues as I was staring at him trying to figure out if I thought he was different before I knew he was gay.

At the start of the next choir practice he mentioned my missed cues and asked me if everything was okay. Before I could fully answer his question the minister showed up. “Can I talk to you?” he asked. I thought maybe I was going to be in trouble, but for what exactly, I wasn’t quite sure. We moved further back in the church and the choir began their practice.

“Gerry told me you were missing all your cues last Sunday and he thinks you were doing it on purpose. He said that he thought you were trying to disrupt the choir and him. He told me that you were staring him down.”

“I wasn’t trying to disrupt the choir. I wasn’t staring him down. I was just looking at him.” I began to panic. I did not want to tell him I heard Gerry was gay or that I had seen him kiss the man who picked him up. I wanted to tell him the truth, that I thought I might be gay. I wasn’t sure how I would be treated though, after hearing how the other choir members spoke about someone they thought was gay. I did not want pastoral care because I didn’t know what that was and I didn’t think there was anything wrong with me.

“Is there something you need to talk about?” he asked and then finished with, “You know when you talk with me I don’t share it with anyone else. Is everything okay at home? Should we go downstairs to my office?”

“Yes, everything is okay at home. Can we go down to your office? Are you sure I can talk to you about things and you will keep them just between you and me?” With that we got up and started to head downstairs.

“Yes, I will keep it confidential. How old are you now? Thirteen or fourteen? That means you are almost a man,” he said, though it seemed clear he wasn’t as impressed as he sounded about my age but more like he wanted to coax me to tell him my inner most secrets. When we got to his office I sat down as directed in a chair that was right near his. Usually I saw him sitting behind his desk not in a chair on the same side as who he was talking to. This seemed out of the ordinary. My heart was racing now. How could I explain what had happened and what I thought was happening to me and not say anything about the choirmaster?

“I think I am gay,” I blurted out. “I don’t really like that word and I don’t really know exactly what it means, but I think I want to marry a man. My nickname at school is ‘Freak Show’ and people first called me that because they thought I was funny. People thought I was a freak because I was good in drama and art and wrestling and academics. It wasn’t an insult. Now I think some of them think I like boys. They call me ‘Freak Show’ or ‘Freak’ because they don’t want to say gay or fag and get caught. I just learned those words. I don’t think I am weird or creepy or anything like what I have heard some people say about people that they think are gay. I just want to marry a man not a woman. I have been thinking about it a lot lately and last Sunday, I was just thinking about it more. That’s why I missed my cues. I wasn’t staring Gerry down. He just sits in front of me. I am not a freak or a freak show. I just guess I want to marry a man. I don’t know if there are any other people like me. I have never met one,” and I stopped talking.

After I stopped talking, I do not really remember exactly what he said. I seemed to fade in and out of the speech he was making. It was as if I could hear him and then as if I was inside my head and it was quiet. I felt elated. I had said it out loud and the minister was saying I would be fine. He said I was not a freak; I was a good boy and other such things. I am not certain how long we were in that room or if what was happening was pastoral care, but when we left the office he put his hand on my shoulder as he walked me upstairs while telling me I would be fine.

At the top of the stairs he repeated, “You will be fine. I am glad we got to have this talk. Are you safe to head home on your own? Practice is over. Does someone usually pick you up or do you usually walk home with someone?”

Although I thought it was odd that he didn’t offer me a ride
when it was late, I answered, “It’s just a couple of blocks and I usually walk alone.” I pushed the back door open and bounded to get to the stairs, the sidewalk below, and away from him. The walk home was filled with thoughts. The conversation had not gone badly, I thought. It seemed there would be no grave consequences this time. He seemed to not think it was wrong that I wanted to marry a man.

The following Sunday I went with my family to church and feigned not feeling well. There was a rule in choir that if you weren’t at practice that week, you couldn’t sing in the choir that Sunday. I had to have an excuse because my dad knew I had gone to the practice, but I would not be allowed to sing because I hadn’t actually practised. The minister shook hands with many of the congregants as we came in and for me it seemed a little longer shake than with the others. He smiled down at me.

The sermon was called “How will you get there?” and the readings were all about heaven. Before the minister began his sermon he paused, smiled a bit and made eye contact specifically with me.

“Sin leads to hell,” he began, “but at sometime we will all sin. Does this mean we will all go to hell? No. Murders could be forgiven. Homosexuals could be forgiven. Rapists could be forgiven. We all could be forgiven. If we repent! However, homosexuals, gay people don’t repent. They are trapped for they keep repeating their sins. They are most likely the only ones who will end up in hell.”

I do not remember hearing much more. He stared me down through much of his words.

I did not return to the choir.

I did not return to church.
“Sitting in the dirt, on the floor of the Women’s Barracks, with a faint light coming through the rain streaked windows, we listened to Faigie’s story of surviving the Holocaust. Looking around at her audience I realized every one of us there would have been on the deportation list. She had survived to bear witness and tell her story so we could carry it forward and tell others. And to be sure we would tell our own.”

(Reflecting on my visit to Auschwitz Birkenau, with The March of Remembrance and Hope, Canadian Centre of Diversity Studies, Spring 2010)
I was so excited to start school. I really liked the pack of friends I hung out with but I was excited to meet more new people and maybe find more friends like me. There were no boys on my street who were my age. There were no boys on my street that liked to draw, paint, read, and write the way I did. And, there were no boys on my street who were fearless. Our family was different from other families on the street because both my parents worked outside the home and all the other mothers stayed home and worked from there. This made me think that there would be other families that were different in other ways, and if so, there might be more people who were like me. The school was only one and a half blocks away from our house and so I was supposed to walk with my friends from our street, but I was so excited I ran ahead of them just staying in sight of my sister, because I could not wait to get there.

In my first year I made a bunch of new friends and found out lots of things about other people who were different from those I already knew. There was one girl in my class who lived with just her mom. There was one girl who did not have parents, and lived with her grandparents. There was one particular girl named Linda that I really liked because she seemed to be as fearless as me. There were a couple of kids I didn’t like because of how mean they were. There were a couple of kids I really liked just because they were so different from me.

There was one boy named Tim that I really liked because he could throw things very far and did lots of different tricks. We sat next to each other in class. We spent our recesses together. And we helped each other out with different things. He taught me lots of stuff like how to throw sticky paper onto the ceiling that later would fall when it dried, and how to throw paint from one side of the room to the other. I taught him the alphabet, how to write your name with finger paint, and how to organize yourself for naptime so you could put your stuff back quickly for art class. After Tim and I declared we were real true friends forever I went home and told my parents.

“I am in love with a boy named Tim,” I told my mum, “He can throw paint from one side of the room to the other.”

“Hold on,” she said, “boys love girls and girls love boys.”

“But, you told me I was supposed to treat everyone the
Our tadpoles grew legs and became frogs. We caught salamanders and learned that they cannot sit out all day in the sun or they dry and die. We rode our bikes under the bridge and went to the woods almost every day. One day in the woods we met some other kids we thought we did not know. My sister and some of the other older kids got a bit protective. But, when I realized that one of the kids was Tim and he told me the rest were his sister and kids from their street and everything was okay. Our pack grew much larger. After that day, I saw Tim a lot more that summer because we kept meeting as neighborhood packs in the woods.

The day before I started grade one my mother reminded me I would have a new teacher I had never met. She was worried I would be a bit nervous. I was not nervous. I was excited because I was going to get to meet someone new. Now that I was six I was old enough that I didn’t have to wait for the other kids to walk to school so I left ahead of my sister and my other friends. I ran all the way. The schoolyard was packed. I saw most of my friends and we started to figure out which one was Miss Judd. Once we had narrowed it down to the one woman none of us could remember having seen before, I was elected to go and ask her her name and narrow it down to the one woman none of us could remember having seen before.

I decided to keep my love for Tim a secret from everyone else. I spent lots of time with Tim and didn’t tell him I loved him or that my parents told me I couldn’t. We were good friends. That first year of school flew by. It became obvious that I was really good at math and science and art so my teachers started to tell me I should be whatever I wanted and I shouldn’t listen to my teachers when it came to picking a job. I think he wanted me to be an artist or to be a farmer like him. On the last day of school I said goodbye to my friends, as I would not see them until the fall. Some of them lived two and three blocks away. We also found out that some of us would not be in the same class the next year. Some of us got Mrs. Leserf for grade one and others got a new teacher, Miss Judd. I got Miss Judd.

In the summer between Kindergarten and Grade One I learned stuff from the kids who lived next door and Mrs. Warner, their mum. We raised tadpoles in a big glass box and watched them grow legs and become frogs. We caught salamanders and learned they cannot sit out all day in the sun or they dry and die. We rode our bikes under the bridge and went to the woods almost every day. One day in the woods we met some other kids we thought we did not know. My sister and some of the other older kids got a bit protective. But, when I realized that one of the kids was Tim and he told me the rest were his sister and kids from their street and everything was okay. Our pack grew much larger. After that day, I saw Tim a lot more that summer because we kept meeting as neighborhood packs in the woods.

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“Spencer, that is a good name, you are in my class. Nice to meet you. Who are your friends?”

“This is Linda. This is Elizabeth. This is Tim. We are all in your class,” I replied as she shook each of our hands.

She turned back to me and said, “I have heard all about you. You like to do experiments and to climb things. I hope you will be careful and daring in my class.” She turned to Tim and said something about him throwing paint. She grinned and nodded and I wondered if she loved him too.

The bell rang and we went inside. As we headed into class I was so excited as I knew that in grade one you got desks. Our desks were arranged in pods of four and by luck my pod was at the front of the room.

After the first week I think I was quite sure that Miss Judd and I were friends because in art class she let me build a collar like the man in the Rembrandt painting. It stuck out on all sides and had rolls and rolls of fabric in it. I told her we had a painting of a man in armour on our living room wall painted by Rembrandt that my parents got when they spent fifty dollars on groceries. I loved that painting. When I went to the public library to see more paintings he had made, I found out about the magical collar. I also told her that the one I was making was a model for a real one and that when I found out where to buy a collar like that I was going to buy one and wear it everyday.

She laughed and then got quiet, “I don’t think it would go over very well here. People might think you were strange.”

“I don’t understand, Miss Judd. It is so beautiful and if I wore one I would feel like a king.”

“I think people would think you are odd. People don’t wear clothes like that anymore.”

The painting we were going to paint was called "The Man in Armour." It was a painting of a man wearing a collar like the one Tim and I were building. The painting was done by the famous artist Rembrandt. The collar was made of fabric and was very ornate. We wanted to make a replica of the collar for our school project. Miss Judd was very happy with our progress and encouraged us to continue. She even gave us some extra time to work on it. We were very proud of our finished product and were excited to show it to our classmates.
“Do you think I am odd for wanting to wear one?” I asked as I put the finishing touches on the model I was making.

“No. I think you are different and you see things a little differently than others. I just think you should keep it secret that you want to wear that type of collar”

“Later that day, when I stayed behind at recess to help Miss Judd clean up, she asked, “Why are you quiet? Are you okay?”

“Do you think anyone who goes to this school has two fathers?” I questioned. She sat down and gave me a look for a minute before she said, “No, I don’t think so, what do you mean?”

“I just wonder why all the boys marry girls. I want to marry a boy. I like them better. Not that I don’t like you, but you are older. I mean the boys my age. I want to marry a boy and then live on my street. My mother says boys love girls and girls love boys but she also tells me to treat everyone the same. I want to marry a boy. Are there no kids with two mums or two dads? There are kids with just one parent.” I said really rapidly while I cleaned up from art class. I didn’t look up because I already sort of knew the answer.

“I think after art class, everyday, you should help me clean up. And I think you should wear the Rembrandt collar so you feel like a king.” was all she answered as she headed up to her desk. As she sat down she said, “I don’t think you are odd because you want to wear that collar. I don’t think you are odd because you want to marry a boy. I think we should find a place in my desk so we can keep the collar and keep it our secret. I want to help you become whoever you want to be.”
“Standing inside Christian Boltanski’s piece, *Kanada* I realized that it was not what was on the walls that mattered but how what was there could lift the viewer up and set them down in their own memories and collective memories. The walls were just draped with used clothing, but I was vicariously transported to Auschwitz. I thought if I could harness this action I could move people vicariously through my own experiences into action.”

(Reflecting on seeing Christian Boltanski’s work at Ydessa Hendeles Gallery, Toronto, Ontario, Summer 1988)
I was really excited to head to a new school in grade nine. Almost all of my friends from Grove Public, my grade school, were coming to Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute (or Kenner as everyone called it). But besides my friends, another 500 or so Grade Nines from four other feeder schools were coming too. This meant more people for me to meet. I could not wait for it to start.

If you walk in the front door of my high school and turn right you would be in the hall that goes to the main office. If you turned left you would go down the hall where all the action takes place; the hall not where the office was. My grade nine locker was in the hall to the left. That was great for me as I wanted to be where all the action was. Our school was one big two storey square. On the first floor you had to go outside if you wanted to make the full square because cars drove under the second storey walkway into the parking lot that was in the middle; the second storey went all the way around. My locker wasn’t the furthest one away from the office, but pretty close. This meant it was the area where the most people hung out.

Though none of the kids in my homeroom were already friends of mine I knew about ten people and all of them knew me. I was the runner up for valedictorian in Grade Eight, not because I was the smartest or the top boy, but because in our school it was by vote and all the guys thought that I would not chicken out, that I would give a good speech, and that I would make the audience laugh. I guess I had a reputation for being brave, speaking well, and being funny. So even though I was not particularly good friends with any of the kids in my homeroom class, we all knew each other and we all still made like we were. This also probably had to do with the fact that on the first day everyone was a bit nervous so those of us who knew each other, stuck together.

That is until some snickering and name calling started to take place when others were checking out my super short hair. In 1976, most guys in my city had long hair. The summer between Grove and Kenner, my friend John showed me an advertisement in the newspaper calling for extras in a movie being shot in the area. I auditioned on the last day and after they told me I was going to get to be an extra, they asked me if I had ever acted before. Friends around
me laughed because I was in every play in school and so I laughed along with them and said, “Yes I have.” After a quick conversation I went to meet the director and audition for something more than the bit part I had already been given. Someone had dropped out and I had the look they were after. I got the part, but it meant I had to cut my hair to look like it would have in the 1920s.

Apparently this haircut was enough to inspire laughter, and name calling which when coupled with my overall attitude that did not come into style in Peterborough until the following year, prompted me to be called ‘Freak’ and ‘Farmer.’ I made a strange face when they called me farmer, I sarcastically snapped back, “Make sure you don’t call someone farmer in a negative way when you have food in your mouth or you may choke.” This was something I had heard my mother and grandfather say and like those times it shut people up pretty quick.

The comments stopped just in time, because that was when our teacher walked in and I did not want him to hear me being made fun of, as I didn’t think it made for a good first impression. Steve from my previous school leaned over and told me I was going to be popular at Kenner because I was so funny, and then laughed and said, “Don’t worry Spencer, we got your back.”

I did not really know why anyone would have to have my back as I had never had any trouble before and didn’t imagine making people laugh would get me in trouble now. When I whispered to Steve, “Why would someone have to have my back?”

He replied, “You might be too smart for your own good. I think you might have bugged that guy. Everyone from Grove knows you are cool, but that guy might just think you are a skinny, little, smart mouth until he gets to know you. And he is pretty big. Some big guys can be jerks because they can get away with it, because they are big.”

I took a second look at the guy I had made others laugh at with the farmer comment and thought he was pretty big, but so was Steve.

“As soon as they get to know you. As soon as they see how great and funny you are it won’t matter, but for now we’ve got your back.”

“Thanks Steve,” I said and then noticed the teacher was waiting for us to be quiet before he spoke. I stopped talking and listened for my name to be called in the attendance.

Grade Eight was great. I had gotten pretty good marks, I had made lots of friends and I had fun. It was nothing, though, compared to how Grade Nine was turning out to be. I liked my classes, and teachers and was making some new friends. Word got around why my hair had been cut short and people started talking about the fact I was the only local person who had a starring role in the movie and this somehow made me more popular. Once the drama teacher got wind of what I had done in the movie he sought me out and asked me to join the Drama Club. I was doing very well in my Grade Nine art class. I was performing so well in math, English and French that the Guidance department moved me up into the advanced classes in all three subjects.

When the first term ended the names of the top students in all subjects in each grade were read out on the morning announcements. They began with the Grade Thirteens and worked their way down. When they got to the Grade Nines the vice-principal said, “I think it is pretty exciting for one of our Grade Nines and we should all congratulate him when we see him. Spencer Harrison is the top student in Grade Nine functions, physics, English, French, art.”

All the kids in my homeroom applauded for me, even Jeremy who made fun of me on the first day. Lots of people stopped me in the hall, just to pat my back and such.

About three weeks later, our vice-principal again read out my name over the morning announcements. “Kenner, can I have your attention please for a special morning announcement. Last night Mr. Wilson’s Drama Club came first in the Sears Drama Festival at the local level and they will now advance to the Regionals. Kenner brought home three awards last night. Best Stage Management went to ourScott Baptie, Best Actor went to our own Spencer Harrison and Best Play went to Kenner’s cast and crew for their version of Babble Rap. Please congratulate them when you see them today and wish them well at the Regionals being held in Lindsay in five weeks.” There was some applause in my homeroom though we had already talked about it before the announcements and some of the class had been there at the play the night before. When the class became quiet I could still here some cheering in the hall. Scott’s homeroom was one class away from mine.

After homeroom I headed downstairs to my locker and then on to my first class, I got stopped a bunch of times. People shook my hand. People patted me on the back. Some people jokingly asked for my autograph before they congratulated me. It took me a bit longer than usual with people shaking hands with me. By the time I ducked into my science class the halls were almost empty and I was worried I might be in trouble for being late. I slid into my desk and looked up at the clock right as the second hand clicked over. I just made it. My classmates stood up and started to clap as my physics teacher, Mr. Parsons, had told them to.

Most of the day continued like this right up until rehearsal that night. “No sitting on your laurels now, my friends,” Mr. Wilson said. “We can win this. You are good, but you are really going to have to work. Okay, let’s go through notes from last night’s performance. And Spencer, you might have won best actor but you are really going to have to step it up if you want to do that again at the next round. Grenville Christian College is also coming to Regionals and they are a tough school to beat with two really strong actors.” We worked hard during notes and rehearsal, but just for an hour because Mr. Wilson wanted us in at 6:30 the next morning for a full run through. I was glad to be heading home when we were finished. I was tired from the performance last night and all the excitement of the day.

After rehearsal, when I was back at my locker some kids I didn’t know stopped to say congratulations. They were older so I thought they were most likely in Grade Thirteen and that was why I didn’t know them. My sister Connie probably did though because they would be in her year.

“Quite the accomplishment and all those great marks too. You are something else.”

“Thanks,” I said and turned back to my locker to get my books and coat to head home.

“Something else is right!” the tallest one said.

“More like a freak than something else,” another one said laughing.
I turned to look at them deciding if I would say something back or just let them say their piece and leave. I looked both ways down the hall, but it was only the five of us there.

“You must think you are something special,” the third one said looking me right in the eye. “You are pretty small to be the big man around school don’t you think?”

The fourth one followed up with, “You are quite the little Freak and pretty small is right. Hey I bet you are small enough to fit in that locker,” and he gave me a shove backwards. My shoulders hit the locker with quite a bang and I hoped at that second that one of the janitors might be around the corner and come and look to see what the noise was. There was a ton of laughter and they all started to reach for me. “Turn him sideways, he’ll fit.”

“Fuck off guys. This isn’t funny. Leave me alone,” I snapped at them good and loud as I twisted and tried to get away from their grips.

It was no use. One of them was ripping all my books out from the bottom of my locker and throwing them all over the hall. “Shove him in,” he demanded as he lifted my feet and pushed them in. The locker door hurt as it hit my right shoulder. My face was pushed up into the top corner. One more shove and they got it closed.

“I told you he would fit, the little freak.” It then burst open and I was reeked out of there. I thought maybe it had all been a joke and the rough housing that was a bit extreme was over, but it was not.

“Where is your lock faggot?”

I hadn’t let go of it. It was still in my left hand. I tried to cover it by making a fist and screamed, “STOP!” still hoping a janitor might be in the area. One of them saw it and wrenched it from my hand. “Put the faggot back in his closet,” and I was shoved up and in. One of them kept kicking my feet until they were mashed inside my locker. And the door slammed. One last push and the locker latched caught. In the darkness I heard my lock slide through the loop and click shut. Stillness. They were laughing and I was not making a sound.

“We can hear you breathing.”

Laughter.

“But we can’t hear you crying. Freak!”

More laughter. “Yet!” and then there was much more laughter. They started kicking the locker. The kicking got harder and louder and the pain intensified. With every kick my shoulders were crunch in the very small space and my ears rang with the thunderous pounding.

And then silence.

I heard some mumbling and scrambling outside the locker and then a voice through the vent said, “Make one peep of noise and we will break you in half, today, tomorrow, whenever you least expect it. Not a peep Freak, if you know what is good for you.”

I heard another voice I was not quite sure who it was, but I could still feel the pressure of the person leaning against my locker, bouncing back on it. And then it all stopped. Silence. Darkness. The next kick to the locker exploded in my ears.

“See you Freak Show.”

“Have a nice night.”

“Don’t forget your combination because we will need it tomorrow when we let you out” The laughter trailed off and I thought they had walked away.

“Let me out,” I screamed. And “BAM!” the locker reverberated with another kick.

“I told you, not a sound,” came through the vent again, but it was pretty muffled by my tears.

I am not certain how long I stayed quiet in that locker, except for some shallow tears. I think I passed out. I sort of awoke to someone rumbling outside the locker and through my silence I heard the sound of a broom clicking back and forth in the hall. I screamed and banged half expecting to feel another thunderous kick.

“Who is there? Where are you?”

“It’s Spencer, I am trapped in my locker.”

“Which one and what is your combination.” The caretaker moved down the lockers until he found the one I was in. “Okay, what is the combination? Let’s get you out of there.” And I heard him starting to turn the tumbler of the lock.

When I stepped out of the locker he had to help me so I wouldn’t fall because my legs were asleep. “Steady there. These your books? They were piled by your locker. Kids playing games,” he said as if he had seen this happen before and he did not want to get involved or ask what it was about. He did not ask me if I was okay, but instead stated, “It’s late. The school is all locked up. Were you at the basketball game? It has been over for an hour.”

I forgot there had been a game. If it was over that meant it was at least nine. I knew then that I must have passed out because I had gone into the locker at around four-thirty.

I put my books back into my locker and grabbed my coat. When I got to the front door I checked my watch. It was around eleven. I had been in my locker for at least six hours. I headed home to face my parents who would be worried sick and angry. I headed home terrified of what would happen the next day at school and the next day after that. I headed home a lot less fearless.
“I hung the Queer Project in hospitals, police stations, churches, city halls and centers for education. I always wondered if art in non-traditional sites got noticed or mattered. The phone rang at around 6:00 pm. It was someone calling from *Hansard* to check the correct spelling of my name and that of the project, for the record. My work had just been discussed on the floor of the House of Commons in Ottawa.”

(Peterborough, Ontario, April 4, 2004)
“Is that it? Is that all the presents?” I asked, with a somewhat sad face as I scanned around the room for the one I thought must have been missed.

“Yes, why was there one you forgot to give someone?” my mum asked as she sat further forward on the couch scanning the room through the debris of the Christmas morning gift opening.

I put my hand down on to the wooden case with all the various tools in it that I had just opened. In our house the last gift was the big one. I always felt spoiled by all the stuff we got. My parents did not have much money, but Santa was always really good to us. I ran my hand back and forth on the edge of the wood of the box in front of me, feeling how nicely polished it was. I popped open the case so I could put the top of it between Mum and me as I did not want her to see my eyes filling with tears. This case was specially made to hold the various chisels, screwdrivers, hammers, wrenches, clamps, and measuring devices. It was quite beautiful. But when I said I wanted tools for Christmas I meant I wanted electric drills, plug in saws, and an electric sander. I wanted tools like my dad. I wanted to be like my dad. I could tell my mum was getting angry with me because she kept saying my name and repeating her question.

“Spencer, those are all your gifts. Are you being greedy?”
“Spencer, are you being greedy?”
“Spencer, are you being greedy?”

My eyes were now filled and as I shut the top of the case back down and flipped the clasp closed, I again ran my hand along the edge of the box. I fought to not shed a tear. Eyes full of water was one thing, but letting a tear drop was quite another. I turned my face away from her. If I cried she would think it was because I was being greedy. It would look like I had been caught doing something I had not actually done. That was not the case at all. I loved all my presents. I got everything I wanted. I knew the tools Santa had brought were what I said I wanted. I had asked for tools, and got tools. I knew my friends Kenny and Kevin had asked also for tools and I imagined this wooden case was much like what their big gifts had been. I imagined they were not looking for more, but probably being very happy and by now both were working on some scraps of wood in their basements. But I was not like them. I wanted
I thought of how I could explain to my mum I was not ungrateful, I was just not like the other boys my age. I wanted to be a man. I thought of how I could explain to my mum I was not ungrateful, I was just not like the other boys my age. I wanted to make time go faster and become the man I so wanted to be. The more I thought the worse and more confusing it got. When she opened the door, what would I say?

I heard my grandparents arrive downstairs and I could just imagine what my mum was telling them, explaining why I was in my room. No one came up to say hello. A couple of hours later I heard my cousins coming in the front door and a few minutes later my mum came into my room to tell me to get dressed for dinner.

She asked me what I had thought about.

I do not remember what I said, just that I fumbled a lot with my words. And, I cried. She listened and tried not to be angry. I fumbled more and more until I could see my mum was beginning to understand what I had been so upset about. She explained what it meant to be grateful, but I could tell she knew this was not what the problem was at all. She stopped. Her eyes were now filling with tears.

She stayed quiet for a minute and wiped the tears out of her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I did not understand what you were upset about. I should have asked more questions so I would understand more. I should have tried to understand you more.”

She squeezed me tight as she always did when she wanted me to know how much she loved me. “Come on, get ready and come on downstairs. Earle, your other cousins, and grandparents are waiting for you,” she said as she got up and headed downstairs herself to finish preparing the Christmas dinner.

I took my time getting ready. I was in no hurry to get downstairs. I still felt sad that I had not gotten what I wanted for Christmas, knowing there was no backing up and exchanging it. I would have to wait a whole year to tell Santa what I really wanted for Christmas. To be like my dad. To be older. And to be different from all the other boys on my street. I felt ashamed because everyone downstairs would think I had done something wrong to be sent to my room on Christmas day. What would they think of me? Being bad and ungrateful on Christmas day.

When I opened my door Earle was right outside waiting for me. Before we could really even say hello my mum called out that, “Dinner was served,” and we all headed downstairs, to the basement for dinner. I took my seat where I was told to sit, and my Grandpa Chambers smiled from the seat beside me. As we lowered our heads to pray, I noticed a plate from Mum’s Sunday dishes sitting at my place in front of me and thought I had missed where I was supposed to sit. With my head lowered I scanned the table but all the other kids had our everyday dishes, all the adults had Mum’s good china and there were no empty places. When “amen” was said, I raised my head and looked to the other end of the table and my mum, so I could point out the mistake. When I caught her eye, I raised the edge of the plate, holding it careful so as not to slip with it in any way. She smiled back at me and turned back to talk to Aunt Mary. My grandfather leaned forward with the big bowl of potatoes.

“How much of these do you want? I guess you can get them out of the bowl yourself,” he said as he took a scoop and set the bowl down beside me putting the spoon back in.

I did not understand. Kids got everyday dishes from the cupboards in the kitchen and the adults got ‘the Sunday best.’ Kids ate was put on their plate. And the adults always served you.

“So your mother tells me you are to be treated as an adult. You get good dishes and can serve yourself,” he said with a smile, “but if you need me I’m right here, just ask. We will always help.”

The room seemed to go silent as I looked around the table. I looked at my cousins, whose plates were being filled by the adults. Again I looked back at my mum who was smiling at me. And at my grandpa who gave me the wink he usually did when there were secrets he and I would knowingly keep.

I looked down at the big and beautiful rose and white border on the plate in front of me. I took a scoop of too many potatoes and asked my grandpa to help me pass the heavy bowl. I looked again at my plate as the bowl of corn was set beside it and the spoon handle came out of the bowl yourself,” he said as he took a scoop and set the bowl down beside me putting the spoon back in.

I would have to wait a whole year to tell Santa what I really wanted for Christmas. To be like my dad. To be older. And to be different from all the other boys on my street. I felt ashamed because everyone downstairs would think I had done something wrong to be sent to my room on Christmas day. What would they think of me? Being bad and ungrateful on Christmas day.

When I opened my door Earle was right outside waiting for me. Before we could really even say hello my mum called out that,
“I was never more aware of the varying emotions I felt when I try to bring the diverse parts of my world together than when I was standing on the podium as one of the keynote panelists, for the Dean’s Conference. I was one of three panelists. I was the one without a PhD and the one who was not a faculty member. In the audience were some of my gay activist friends and some of my colleagues from where I am a student and where I teach. But when I stared into the crowd, I focused on a both familiar and yet unrecognizable face from my past. It was one of those moments where you keep speaking but your brain goes somewhere else searching for illusive information. Then I recognized her. Ydessa Hendeles is, in my mind, the most important living curator and I was speaking about my painted research.”

(From my journal notes after the 2011 annual OISE/UT Dean’s Graduate Student Research Conference)
There was another important tree in our yard. It was the maple on the front lawn. As it grew it gave us many places to climb and hang out, places to hide and jump down from like super heroes, and a mass of leaves from which great forts could be built. The branches of this tree stretched up and out looking sort of like an open umbrella, quite opposite to either my climber pine tree or the jumping cedar tree. Those trees had a central trunk whose branches came out from the middle and made sort of a cone shape. The maple was a very different tree to climb. This tree was the most common place to call home in a game of hide-and-seek. This tree was headquarters in a game of war. This tree was where my pack of friends often gathered to read, tell stories, and draw. Its canopy protected us from a light rain, shielded us from the summer sun, and created a circle on the ground, which outlined our make-believe houses, schools or islands, from the rest of the lawn where we played. I thought of the branches and coverage of this tree as my place of refuge from the rest of the world and because of that, as a part of my family.

This is the tree under which I kissed my first girl one spring and that fall, more significantly, I kissed my first boy.

Near the middle of the summer, right before I turned nine, my dad told us he had decided to put a pool in the back yard. It would be the first in-ground swimming pool in our neighbourhood. The whole family was very excited and when we told our friends and neighbours they were excited too. It was kind of strange to call it a backyard pool though, because our house is on a corner lot where a crescent and the main street meet. We didn’t really have a back yard, but rather two side yards. Our carport and the street bordered one side yard. The far end of the house and the neighbour’s lawn bordered the other side yard. It was on the latter that the pool was going to be built.

My dad plotted the space of the pool out with stakes and yellow rope to the contractor’s prescribed measurements. Although the map of the pool showed us where it would be, where the shallow-end would be and the deep-end would start, the contrast of the rope on the green grass did not really help us visualize what it would be like to actually jump into the water. However, the rope diagram
made one thing very clear; they were going to have to cut down and dig up the cedar tree I had climbed, jumped from, and tested my fearlessness from for years. As my dad explained to us how the hole would be dug and the pool built I was struck by another worry. How would they get the digger past the maple tree which separated the location of the new pool from the road? Luckily my father had a fondness for that tree and a plan as to how they would get around it to dig. He assured me the big maple tree would be spared.

I spent a quite a bit of time that fall and winter playing in, around, and under the three trees. It was as if something in my life would be missing, empty, or sadder when the one tree was uprooted and the other two left to stand alone. I wanted to find ways to remember the cedar. I had learned so much about myself, the world, and how much I was loved perched high in that cedar tree, jumping from that tree to the neighbour’s lawn, and hanging out under the maple. I thought of the cedar tree coming down as a sacrifice I would have to make. It was as if I would have to give up some of myself to enjoy some other things in my life. I started to think of the cedar as the place I learned so much but something I would have to let go of to grow up.

That fall, in my history class, when studying world religions I also learned about lineage and where we came from. I learned about missionaries and settlers and how my ancestors came to Canada. The teacher said our ancestors settled the land and taught the Indians about God. This seemed very confusing to me, as I could not understand how the land wasn’t already settled and how the people who lived here when the settlers came did not already know about God. Did they not already have families, governments, and places to worship? My teacher used words like “living off the land” when describing Indians, as if it was something bad to say about someone. This was the same language my grandfather used when talking about the farm.

When I asked my grandpa about all of this he told me what he knew about the farmers who lived here before him and about their sense of God, heritage, and family. In that discussion he also explained that early settlers cleared the trees from the land we were standing. This allowed them to grow the food they needed to survive. Later it allowed him to plant and grow all the food he and my grandmother, my mum, and Uncle Don raised on the farm. This he said, was the history of the farm.

This discussion led me to talk about how I was worried about the cedar tree and maybe the maple tree. “If the workers aren’t careful both might get cleared off our property.” By the way he looked at me I think he thought it was strange that I was jumping from one topic to the other.

“Why do you care about the trees and about those that lived here before us? How do the two tie together? How are they connected?” he asked.

“I’m not sure but I don’t think using the word settlers is right. Don’t you think the Indians were already settled?” I asked. Then I explained, “I think of the maple tree as being a very important part of me growing up. It was an important part of my history. It was where I went to think or just hang out, and make sense of the world.”

Grandpa put his big hand on my shoulder, as he often did when he was going to tell me something important and wanted to be sure I was paying attention, and introduced the idea of family trees. I started to picture the big maple tree on the front lawn as mine. I imagined the roots going down into the ground as being all of my ancestors and all of the experiences they had to get me to here. I thought of the branches above being all the friendships I had made. They were all the places I would go and experiences I would have. It was where I went for comfort and the place I went to imagine my future.

When I explained this he said, “That is a very interesting image. You should draw it out or write it down.” As he rubbed my head and disheveled my hair, we laughed a lot about me having climbed the cedar tree and jumped from it. We laughed at how much it had scared my mom when she caught me doing it. He asked me, “Do you still do things that make you say ‘TAH-DAH’?” He reminded me, “You should always be fearless and do the things that make you say that. You should protect the maple tree if it is that important to you. If you make them save the maple tree that should be a “TAH-DAH” moment.”

Finally he said, “You know I never thought of how rude the word settler is.”

The next spring, just as planned, a backhoe showed up one morning to dig the hole for the pool. I stationed myself at the trunk of the maple and my dad explained to the workers how he wanted that tree saved. My best friend Gail Warner stood right beside me, I think to help me be brave. The digger and workers moved around that tree as they dug up the other and made way for the pool. I barely moved from holding that tree as I watched them dig. Only one day of work and the hole was dug. A few days later of making the molds for the walls of the pool and the hole was ready.

Next came the cement mixer and with it for me a whole new set of worries. My cedar tree had been cut, dug up and taken away. Only a few branches of the maple tree had been hurt as the digger squeezed around it and dug. The cement mixer was twice the size. Though we had thought of the digger and protecting the tree, I don’t think anyone had thought of how to get the cement in to the space to make the pool. When the man driving the cement truck asked me who I was and what I was doing. I explained that I was standing at the trunk of the tree to protect it. This time Gail stood quite far away. He smiled and asked me if I would help him with the truck if he promised not to hurt my tree. He showed me how to shut off the mixer from turning and I got in the cab of the truck. He said I was helping him drive safely. He backed up and onto the lawn very slowly until his partner outside the truck said to stop. We got out but I could see he had backed almost directly into the tree and was within a couple of feet from hitting it. He climbed up on the back of the truck and tied back some branches so they were out of the way when the mixer again started. He then extended a half tube, out and out and some more. He could pour the cement right from there. When instructed I turned the mixer back on. No branches were touched. The cement poured out. I felt I had saved the tree. Gail ran over, threw her arms around me and kissed me square on the lips. She said she was proud of me and that I was her best friend.

She was the first one I invited to swim in our pool. Although the pool barely got warm that year, all of the kids on the street came swimming many times that summer. Our family loved sharing the
pool with everyone on the street but that’s what we are like. The summer our pool opened two more pools went in on our street but our pool seemed to be the one people liked most. The other pools got warmer than ours, but ours seemed to always have more kids in it. Near the end of the summer my dad started to complain about the shade of the maple tree and in the fall he sure disliked how many leaves ended up in the pool.

That fall I did a presentation in our history class about my heritage and I showed a big drawing I had made of our maple tree. I used the roots I made to talk about those who were no longer alive and some of the things they had done in the past. I used the branches to show who was alive in the family and all of the outermost parts of the boughs to show dreams different members of my family had for the future. I think most of the class and the teacher liked the presentation right up to the part where I told them it was the tree from my front yard. Most of them said it was corny when I told them sometimes I climbed up in the tree to be part of my dreams. The teacher gave me a good mark but told me he thought I saw things a bit differently than others and that dreams were not normally parts of family trees. After the class was over we headed out to recess. The new kid in our class asked me at recess if he could come over and see the real tree and I said, “Sure, why don’t you bring your bathing suit and come for a swim.”

Todd showed up on Saturday, as planned. We looked at the tree, climbed in it a bit and then went for a swim. He liked my sister, and we hung out in private. We swung on the swings in silence that meant and he told me he didn’t know. We both agreed to stay on grave consequences,” he repeated. I asked him what he thought would be grave consequences. “Boys kissing boys always brought and to stop kissing other boys. She told him if he kept it up there would be grave consequences. “Boys kissing boys always brought on grave consequences,” he repeated. I asked him what he thought that meant and he told me he didn’t know. We both agreed to stay friends and hang out in private. We swung on the swings in silence for quite a long time. When we parted ways we made arrangements to have recess together the next day. Though I think we both wanted to, we did not kiss each other goodbye.

As I started to walk home I kept wondering what the grave consequences could possibly mean and wondering if this is what my teacher meant when she said men marrying other men was only ever in secret. When I got closer to our house I could see there were a bunch of my friends from the neighbourhood standing on the side lawn of our house staring at something going on in front. As I rounded the edge of the carport I heard and saw what everyone was watching. My dad was cutting down the maple tree. My dad was cutting down my family tree. My dad was clearing away my dreams. This is what the grave consequences were from Todd and me kissing under that tree. Dad must have seen it and now was making it stop.

The next day was Sunday and church was sort of boring. I hadn’t yet started in the choir and I was no longer going down to Sunday School. During the sermon I kept thinking about kissing Todd the day before and how great it felt and excited I was about it. Though I got up and down for all the songs and prayers in church, I had to be prompted to do so. I could not stop thinking about Todd. After church I headed to the park behind the houses at the end of our street where Todd and I had agreed to meet.

He was sitting on a swing in amongst a bunch of kids playing on the different equipment. When I sat down beside him he looked less happy than he had the day before. He told me he had told his mother when he got home that he liked me, that we had kissed a few times, and we liked it. She told him to stop hanging around me and to stop kissing other boys. She told him if he kept it up there would be grave consequences. “Boys kissing boys always brought on grave consequences,” he repeated. I asked him what he thought that meant and he told me he didn’t know. We both agreed to stay friends and hang out in private. We swung on the swings in silence
“Curled up on the couch trying to see through the tears running down my face I read of tender love making between Charlie and Dewar. It was the first moment where I saw myself in a character in a novel. Reading this story made me feel more like myself.”

(While reading Gary Reed’s, 1997, Pryor Rendering)
From an early age I felt like an outsider. I felt like an observer. I set myself apart from others of my own age and attempted to align myself with the adults of my world to learn the secrets they held and move through the awkward yet amazing domain in which I lived. These relationships allowed me to understand the world around me, to build connections that could foster a strong sense of self and yet avoid the ideas and emotions, and fantasies and desires, that from a very early age I knew boys should not have. The general public often imagine that gay or lesbian youth live very troubled lives, moving through layers of alienation, shame, fear, and internalized self-hatred. And while in many cases this is true, my disassociation with my peers and position of observer were not one enforced by these typical feelings, but rather, it was the means by which I developed my first relationships and created the core personality that enabled me to survive the homophobia I would confront later in my life.

Feeling like an observer is also where looking at art begins in my life. Art was a way of seeing and experiencing things that my rural background would otherwise not allow me. Being an observer is where my role as an artist began. The connection of three positions one who observes the world, one who is influenced by art, and one who makes art — is in some ways the genesis of this project. Through observing the world, looking at art, and making my own art, I began to question what I saw, make sense of it, and try to share my understandings of it. This feeling of being an outsider was where I began to sort and understand my own identity as a gay male. Accepting that I was in some ways an outsider, but also seeing that I was clearly part of the world, empowered me to see past some of the homophobia I witnessed. Being an observer and an outsider enabled me to not be part of the hegemony and therefore not carry or build upon the negative images and stereotypes sexual and gender minority youth often face on a day-to-day basis. My sense of being an outsider was not a position of isolation. I was still very supported by my friends and family even if they saw me as different, as an outsider, and as an observer. Being one who observes and makes art gave me a context and the tools to understand, respect, and love my difference. I could see others' negative views of the world and while exploring them I could also observe how the judgments made no sense. Those views were dissimilar to my views and understanding of myself.

Exploring others’ views of the world through art started the process of me imagining different situations, environments, and possibilities. And as art was full of things and images that were not part of my reality, I could imagine things and situations that did not yet exist for me. Art gave me a lens into the rest of the world I could not otherwise see. Through imagination and magical moments of engaging with art I could see a full spectrum of what was possible. As time progressed, my interactions with art shifted as both my ability to understand more complicated work strengthened and the work I focused on was art aimed towards altering the world’s view of itself. I was becoming more confident in understanding my identity and in doing so, felt the need to become part of the movement towards social justice. Through art I was able to see myself not only with the negative homophobic identity I had been painted with, but with an understanding that my difference allowed me to see the world with multiple lenses.

Making art gave me a means to sort ideas, rearrange relationships, and make sense of the world. More specifically it allowed me to render and record moments and relationships so I could more clearly understand them and have a means to explain them to others. It gave me a place to bear witness to things about the world I saw and wanted to be part of changing. I advanced as an artist, moving away from merely and exclusively being interested in the aesthetic of what I was producing, moving towards art which would have strong emotional impacts on its viewers and could vicariously position them so they too might see the world as I did. I could create new lenses for them to look through. I began to be an activist with my work. This mirrored my newer understanding of my sexual orientation and my need to help others.

**A Map**

This chapter is set up as a map of my epistemological path, where using moments of engagement with art — both my own studio production and others' works are explained as my points of learning. It is also a map of how my work shifted from aesthetic decision making to positioning this research within the body of scholarly work, commonly referred to as Art for Social Change (Bradley, Esche, Afterall, 2007). It is a map of how I came to understand that art can change the world. If thought of as a map, similar to the map my mother produced of her childhood farm which I then recreated on the walls of the tent, this chapter both reveals things that are somewhat familiar and in other cases provides information that can help familiarize a reader or viewer with details that are less clear. Like a map it is not completely linear, although it provides directions from a beginning place to the destination.

Judith Marcuse explains art for social change stating, “Art bridges the silos that separate us as we confront today’s pressing issues. Art creates new visions and engagement, connecting the head and the heart.” (Marcuse, n.d)

**The early years**

In the living room of my childhood home there were only two pieces of art, both of which were textured cardboard punch-outs of famous paintings. One was a copy of a Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) painting of a knight, titled *Man in a Golden Helmet*, painted circa 1650. The other was a reproduction of a more recent piece by Philip Shumaker (1921-1967) depicting a red barn and shed along a reflective river, originally painted in 1956. Other than family photographs these were the only images on the walls of my family home. While to others these pieces may seem less than art, I thought about them often and at the age of ten started trying to find out more about these paintings. Time spent with Mrs. Campbell at the Delafose Public Library led me to learning a great deal about Rembrandt and very little about the lesser-known Shumaker. During this investigation I expanded my response to the question of what I wanted to be when I grew up from a doctor or a farmer and added artist to the list. Knowing that these were only reproductions I became determined to see an original Rembrandt painting and to begin to draw and paint like him.

The beginning of my search for an original Rembrandt took
me naively to the local art gallery and prompted me to talk to those around me about making art. When I spoke of it to my grandmother and asked her if she would take me to the art gallery located on the street behind her house she said she would, but that she wanted to show me something first. She pulled three books of cardboard coloured paper out of the drawer in her spare room and we sat side-by-side on the couch in her living room to look at them. Pulling the books out of the used, plastic sugar bag she kept them in she opened them up onto our laps and we flipped the pages of each one from front to back. She showed me drawing after drawing of images of flowers, the farm, and some people who were her neighbours. Mainly they were drawings of pansies, her favorite. “This is your Grandpa, this is Mrs. Wittington, and this a woman I used to know from back home,” she said. “I can’t draw faces the way I would like to. I can’t make them look the way they do, but I like to draw so I just keep trying. I draw the flowers from my garden so I can remember year to year what they looked like and how they change. I drew the farm when I knew we were going to leave it and move here into town so I would remember it too.”

“But you have good pictures of the farm. Even the one taken from the plane that flew over. Don’t they help you remember?” I asked.

“They do, but when you make the drawing of something it is like you are running your hand over it. You remember more than from just pushing a button on a camera or looking at a photograph someone else took,” she explained as she started to tuck the books back into the bag. “Now let’s get our sweaters and walk over to the Art Gallery and see if we can find you a Rembrandt.”

I would never think of my grandmother the same, because not only was she an artist, which meant I could probably be one too, but she also explained one of the reasons why you might want to make art. It had never occurred to me that if you draw something you might be able to see it more clearly. I really only thought you made art to make something beautiful. She was sad that she could not draw people in the way that they actually looked. She still kept drawing. She sure could draw and paint pansies well. Once I knew those drawings were so she could see how the pansies were different from year-to-year, I could look at them and see some of that too.

We headed out the kitchen door and down to the short lane that cuts between Ware Street and Crescent Street. After walking around the lake we came to the front doors of the Gallery and headed inside. “Are there any Rembrandt paintings here?” I asked as I dropped the coins in the donation box.

“No there are not. He is far too famous to be shown in this small gallery. His work is priceless. We would not even be able to afford to insure them,” said the attendant behind the counter. “We do however, have a great show with a Jack Bush (1909-1977) painting in our main gallery. He was one of the Painters Eleven (1954-1960), you know, the group of abstract painters who came after the Group of Seven (1920-1933). I nodded my head because I could tell she wanted me to, although I wondered what happened between eleven and seven and what abstract meant. Grandma and I headed into the main room of the Gallery.

There were a few paintings on the walls but for the most part I could not tell if they were the right way up. One was purple with a pattern of blue and green, which looked like rain. One was almost completely orange. One looked like the colours on the sides were pushing in on the colours in the middle, but if you looked at it differently it could have been a tie you wear when you are going to church, or maybe a belt pulling in at the waist. I could not stop staring at it. I could not stop trying to figure out what it was. I kept looking at how the colours overlapped, trying to figure out what was the background and what was up front.

“That’s the Bush piece. Isn’t it amazing? People look around the room at all the paintings but as soon as they see it they can’t take their eyes off it,” the girl behind the desk, now standing in the room, said.

“Well I can take my eyes off it,” scoffed my grandmother. “It doesn’t look like anything. Anybody could do that.”

“Anybody could do it, technically,” said the girl. “But they didn’t. Jack Bush did and I don’t think anyone could put the feeling into it like he did.”

My grandmother and the attendant debated the merit of the piece, back and forth for the next ten minutes or so. I just stared at it. Mesmerized. It was true. In fact I thought I could paint it; however, I still wasn’t sure what part was the background and where I would start first. The thing that just held me there though is that I felt oddly happy and I could give no other reason than it being the painting that was making me feel that way. I wondered if I too could paint something that would make somebody feel something. And if this was really just some colour, what would I feel the first time I saw a Rembrandt?

“Are you coming?” Grandma said as she stuck her hand out towards me. I took it and we said goodbye to the nice woman. I couldn’t wait to get back to Grandma’s house and start a drawing.

On a school trip that fall, we went to see Fort York and the Art Gallery of Ontario. The trip was quite a big deal as it was my first journey outside of Peterborough without my parents. The trip itself was nothing much to speak of, with forty students, three chaperones, and our teacher, Mrs. Brotherton on a bright yellow school bus for a day away from the school. We had learned a great deal about the war of 1812 and I think we were all looking forward to seeing the Fort. When you are that age you almost imagine you can go back in time to the actual events. You can suspend your disbelief just enough to imagine those guards are the actual soldiers.

The Fort was an interesting place filled with lots of history, lots of artifacts, and lots of beautiful guards in costumes of the time. There were great details of architecture. There were beautiful lights shining through odd shaped windows distorting how many things looked. By this time I had learned to draw not just the things I see in front of me but the light around me as well. I was interested in how light sources illuminate and cast shadows. There was a lot to see there.

After we ate our lunches in the park behind the Gallery we went in. I, of course, was looking forward to being in a large Gallery and seeing what I might find there. The person who greeted us first explained why we shouldn’t touch the work and how to behave in the Gallery. From there she took us through some of the historical work, most of which we thought should be in churches. We also saw a room full of landscape paintings from the same time as the war of 1812. Then we went into a room that had paintings by the
Group of Seven, Tom Thompson (1877-1917), and two paintings by Emily Carr (1871-1945).

I was not in anyway interested in the pieces by Emily Carr as they seemed to me to be not very well done. The paintings by the Group of Seven were all wonderful. They reminded me of the trip my family took to Sudbury to see the Big Nickel. They reminded me of the area around there, and some of the forests and lakes we passed along the way. I was completely struck though by a painting of Tom Thompson’s. It was a painting of a portion of a river with quite dense brush around it. There were beautiful colours, boldly applied that showed both the beautiful northern waters and the fall colours. What was most interesting to me though was the screen of dark trees we were positioned to look through. It was as if we were standing in the dark forest looking out towards the view of the river which he was trying to show us. It was as if he painted the viewer into the painting. Though it was clear where the painting ended and the world began I felt as if I was in the painting. Like the Jack Bush painting I had seen earlier that year, I was struck silent by this beauty, a view I had not yet experienced in the real world, and Thompson’s ability to pull me right inside his work.

In the mid 1970s three major interactions with art happened that deepened my understanding of what interested me in others’ work and boosted my confidence to become an artist. I met David Beirk (1994-2002), a renowned artist who lived in my hometown. I was quite surprised he even remembered who I was. He had not been my regular teacher; we had just had him a few times when Mrs. Patterson, our regular art teacher, was ill. Maybe he had remembered my drawings with the light sources as he had commented on them more than once when he saw me working on them. “What is this place? It says it is an art gallery, but I thought the Art gallery was down on Little Lake, on Crescent Street?” Some of these paintings are huge. Do you have any Rembrandts? He is one of my favourite,” I said all rather rapidly.

“No, we do not have any Rembrandt’s. This is an Artist-Run-Centre, which means we are not run by the government like the Gallery on Crescent Street; local artists run this Gallery. Hence the name. I am the Director. My Name is David, David Beirk,” and he stuck out his hand for me to shake. “You are Spencer. You are the famous actor in the Sears Drama Festivals. You are one of Brian’s stars at the school. Aren’t you?”

“I am in drama, yes. I did win the Best Actor award, yes. And we are going on to the next level. This is my only Saturday off of rehearsals this month and I wanted to see what this place is all about. I think someday I might be an artist,” I said rather sheepishly. “If you run this gallery, are you an artist?”

“Yes, sort of,” he laughed and then showed me a book with some of his art in it. One of the pieces was one of the big pieces on the wall just behind me. “You painted that? It is so big. What is it about if you do not mind me asking?” From where I was standing it looked like a huge mound of rocks like those up near where I have been camping with my aunt and uncle.

See the trees at the top of this rock cut? Do you see how you can only see a bit of them and then the rest of the painting is the rocks? I filled the space with the rocks and let you only get a glimpse of the base of the trees. I put that up at the top so that you have to look up, as if you are honouring the trees. It is like a religious painting or the steepleys of a church; how they make you look up towards the heavens, towards God. Its design makes you look up to the trees and reminds you, you are lower than them, below them. The rocks represent the weight of the world and the damage we are doing to it. Where as the trees, or nature, is elevated. Do you get it?”

“Um yeah sort of. The trees and the rocks look so real. That painting is twice as tall as me. I think when I came in here Tom Thompson and Rembrandt were my favourite artists, but maybe you are,” I said and he blushed.

“What is the big deal with Rembrandt? What do you see in his work that makes you want to see it so badly?”

“I feel like he taught me to paint colour. Like paint darks and lights. He taught me to think of the shadows and how powerful they were.”

“He taught you, eh? Did he teach at Kenner and I missed him?” he laughed.

“No, you know what I mean. I learned to think about it by looking at his paintings.”

“See this is what I mean by thinking you should be an artist, not an actor. Not many people could learn that just from looking at the paintings. Light and dark though, for the most part, is what his work was about, chiaroscuro. Do you know what that is? If not, go look it up. There is some homework for you.” The conversation went on for a while. We talked about other artists and techniques. Eventually I forgot that I was talking to one of my teachers and a famous artist who ran a gallery. We looked at books together, talked about colour and light and shadow, and he told me some people he thought I should look up if I thought I was interested in light. The one he most recommended I look at was J.M.W. Turner, a British painter. “If you love Rembrandt because he knows about darkness and shadows you have to check out Turner because he knows about light,” he said, as he bid me goodbye.

Two weeks later I rushed into his classroom at lunch. “My parents decided to go to London for our summer holidays. My dad wants to see the Tower of London and the Zoo. My mum wants to check out the antique markets and to go to the theatre. I cannot believe they want to take me,” I was practically screaming. “I am going to get to see a real live Rembrandt and the Tate Gallery has a huge collection of Turners.” David was very happy for me and wrote out a list of the paintings he thought I must see when I was there. They were not all by Turner and Rembrandt, but there were lots of them on the list. He explained the difference between the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery and before the bell rang he dug around in his bag, “Here’s a sketch-book to work on while you...
David was completely right; there were some beautiful and mysteriously lit Rembrandts at the National Gallery. I spent a while trying to decipher which ones I liked the most. They did not have *The Man with the Golden Helmet*, the painting we had a reproduction of in our living room. I already knew it was located in Germany; however, they did have some tiny ones and some of his major works. Surprisingly, I was not really struck by any of them as I had been by the work by Jack Bush or the work by Tom Thompson. A couple of days later though, when I first saw the Turners, the experience of being awestruck returned.

The National Gallery was dedicated to more historical work whereas the Tate Gallery is dedicated to more modern work. There were three small rooms and one massive room at the Tate dedicated to the work of Turner. Most of the work was landscape in focus, but not like looking out a window on to something picturesque. The pieces were more geared towards giving an impression of how a location felt. Many seemed to be about the weather, atmosphere, or the perception of one of those elements around a specific site. All location felt. Many seemed to be about the weather, atmosphere, or the perception of one of those elements around a specific site. All were titled with the location of the landscape and some gave added information. The weather seemed to swirl or glow in almost all of the pieces. There was movement in most of them but some seemed to really be shimmering. When I first saw the piece *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (c 1845), I could not believe the intensity of the light that seemed to shine through the piece.

Painted with very thin skins of colour with what seemed like lightly rendered suggestive drawing, it was as if there was a light source behind it that shone through it. The intensity of the light was like looking directly into the sun rising across a lake. Figures, structures, and landscape were reflected and seemed to hover on the surface of the canvas. Shimmering shadows made the intensity of the colour come alive. Clearly this piece had been painted with layer after layer of transparent colour, heightened by whites and yellows. Nothing in the image seemed real and steadfast and yet every detail seemed to have been perfectly executed. The piece was indeed breathtaking. I spent over an hour looking at it at such a close proximity to try to understand the skin-like layers of paint, that three times the guard approached me and asked me to move back from the piece. Staring at the piece, I experienced a work of art, acting like my teacher and teaching me technical aspects of painting. I could not wait to get back to the hotel room and try out very transparent paint, to see if I could replicate this technique.

When I got back to Peterborough I was very quick to go and see David at the Gallery. I showed him many of the drawings I had done. I talked to him about the paintings I had seen. And I talked to him about trying to replicate Turner’s painting methods.

David invited me to his studio the next day so he could show me some things about painting. The following day I met him at the address he gave me. He wanted me to try out different brushes and a variety of solvents to make the paint thinner. He showed me how to build a darker dark than black, by layering skins of the darker hued colours and then suggested I try to put really intense skins or layers of light on top of each other to see if I could not achieve something similar to Turner’s. The difference between the lights and darks was the opacity of both and he hoped with experimenting I might find out more and more about painting. As I was about to leave the studio he stopped me so he could show me one of his latest pieces he was working on.

“Hey, you are copying a Turner. I saw that piece last week pieces he was working on.

He laughed and said, “I not copying, but rather I am appropriating it. Copying is where you try to replicate something and claim it to be someone else’s, or when you replicate something and claim you made yours first and they copied you. When you appropriate you are lifting the image from one context and placing it somewhere else. When you do this you can ask some very contemporary questions about what this image means now.” He pulled a sheet down off another piece he had been working on. I knew I had seen this image before but could not identify it. “For example, when I paint a Monet (1840-1926) haystack now it means something very different than if it had been painted before. When I juxtapose that image with another more contemporary image from a magazine or such what does this image now mean? I haven’t decided what I am going to do with these yet, but lately I have been thinking, quite a bit about appropriating images.” And with that we said goodbye and I headed out of the studio.

Years later I returned to David’s studio to discuss other trips to galleries, a book I had just read, and a story that had just been told. It was not the only time since the first visit to his studio that I had been there, but this time was very memorable as I spent most of it in tears, shaking, and trying to explain something that words would not equip me to really tell.

**The Formative Years: Becoming an Activist**

In my second year of University I went on a bus trip to New York City with other students from the Fine Art Department. It was exciting to be going to look at the galleries with my classmates, but more exciting because one of my friends and a former student who had graduated from *Queen’s* the previous year, was now doing her Master’s at Parsons and she promised to show me around. By this point I had decided I was a painter and felt that all other art forms were somewhat lesser. The joke I often made was that good sculpture was something you backed into when you were looking at a great painting. In 1984, at the *OK Harris* gallery in Soho, I quickly changed my mind.

I walked into what was one of the more prestigious commercial galleries in New York expecting to be blown away by great photography or great realistic painting, as this is what the gallery was known for exhibiting. Kathleen and I quickly looked around and assessed our bad luck in timing. The gallery was full of sculpture that was made of used and older oil drums. Both being painters, neither of us were really interested, but filled with the excitement of being in New York I carried on through the numerous rooms of the gallery. I rounded a corner into the last room and found myself facing a life size fallen work-horse made out of the same materials as the earlier pieces in the show. I started to weep. I could not understand why. It was a horse. On the ground. Made of a few blue and rusted oil barrels. One of its legs was clearly broken and it would clearly have to be put down. But wait, it is just rough and rusted metal. I started to now sob. I had to sit. A gallery attendant approached me with a box of tissues and a glass of water. He acted
like this was of no surprise to him even though I was now sobbing uncontrollably.

“This piece seems to do this to people,” he said handing me all he had in his hands and putting a hand on my back. “I can’t quite put my finger on it but it really does something to lots of people. We have sold out the rest of the show, and though this piece really seems to strike a cord with people, no one seems to want to take it home with them.” Kathleen came in to the last room and quickly assessed that something was wrong. I started to sob again as she also put her hand on my back. “What happened?” she asked him. “Are you alright?” she asked me. I pointed at the piece. I let out a sob.

“It is so sad. I don’t know what is happening to me. I can’t stop crying. I feel like I can feel his pain, yet I know it is not really a horse.” Both Kathleen and the gallery assistant helped me calm down and I left the gallery feeling like something very powerful had just happened to me. I knew the piece I had seen was truly just rusted metal oil drums shaped into a form that I could understand as a fallen horse. There were no other details that would suggest any reason I should feel sad. The title of the work was simply a horse. "Ok Harris brought the horse to life for me and transported me into the trauma of it falling, breaking a leg, and it knowing it was not going to survive. I could feel the few unsuccessful attempts the horse would have made to get up before I rounded the corner, and as I looked into its eyes, it told me it could not rise. I could see its fear, knowing it was not going to make it. I felt panicked and pained.

In class we had gone through many facts about the Holocaust. We had been shown many images of guards, barracks, and prisoners. We had read through charts and lists and we had looked at innumerable maps to understand the transport system and the number of deaths that occurred in the camps and ghettos as well as the routes in between the two. Yet it was this personal account that brought the Holocaust as alive as it could be for someone who did not experience it.

The following Monday a Holocaust survivor was to speak in our class. We were all quite nervous as we waited. Clearly the story of time who our speaker would be until the day when they show up. This year however, when it was known Elie would be in the country and available we had to agree to some security measures and because of that we knew ahead of time who our speaker would be. Usually the survivor tells their story. Elie and I discussed the fact that you would have read Night for today’s class and agreed it would be better to let you simply ask the questions that came up for you reading his story.” There was a short pause as she looked around the room and then stepped aside so he could be at the microphone.

“I bet some of you are thinking, damn, I wish today of all days, I had done my readings.” The whole room burst into laughter and the tension of how we would speak to such a gifted writer and storyteller who had survived the atrocity of the Holocaust, was broken. Students asked a variety of questions, looking for minute details, trying to understand hate and forgiveness, and getting to know the story more. He spoke with lots of humour, making us all aware that not only had he survived, but he also came through it as a human. He said hard, harsh, and horrible things. Many shed tears in these moments and many laughed deeply at other aspects of what he shared. He asked that we not applaud as we left, but to stay silent out of respect for those who had not survived. He closed with, “Never Forget,” and gathered his belongings and left as he had come in, to a silent standing class.

That same year, in my Problems in Contemporary Religion course we were asked to read the book, Night (1960) by Elie Wiesel. On the bus ride home from New York I began and finished that book. As the tears continued to roll down my face it seemed like just the right thing to be reading after seeing the fallen horse. It was as if for the first time I was getting a chance to see how art, either written or visual could move me. Both showed me something, brought clarity to something that I had some knowledge of, but when asked to face it in a deeper way, it shifted my composure. The story in Night made real for me the less tangible statistical information I knew of the Holocaust. No longer was it six million Jewish people I was thinking about, but one. One person’s experience, told in his own words made the situation so very clear. I was quite certain I could smell the death which surrounded him. I could feel family members being taken from him. I could hear both the screams of those being gassed behind the barrack walls and the silence of those who awaited to be loaded in next. This was just a story, but the story made the atrocity more possible to sense than any other fact or piece of information I had been given in the course.

Although I had seen horses and cows fall on my grandfather’s farm I had never really moved past thinking about it. The experience in the Ok Harris brought the horse to life for me and transported me into the trauma of it falling, breaking a leg, and it knowing it was not going to survive. I could feel the few unsuccessful attempts the horse would have made to get up before I rounded the corner, and as I looked into its eyes, it told me it could not rise. I could see its fear, knowing it was not going to make it. I felt panicked and pained.

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The following Monday a Holocaust survivor was to speak in our class. We were all quite nervous as we waited. Clearly the book had affected us. The lecture hall was filled beyond the number of students in the class. Other students, faculty, and staff nervously awaited the professor and the survivor’s arrival. We looked around at each other wondering why the hall was so full when we knew posters had not been put up about a speaker in our class. When the professor walked in down the left hand side of the lecture theatre everyone rose as if it was the beginning of church or a trial. In silence we stood watching the professor aid Elie Wiesel set down his things and get comfortable in the front row.

“Ladies and gentleman, it is a rare treat and great privilege to have as this year’s survivor the author of the book you have read and numerous other great books, Elie Wiesel. When I asked the survivor’s speakers bureau for a survivor to speak in this class this year I was told that Mr. Wiesel would be in this country and would be pleased to speak. Usually you do not know whom the speaker would be until the day when they show up. This year however, when it was known Elie would be in the country and available we had to agree to some security measures and because of that we knew ahead of time who our speaker would be. Usually the survivor tells their story. Elie and I discussed the fact that you would have read Night for today’s class and agreed it would be better to let you simply ask the questions that came up for you reading his story.” There was a short pause as she looked around the room and then stepped aside so he could be at the microphone.

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I just began to program artist business. Do you think you would like a show at Artspace? I am the exception to the rule. You know, I think you are getting this OK Harris see anything that truly moves you, as it is most often out of date hard to be in a public gallery unless they are really progressive and galleries is more often than not really about the aesthetic. Public galleries of any kind is that. The work you might see in commercial in his life that was the same and that many never grow out of it. “I doing that myself. He laughed at me and told me he had a period pretty. I confessed that up until this year I had really only been As I explained all of this to David we talked at great length cut into you. It almost vicariously positioned you in the camps so powerful and, surprisingly, they were of love. His story seemed to feel by stepping away from my emotions and critically analyzing the things you learn in University do not always come in
Moments of Change: Art as a Tool for Communicating

The things you learn in University do not always come in the lectures you attend, the readings you do, or the research you complete. Around the time of studying fine arts at Queen’s, three such moments took place. I travelled to Venice, Italy to complete a course in Renaissance Art and Art History, in 1984. I was hired to explain a controversial painting being exhibited at the public gallery in my hometown, in 1986. And I saw the Christian Boltanski exhibition at Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in 1988. Although I had traveled abroad before, immersing myself in the culture of Venice and the art of the Renaissance for an extended period of time changed how I understood art history and my possible relevance as an artist. Being hired to speak to visitors who were disturbed by the controversy of a painting, which I thought of as rather palatable confirmed many notions I had about art being able to truly affect its audience. These two events coupled with engaging with the Boltanski exhibition shifted the focus of my work further away from simple aesthetic concerns and towards to the activist I was becoming.

The interaction I had with Giovanni Bellini’s San Zaccaria Altar Piece, 1505 in Venice, Italy was, as I stated earlier, one where I came to truly think about the meaning behind work outside of the discourse of art production. It also allowed me to think about the power of where art is made and subsequently exhibited. I wondered if I was to make work in Venice and bring it back to Canada, would it change how my audience or I saw it? I thought how my work might be different if I was not making it during school where the particular professor’s interests had to be considered along the way of the work’s production. As we moved from cathedral to cathedral I also considered what it would mean to have a patron who was part of the decision making team on the artworks I might be producing. Once I really started to consider where a work was shown, it became clear that only hoping to produce artwork for gallery exhibitions with the hope for later purchase was very limiting. Part of the way through my degree, the gallery that I had taught at for numerous summers called and asked me if they might employ me on weekends for a month as they were receiving some negative responses to a work of art that was in a travelling show they were exhibiting. We discussed the details and I agreed to come home for the next four weekends to be the docent in the gallery. Arriving the next Saturday morning I was thrilled to find myself in amongst an exhibition of works by two artists who were starting to become major influences in my own studio practice. Although the show was made up of more artists than these two, I was going to get to spend time appreciating works by Attila Richard Lukacs (1962-) and Joanne Tod (1953-). The piece I was specifically there to defend was a work by Tod entitled Kiss This Goodbye, (1985), in which she depicts a view of a forest so thick you cannot see past the trunks of the trees. In many ways lush and green, punctuated by the trunks of a variety of deciduous trees, this scene of nature is completely interrupted by bright neon pink letters, that say, “We’re Fucked,” painted across the centre of the painting. The density of the tress coupled with these letters turn this lush glimpse of nature into a discussion of the commodity of lumber where the words speak to the environmental breakdown that was just really beginning to be brought into daily discourse.

It was surprising to me as I spoke to the audience about this work that what I was defending was the Gallery’s decision to show a work that has swear words in it and not the environmental disaster this work addresses. Also in the room were homoerotic works of Lukacs, which speak to the cross between repulsion and eroticizing of the military. His work asks questions about who is called on to be in the military, who signs up for it, and who is excluded from it while wrapping it all with his own sexualized and objectified lens. He spoke about racism and issues of poverty, both powerful forces here in my hometown. I was never once in four weekends asked to explain or defend any of his work. I was never once asked about Tod’s other works which also ask numerous questions about poverty, power, racism, and identity. I was never asked the tough questions about the tough work. I was only asked to defend the gallery allowing the word ‘fucked’ to appear in this small town.

While I admired this work greatly and felt somewhat proud that I was asked to be the educator who could make sense of this work I was most fascinated by what the audience was not seeing in the deeper meanings of most of the pieces. I started to realize that both of these artists had produced their work for an art appreciative audience, who had already begun to consider these issues. They were at least hoping these pieces would be viewed by an audience equipped with socio-political critical lenses and therefore the exhibition would begin the discourse. What they were not considering is that the way they were delivering their messages was exclusionary to many. Much of the audience could not see through the complicated codes within the work to get to the base
messages. The work was outstanding for a very specific audience and not accessible to the rest. Spending time with this work allowed me to question and consider how I could make work which would still be read by an art educated audience while being more available to those who do not have the language of art making.

The next major exhibition I engaged with gave me some very simple and tangible clues as to how I should tackle this in my own practice. Earlier I referred to the impact the 1988 exhibition of Christian Boltanski’s work at Ydessa Hendele’s Art Institute had on me, in that it was so emotionally overwhelming it caused me to pass out. After being revived from that experience and after assuring myself that I had in fact not been transported back to the time of the Holocaust, but rather had been vicariously positioned within someone else’s memories of the experience, I began to analyze how Boltanski was able to achieve this. The materials he employed in producing this piece were quite straightforward and made the piece very accessible. Used clothing, simple desk lamps clamped to the top of the wall, and a large square space were all that he employed. As the used clothing was relatively contemporary, viewers would be hard pressed to look at these garments draped from the walls and top of the wall, and a large square space were all that he employed. This gave an entrance point into the piece, different from if they had not find something that would remind them of their own wardrobe. Viewers would not be able to distance themselves returned to the camps in Poland or Germany and seen the piles of discarded clothing. Viewers would still be read by an art educated audience while being more available to any other showing I had presented. In my studio practice how I produced this piece were quite straightforward and made the piece very accessible. Used clothing, simple desk lamps clamped to the top of the wall, and a large square space were all that he employed. As the used clothing was relatively contemporary, viewers would be hard pressed to look at these garments draped from the walls and not find something that would remind them of their own wardrobe. This gave an entrance point into the piece, different from if they had returned to the camps in Poland or Germany and seen the piles of discarded clothing. Viewers would not be able to distance themselves from the clothing in this piece, thinking of it as being from a time appearances. The commonality and non-artistic qualities of the objects gave the audience a point of access to the work, allowing them to think of their own romantic lives. Consistently the responses to this exhibition were stronger than they had been to any other showing I had presented. In my studio practice how I was communicating through what I was producing was becoming far more important than the aesthetic qualities with which my work was rendered.

**Artist or Activist?**

In the early 1990s I began to produce the first body of work that was interview based. Through a residency program at Artspace in Peterborough, titled **Heroes**, I interviewed a group of men who I felt were trying to navigate the world without sexism and changing the position of power men held. From these interviews I then took photographs of each of the men in what I felt was a vulnerable situation, nude or semi-nude, and produced large-scale drawings and smaller paintings. The show itself seemed to be very well thought out in how the images created a space for dialogue between the participants, art, myself, and an audience, as well as adding to the feminist discourse within the community in which it was made. Student groups and university classes attended the exhibition and had on-going panel discussions amongst themselves.

This residency and the finished works of art shifted my studio practice dramatically. I began to see my goal as different from one who produces work in isolation to then reveal the truths or ideas I had conjured in that situation. I began to want to have an ongoing engagement with my audience, before, during, and after the work’s production. I wanted to use these types of interactions as part of the process, both assuring myself that the work was communicating what I wanted and that its conclusions would be more about asking further questions than producing visual answers.

The work also took on a very different look. I was working with found materials. I was drawing on architectural blueprints and painting in drawers of an antique architects cabinet, both of which suggested the patriarchy I was trying to confront. Photographs, photocopies, and photo transfers were used to suggest deeper truths that I was trying to question with the larger drawn and painted images. Both the paintings and the drawings did not consider aesthetic qualities, but rather, were about communicating to the audience the notions the interviewed participants and I had around feminism and equity. The mark making was bold and direct and soft and compassionate. In itself the marks told as much as what was being rendered.

The exhibition was very successful in the audiences it drew and the discourses it provoked. It was a powerful passage in time in my career for the shift in how my work looked and how it increased the importance of process in my studio practice. For the most part though, the exhibition did not seem successful to the audiences who had been consistent in viewing my earlier work. At the opening and throughout the month long exhibition people told me how much they liked my previous work. I also felt I had not achieved enough in the power of the messages I was producing to compensate for the visual qualities I felt were now lacking from my work.

Shortly after this fall exhibition was the third year Artspace
was participating in *Day Without Art* (DWA), a program established in 1989, to commemorate those in the Arts community who had died from AIDS and to make the greater population aware of the prevalence of this disease in their communities. This was achieved through galleries and other arts organizations covering, hiding, or removing works of art from public view for the day and placing a didactic where the piece(s) would have been explaining its absence. Artspace had commissioned me to create a DWA window for three years and this was the third installation. For this particular year, I hung a work the day before and then that night at midnight I draped the piece with Muslin fabric with a loosely rendered text explaining the death of a friend. The window faced George Street, a main street in the city. December first, that year was the day the Santa Claus parade ran down George Street and the juxtaposition of the festivities with the rather somber narrative was quite provocative. In this piece I reinforced my understanding of what was possible in a work of art that told a story, gave the viewer an ability to consider their own position in relation to their own narrative, and to question how discriminatory practices could impact innocent people. With this piece I started to consider myself more an activist than an artist.

The materials used in the DWA piece coupled with my newfound interest in working with other participants, in public spaces was the catalyst for the next major body of work and exhibitions that would in the end set my course for this thesis project. In the fall of 1994 I began an Artist-in-Residency at Trent University. The proposed project, first entitled, “The Fag Project” and years later after women were included as research participants, “The Queer Project,” was an interview-based body of artwork in which I investigated issues around gay bashing. Multiple residencies and interview sessions took place in Peterborough, London, Hamilton, and Thunder Bay, Ontario; Edmonton, Alberta; and Halifax, Nova Scotia over the next six years. I produced works and travelled to all of these locations as well as Red Deer, Alberta and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with the largest exhibition being in five sites simultaneously in Toronto, Ontario. Media attention to the project was sizable with the greatest attention being garnered at the Floor of the House of Commons as primary research for the changing of over seventy human rights laws.

For the project I interviewed over one hundred gay men, lesbians, and people who had been presumed to be one or the other and had been gay bashed. From these interviews I produced a variety of painted pieces or installation pieces which were then exhibited in churches, hospitals, police stations, city halls, centres of education, and galleries. These exhibitions provided a wide audience for the project and generated significant media attention, which together brought the issue of gay bashing to the forefront of discussion in many communities across Canada. This exhibition positioned me as somewhat of an authority on gay bashing as, in conjunction with the exhibitions, I was often asked to deliver anti-homophobia presentations and talks that addressed violence against gay people. This was quite a circular process as it positioned my work with those who were activist. It brought more participants forward who wanted to tell their stories, which in turn, prompted more work to be produced and so on. (For more information see Harrison, 2003.)

In parallel with these exhibitions and subsequent talks both of my commercial dealers canceled their contracts with me, citing their inability to sell this type of work as their reasoning. The Art Gallery of Peterborough who formerly had over-enrolled classes with waiting lists for workshops I would teach there, cancelled an upcoming workshop of mine, as they could no longer register enough students to pay for the class. My work and the responses to my work had shifted so dramatically; however, producing and exhibiting the project brought me to a place of understanding my art and revealed many questions about my practice and what came next.

My artwork was now being discussed as research, activism, and in some cases art. I had shifted so far from my initial goals and practices. I was using my studio practices as a way to conduct research. The outcome from the studio no longer seemed to me to be art as I had known it when I was studying in my undergraduate degree, but rather, was a way of disseminating information and as a catalyst for issue based discussions. I began to question whether I was an artist anymore. I was certainly using my brush to dialogue with others, but was it possible I was no longer making art? I also questioned what brought me to an interest in such a negative treatment of my community.

During one of the final exhibitions of the project, organized by ST Thomas Wesley United Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, I came in contact with a work of art which deepened my understanding of my work and helped me to begin to place future artwork and this dissertation in the greater body of research. During one of the days off from installing and speaking about the project I ventured to the Mendel Art Gallery, the public art gallery in Saskatoon, and came in contact with a room of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s (1957-) installation, *An Indian Act Against the Indian Act*, 1997. This was a collection of photocopies of the 1876 *Canadian Indian Act*, beautifully framed in shadow boxes. A series of bullets, which had been shot at the copies of the *Indian Act*, also framed in similar shadow boxes, was mounted beside the copies of the *Act*. As well, the ceremoniously ribbon decorated rifle used to shoot at the Act was in its own shadow box. Accompanying the exhibition of these artifacts was a pair of videos of the artist shooting at the Act. I was mesmerized by the simplicity of the display of objects and exquisiteness of the exhibition. Being able to see the artist’s hand in creating the work through the videos accompanied by the copies of the act that he had altered by being shot, as well as the weapon and bullets elevated to a ceremonious stature with their presentation, allowed me to have empathy for both the pain the *Act* must cause and the healing process of doing something with ones own historical narratives. The work was rich with struggle and achievement.

This installation in the exhibition was accompanied by many of Yuxweluptun’s paintings that ask different questions about identity and the environment. The gallery was presenting his beautifully painted and considered images alongside some very accessible, yet political work. The curation of the exhibition allowed the viewers to see some of the beautifully rendered ideas that asked subtle questions about their own involvement with these issues, alongside of work that directly confront them. The juxtapositioning of the two bodies of work heightened what was possible in the creation of the larger installation. The discourse these works created was
beyond the execution of the installation. This was an Indigenous person asking the audience of his work to reconsider whether he could act against the Act, which held his identity steadfast. He was telling the story as if it had a different ending.

This exhibition reminded me of earlier work I had seen and conversations I had had with Carl Beam (1943-2005), at Artspace. It brought me back to some of the problems we had discussed when he was the Artist-in-Residence there and I was trying to understand my coming out process. Carl believed and attempted to teach me that all of the work I would make in my life, though it may address many topics, was in some ways always going to be about me. He believed that all work we produce is autobiographical in nature, a concept shared by many of the scholars I presently look towards (Carl Beam, personal communication, March 1989; Cole & Knowles, 2001). He also believed that you could shift your position in the world, or your understanding of the world by making art. I was very young when I had these conversations with Carl and although they left an impression on me such that I remember them as if they had just been spoken, I do not think I fully understood them until I saw Yuxweluptun’s installation. He was making autobiographical work, though not only about him, but about his community, and in doing so he was changing both how he saw the world and his position in it.

I believe it is common within marginalized communities to want to erase some of the narratives which hold the community back, and replace them with stories of how members of that community see themselves. Similarly, many members and structures of the hegemony wish to erase those who they position as other. A simple example would be the Residential Schools 1876-1996 (Milloy, 1999), which began with the enactment of the Indian Act. This system was designed to remove the indigenous elements of this population so they might better assimilate into the Canadian population. One of the more powerful ways Indigenous people attempt to erase the elements which hold them back is to tell their own stories so that future generations might see narratives which reflect their lives as they see them (King, 2005; Highway, 2005; Maracle, 1992).

One of the moments that holds great significance in my life is the first time I read a narrative that reflected my life. Growing up gay in the 1960s and 1970s there was no literature I came in contact with, nor were there stories told at social gatherings, that I could see myself reflected in. Certainly there were stories where I could see elements of who I was (Davies, 1970; Mitchell, 1947 & 1981; Munro, 1968), but the characters had to be adjusted or elements of them had to be imagined so I might more clearly see myself. In my formative years I did not know anyone who was gay or lesbian, so I could not find any role models to identify with. In part, the discrimination was quite successful in that it hindered me from seeing anyone like myself and therefore created a strong position of isolation from which I had to navigate the world.

When I started my research for this project I also began to read what I described as “queer coming of age fiction.” These are the books I would have read if I was in my youth at this time. In this fiction I could find gay characters that I could somewhat imagine myself as. However, many of these books were poorly written, as I think is often the case at the beginning of a genre. Many of these books were chock full of morals and gave very unqueer representations of sexual and gender minority people. Many of these books were stories written around gay characters, but were written more to convince the hegemony not to discriminate. These held very little credence in looking for images of myself as this message was already quite clear for me. There were books of erotica but they were also not fully reflecting back to me what I was looking for in a character.

Shortly after I delivered my first set of anti-homophobia assemblies, using an earlier created model of trying to help the audience think through these issues I began to read a novel by Gary Reed, Pryor Rendering (1997). In this book for the first time in my life I met the character I could fully relate to. A character that I felt mirrored me. Two young men fumble through their first attempts at making love, out on the porch of one of their family homes. The passion in this, quite private and yet quite dangerous location flooded me with memories of such love making early in my life at my first lover’s family resort. In the story someone comes in past them as they sleep. They are seen and yet knowingly ignored. In my life the lovemaking was in a room in the resort and though no one actually saw, they too knowingly ignored what was going on with their son.

I called in sick for work. I called the school where I was Artist-in-Residence to tell them I would not be in for a couple of days. And I skipped one of my doctoral classes. I stayed home and read and reread this novel. I tried reading it in the tub, where I had read much growing up. I read it under a blanket with a flashlight, though I lived alone and no one was monitoring my sleep. I read it on transit going nowhere. I tried to re-imagine my life as if I had had this experience. I remembered my youth, now with this book, as if I was reading it back then. I began to write the narratives of my own life and to determine which images I would render in the tent as well as which ones I would tell in future anti-homophobia assemblies and talks related to my work. Reed’s art was showing me how to make and understand my own work.

Within weeks of reading Pryor Rendering I was introduced to the music of Kate Reid (2006, 2009, 2011) and the storytelling practice of Ivan e coyote (Coyote, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008). Reid is a lesbian folk singer/songwriter who presents her work through large and small concert venues and more intimate house concerts. Her style is full of humour and full of the harder moments of being a lesbian and being a woman. She sings in a way that if you are not comfortable with the stories her songs tell, you can’t help but laugh, and in doing so she brings you into the larger discourse of sexual and gender minority issues. She also presents some of the far more painful moments in her own and others’ search for equity. Coyote is a storyteller and wordsmith who presents narratives of growing up in one gender, living in the other, and all of the spaces in between. Coyote questions why gender matters and teases the audience into moments of great pain and great victories in an autobiographical retelling of moments lived.

Reading a novel where I could see a character who I could fully identify with, hearing some of my struggles of navigating discrimination told through music, and having a storyteller speak of portions of my life together made me feel as if I was part of a
narrative community. Experiencing both Reid and coyote perform showed me a variety of ways to tell my own stories so that they might be heard and understood more clearly. Both artists describe themselves as activist and artists to their audiences, and all three of us are telling autobiographical moments of our day-to-day lives and the epiphanies we have reached, so that others like us can find ways to better navigate their lives. It is through our artful practices that we are activists. Similar to Carl Beam’s notion that all of the work we make will in some way be about ourselves and that making art will aid us to position ourselves differently in the world, we are understanding our lives through making our work and in sharing this work we make the world better for ourselves, our community, and the greater population (personal communication, March 1989).

The production of the Freak Show was interrupted by a trip to Poland and Germany with a group of university student activists, two Holocaust Survivors, and a group of educators. The March of Remembrance and Hope is an annual trip sponsored by The Canadian Centre for Diversity Studies, which university students from across Canada can apply to attend. For a very reduced rate the selected group of students are immersed in an intensive Holocaust education program, with the only requirement being that they will come back into their own communities and do work to educate about the Holocaust and aid in stopping further genocides. Prior to heading to Germany an education program took place in Canada which required students to do individual research and meet through conference calls.

We met for the first time early in the morning at an orientation in a hotel near the airport. There was a great deal of excitement and nervousness as the participants met each other and the survivors we would be traveling with. A Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) film crew joined us, as this year they would be making a documentary film about the trip. Early on in our introductions we were told that given the last remaining survivors were nearing the end of their lives, the CBC wanted to film this group of student activists because they were interested in how we would carry their stories on after they are gone. This was stated quite frankly to us activists because they were interested in how we would carry their stories on after they are gone. This was stated quite frankly to us. This was stated quite frankly to us.

The facts meant nothing. The numbers meant nothing. Was it really the exact spot or was he a foot to the left? Who would know? It did not matter. The grown man stood in front of us in a warm jacket and pressed pants. His hair was grey; his physique now resembled someone in their seventies who had lived a full life. But in his silence, still pointing to the ground, looking around at us one by one, all silent, all shaken by what he had just said, we could imagine things that no amount of research could tell us. For it was in the telling of the story, the method of sharing the narrative, that the greatest moments of learning took place for us all. We could see in his eyes what even his story could not tell.

We moved through gas chambers still stained from the Ziclon-B gases. We looked through peepholes into where the victims would have died as if we were the guards checking on our work. We saw the barracks, the beds, mounds of shoes, and blankets. We moved through the camp and saw all the elements which had now been made into a museum. We entered the buildings where the crematoriums stood empty. The camp tour ended with us going to an open domed marble structure with a humongous pile of sand in the middle and we waited for the rest to catch up. “This is what remains of the human ash recovered in this site,” and Pinchas pointed to the mound of dirt. “This is where my family lays to rest.” Pinchas is a cantor in the synagogue where he worships and to his family he sang a sad song of goodbye. He told us that he does this every time he comes here. His melodic voice stretched out of the dome and into the surrounding countryside.

In silence we headed back to the bus, interrupted only by those asking others if they were okay as we tried to support each other as best we could. On the bus Pinchas joined me.

“Can I ask you a question?” I said as I sat back into my seat.

“Of course; you are the young artist who is going to make us all famous! I’m tired. Is there water?” he said as he looked around the bus.

into my mother’s arms for safety. I still remember her long braid. This is the last place where I saw my father, my mother and anyone else I knew from the village. We were separated here and I never saw them again.”
Someone handed him a bottle of water as I asked, “Who are you singing for? Yourself, us, or those who have died?”

“Ah, you are an artist! That is an artist’s question.” And the bus lurched forward as we were off to the next site. “Wait. Look. See how high those walls are?” as he pointed to a wall that ran all along one side of the camp. “Those were put up after I arrived, after the camp had been here for over a year. See. See. It is a Christian cemetery on the other side. They made the walls twice as high only on this side because the Christians didn’t want to see us when they were burying their dead. When people ask if the world knew what was going on during the Holocaust and many respond that they didn’t. It is not true. That wall is proof. They knew!” He sat back and his eyes filled with tears, which he silently wiped away.

“How do you do this?” I pushed for more information.

“How can I not? There are not many of us left. Who will tell our stories? If we just leave it to the ‘facts’” and he made a gesture of quotation marks, “The facts by whose perspective? I saw you look at me when I pointed to the ground. I saw you wonder if I could actually remember exactly the spot. And then I saw you realize it doesn’t matter. Of course it looks different, now all lush with grass, and of course it could be one foot in any direction. That is not the point of the story. That point doesn’t matter. Me telling that story to all of you is the only real fact, and that is not anywhere in that camp, that is now a museum. I saw you learn at a very deep level what no other type of education can provide and I know you will do something about it. You are an artist. You are in a PhD program. You will be a teacher. I read your proposal to come on this program. You do the same kind of work as me. How do you do it?” He asked.

“I’m not sure how to answer yet, and my story is nothing like yours.”

“I think you do know and we all have important stories to tell. Your life has not been hard in the same way as mine, but you have had your difficulties nonetheless. When I point to the ground and tell the truth about losing my entire family while standing in one spot, I am not trying to make you sad for me. I want you to see and tell the truth about losing my entire family while standing in one spot, I am not trying to make you sad for me. I want you to see and tell the truth about losing my entire family while standing in one spot. That point doesn’t matter. Me telling that story to all of you is the only real fact, and that is not anywhere in that camp, that is now a museum. I saw you learn at a very deep level what no other type of education can provide and I know you will do something about it. You are an artist. You are in a PhD program. You will be a teacher. I read your proposal to come on this program. You do the same kind of work as me. How do you do it?” He asked.

“Ah, you are an artist! That is an artist’s question.” And the bus lurched forward as we were off to the next stop. When we got back on the bus Pinchas sat somewhere else. We had to learn to share him and I had just had a time with him where I learned quite a bit. Days later in Berlin we visited a major monument designed to memorialize those who had died. It was massive. It covered a whole city block. You could go into an information centre and museum under it or walk around and through it on street level. It was a square full of uneven blocks of concrete that you could move around and through, sometimes being visible and sometimes obstructed from view. Moving though it felt quite unsettling.

After a very informative session offered by the educational officers on the trip we headed across the street into the park to what looked like one more piece of the memorial, tucked away behind some trees. This one was quite different, with a square cut away into it, and a video of two men kissing playing on a loop inside the cut away square. The piece reminded me of the Boltanski piece I had seen. It reminded me of the horror in the story Pinchas had told. It also reminded me of the piece I was painting inside the Freak Show tent and the narrative of kissing the boy under that tree. Others’ art was reminding me of art of my own. The loop of the two men kissing told a story, and the narrative about the tree being chopped down after I kissed a boy under it, written in the artist’s catalogue of the tent had the same feeling. I was reminded of the novel Pryor Rendering and how the moment on the porch was so dangerous, how the moment in my life seemed similar, and how now, just behind the bushes and slightly out of sight of the main memorial, I and another sixty people or so, were witnessing this kiss.

This seemed less like a memorial. This seemed more like activism. Well thought out, well researched, and well executed, this piece could move a viewer to realize what sexual minority people’s lives are like in a way that no number of facts could provide. Pinchas looked at me, “You know how to do this. Just tell the stories so people can see and feel and hear them. Just tell the stories.”

Years later, after the tent had been painted and exhibited and the narratives written for the catalogue I began to locate my research within Art for Social Change. Somewhat nervous as to how I might convince my readers of that which I know, I came back to questioning how I can make sense for someone else what it was like growing up gay in the 1960s and 1970s in a rural setting. How do I explain what it was like to see others’ art and make my own so I might have different visions of what was possible for me? When I see the tent, and read the narratives provoked by the tent I think it is quite clear. Yet I worry that others will still seek an explanation. Possibly procrastinating, but more likely just nervous to wrap up this writing, I suggested to some friends we travel to Ottawa to The National Gallery to an exhibition Sakahan: International Indigenous Art. I knew full well that to surround myself with art that is not only pictorial but is in its making and exhibiting Art for Social Change I might convince myself how to bring this piece to a close. Rachael, Colin, and I loaded into her white Volkswagen Rabbit early in the morning and headed off. The drive was like any shared among friends heading out on a summer day away from the work they do and the things they think about daily, towards something interesting, relaxing, and new. We talked a lot, we shared the driving, and we snacked on the things we brought. Upon arrival and just after parking the car Rachael’s friend Amanda joined us. We bought tickets and headed into the show to see what we might see.

I laboured through much of the first section of the exhibition. The work was strong. It had lots to say, but I found myself struggling to make notes that would aid my writing. In truth I felt like I was searching for an experience that was a moment of epiphany within an exhibition where all is recognizable as using the work to bring the mind and the heart closer together (Marcuse, 2013) and in doing so understand our worlds, ourselves, and others more (King, 2003). I abandoned my search and as I looked at this exhibition I tried to think about how I am like some of these artists. How my work ontologically links my childhood searches for meaning making with my adult opening of a studio, producing the painted Freak Show; and telling the subsequent stories as a way of sharing the knowledge I gained from living and then autoethnographically
examining that life. I left the main room knowing there were only two other smaller rooms to view.

Between the first and second room on the first floor stood a tower built of blankets, folded and stacked one atop another. I had seen images of this piece online and thought not a lot about it other than that it was colourful. Marie Watt’s (1967– ) 2013 Blanket Stories: Seven Generations, Advae, and Hearth, stretch over four stories into the sky. Standing at the bottom of it I was reminded of the blankets and quilts stacked in my own and my mothers linen closets. I thought of the quilt my Aunt Mary made of the scraps from many other garments she created. I thought of the quilt top my father’s mother made that still sits unfinished in the spare room of my family home. And then I thought of the blanket I read the stack of blankets the piece tells a story from the perspective of my family home. And then I thought of the blanket I read

rendering Pryor under, selected because it reminded me of childhood. Attached to each blanket of Watt’s sculpture is a simple tag that explains what each blanket is and where it came from. The didactic, on the wall speaks of how blankets are commonly given at births, and weddings, and celebrations and that the tradition of giving blankets stretches far back in her personal history.

I could feel the air being pulled out of my lungs by the power of this piece to archive her life, bear witness to many things that she and her family have seen, and to tap into anyone's life. I left the main room knowing there were only two other smaller rooms to view.

When I got married two friends of mine decided they wanted to make us a quilt. I am married to another man early in the history of gay marriage. I married a man I was in love with years ago, but due to discrimination and homophobia, both others’ and our own, our relationship didn’t last. We didn’t speak for over 15 years because we couldn’t. We loved each other and could not just be friends. We remet by chance. We were both still wearing the rings we had exchanged 27 years earlier. We agreed to spend some time together. We started to date again. We quickly knew we should be together, not just date. This time, because marriage was legal and in the earlier stage of our relationship it was not, we decided we would marry. I think our friends made the quilt to make our marriage more normal to us and to them. Now, we put it on our bed in the summer months. I jokingly say, ‘to cover our love.’ In a way, that quilt belongs on the pile in this sculpture as it speaks to the history of my husband’s and my lives growing up gay in rural Ontario and to the fact that when we first coupled we could not imagine we would ever be able to marry and now we are wed.

Watt’s piece speaks to a healing of sorts. Through the common object of a blanket we all become similar. Using her art to point out this similarity, she socially changes how we position difference. Watt wants us to find similarities and in doing so heal our selves from the damage discrimination has caused upon us; she wants us to see similarities and heal our communities; and she wants us to see similarities so we can be a part of healing the greater population. In an Indigenous art exhibition this particular structure of a brightly coloured pole stretching up above us, references viewers’ previous knowledge of historical work, which may sit in our psyche as a racist remembering. This piece is not a totem pole, but in sparking that idea, because it is in an Indigenous exhibition, it is asking you why you are thinking of this traditional art form. It also breaks traditional masculine/feminine binaries in relation to work. Men carve. Women make blankets. This piece asks why one is valued more highly than another, within Indigenous communities and outside of these populations. This work asks us to question our thinking. The quilt on our bed similarly asks us to shift our thinking.

The exterior of the Freak Show tent provides images that seem both common and yet odd. They are images we have seen historically and images that also reflect things and people we see day-to-day. For example, in the time of the early freak shows, people, specifically women, would be an oddity if they were tattooed, extremely overweight people were definitely not common; and people who were very short in stature did not lead public lives, but rather, would have made their livings as oddities. Today, every one of these people would commonly be seen on our streets. Step inside the tent and the viewer is presented with truthful images of the life and stories of a gay man who grew up happy and content in rural Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s. The juxtaposition of the images outside and inside the tent socially shifts what the viewer imagines and understands of me and in turn my community. Like the stack of blankets the piece tells a story from the perspective of the storyteller and in doing so aids the viewer in understanding portions of the world more clearly.

After spending time with this piece I headed upstairs to another set of rooms showing smaller scale works of Indigenous, socially active work. Stepping into the first room I was acquainted with Yuxweluptun’s piece I had seen earlier in Saskatchewan. In this exhibition it was presented as a single ribbon decorated gun and one copy of the Indian Act which had been shot, all in a single shadow box frame. On the floor was a piece by Sonny Assu (1975– ), 1884/1951 Disposable Waste, the title referring to the dates which the Canadian Government banned Indigenous ceremonial gatherings called Potlatches. This piece is a collection of 67 copper cups (one for every year the ceremonies were banned), similar in shape and size to Starbucks Venti sized cups, strewn on a wool blanket. The piece speaks to the difference in tradition of Indigenous people giving away their wealth as a symbol of their wealth and the rest of society displaying their wealth by the cups, with labels they carry and then discard. On the other three walls was a piece by Nadia Myre (1974– ) Indian Act. It is all the pages of the Indian Act beaded in red and white. From a distance the piece looks like the actual pages of the Act, but when you get closer the text is illegible as it is only lines of beads. The piece symbolizes the ludicrousness and racism in imposing a government Act on a population that does not recognize the power of that governing body and cannot read the text that is written in the Act, for it is not in their language. This room was a place where pieces I was familiar with and pieces I did not know brought together the essence of what I am doing in my own thesis work.

It was at this point in the exhibition that I started to make some major connections in my head about other artists’ work I had seen or come across in texts, that when it was exhibited had challenged major notions carried by the hegemony about the specific population it addressed. I was reminded of early feminist work that I had seen in the exhibition WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution in Vancouver in 2008, such as Maria Lassing, Self-Portrait with Pickle Jar from 1971 and Helena Almedia’s Pintura Habitada, from 1975, and how they spoke to other possibilities of a
self-portrait. I thought of how Colette Whiten’s *Structure #7*, from 1972, Ana Mendieta’s *Untitled (Glass on Body)*, from 1972, and Nancy Grossman’s *Untitled (Double Head)*, from 1971, also from that exhibition, all spoke of traumas to the body and all took my breath away. They reminded me of my earlier work from the *Queer Project* 1994-2003, and how an entire section of that exhibition spoke of family stories of trauma. I now understood it as tied to the work I had produced for my dissertation.

I thought further of the early Queer identified work that I had seen exhibited or read about and that had also been so instrumental in my career. I thought of how much of that work would now be read as dated and historical, but in its time, it was jarring. Works such as Duane Michals’ *Chance Meeting*, from 1970, Crawford Barton’s *A Castro Street Scene*, from 1977, George Segal’s *Gay Liberation*, from 1979, and Andrea Bowers’ *Still Life of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in Storage (Blocks 4336-4340)*, from 2007 shifted how I saw myself and my world and were all part of the collage of how I thought about making the art of the dissertation. It was all art which I hoped mine would equal in quality and in the impact it had on others. The scope of work I was seeing in this exhibition at this point, specifically in this room, after having just seen Watt’s *Blanket Stories*, prompted me to think about the powerful billboard work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres *Untitled (Billboard)*, from 1992, which simply showed a bed which had been slept in, white sheets and white pillows, and the dents of two people’s heads left on the pillows. I was also reminded of the work of The Kiss and Tell Collective (Susan Stewart, Persimmon Blackbridge, and Lizard Jones’s) *Drawing the Line*, from 1988, who presented images of themselves involved in S&M lesbian sexual acts mounted on large sheets of paper, on which they invited the audience to write comments as to what is too much to see. I thought of these two projects of artists or collectives of artists and wondered if they would have thought of themselves as creating *Art for Social Change*. The Kiss and Tell Collective, much earlier than Gonzalez-Torres, asked society to consider S&M sexual acts of a community who was not recognized as having the same rights as others, presented controversial images and asked the audience to engage with them through comments, leaving the audience not realizing that in doing so they were entering the political discussions of inequalities, power injustices, and sex.

Gonzalez-Torres, addressing issues of loss in the AIDS epidemic at a time when the hegemony was turning its back to the AIDS crisis, thinking of it as a problem of gay men only, brought the humanity of the issue to the forefront and into the more common discourse. The collective and Gonzalez-Torres were using their studio practices to move society’s understanding forward around issues mainstream discourse was not considering.

Standing in this room of Indigenous work I wondered if the three artists, Myre, Assu, and Yuxweluptun as well as Watt, think of themselves as using *Art for Social Change*, or if only after the fact do they allow those who will criticize, categorize, and write about their work to say so. When I first wanted to make the *Freak Show* my intention was quite clear to me. I would make a body of work on the walls of a small circus tent, which would juxtapose images of freaks with images of how I saw and knew myself. I would paint this with the intention of providing the very positive side of how I saw myself growing up. In hopes that a sexual minority youth audience might be provoked to think of writing their own narratives or telling their own stories in the same positive light. I would paint it in a public space so some of the reciprocal effect would be allowing people outside of the sexual minority community to be prompted to change their negative impressions of this community through simply seeing the normalcy of my life in relation to their own. I did not start out thinking that this work was in fact *Art for Social Change*, but in the scholarly understanding of the project after its completion, that is where indeed it is most logically located.
“Standing in front of 58 sexual and gender minority youths and allies, and 65 camp support staff and educators I gave the camp closing address. My Tah-Dah story was told with a somewhat shaky voice and I challenged them to go forward and tell their stories, enjoy their lives and be unapologetic about it all. I wondered how living my life, painting the tent and telling my story lead me to here. I questioned whether I had done enough. One of the camp staff, grabbed my elbow when I exited the stage saying, ‘Wonderful, I think you are finished your PhD.’”

(From journal notes written on the plane coming home from Camp fYrefly July 2011)
Near the end of painting the interior tent walls, my father showed me some things he was about to dispose of from the house and asked me if I was interested in any of them. In the collection of things were the two-toned, foil, Christmas tree light reflectors that hung on the family tree when I was a kid. Turning them over and over in my hand I immediately knew that they could be cut into smaller shapes and sewn on to the tent roof. They would be the stars I had originally intended to paint. They would catch the light as viewers moved around in the tent and invite them to look up as if they were staring into the night sky. They were perfect.

“What are you doing?” asked my dad.

“Researching,” I told him as I chuckled and packaged them up to take back to the studio with me. Sitting in the dark on that bus ride back to Toronto, I pulled the stars out of my bag and saw that even with just the passing car lights they would glint a bit of reflection. I began to think of them as a form that reflected back to me all of the things I had navigated to do this research while all the while I was trying to figure out what it was about. They reflected in a few directions. They reflected with more than one colour. They seemed like a clue. I decided to write out a list of the most important words I had come across in the process of making the project. It was a list of words about the pedagogy of the work, about the struggles to come to terms with my own sexuality, and about the difficulties in working through and around others’ homophobia. The list was quickly completed and without further consideration packed with the stars back into my bag.

On the day I was going to sew the fragments of the stars to the tent, I cut them into the same number of pieces as the number of words on the list and prepared the needle and thread I had brought to the studio. I randomly picked points on the roof of the tent. I wrote out one of the words from the list onto the canvas roof. I sewed each reflective star fragment over each word. The tent was finished.

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A WHAT I SET OUT TO DO AND WHERE I ENDED UP: MY METHODS

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As painting the tent came to close, as the main narratives were completed in their multiple drafts, and as the bulk of one round of keynotes and presentations concluded, I began the task of writing the theoretical and contextual framework of the dissertation. Staying true to my belief in stories, I wrote, rewrote, discarded, and wrote more still not fully able to articulate what the research was about. In a meeting with my supervisor she stated, “This is about many topics or discourses,” and then asked, “where do you locate this research? On what shelf would I find this work?” We both agreed it could be about many things; it could be located in many areas of research. It crosses and connects with many disciplines. We questioned whether it was within Gay and Lesbian History? Was it within Oral Narration? Was it within storytelling? Was it within identity? Or was it solely located in methodology? My task was to walk away and determine exactly where to frame or locate it.

In the end it is clear that I was working on a piece that was advancing Arts-informed and Autoethnographic methodologies; however, I posit the work is a conduit between methodology and Art for Social Change. Although it is a painted project, it is located within the realm of gender minority and sexual minority artists, working with a variety of media trying to make sense of the period of time in which we live. It is a research project that uses the process of art production to ask questions on a deeper level than if it was completed in words. It is addressing emotions, actions, and ways of making sense of the world that require a level of knowing that can only be informed through a more engaged process. In hindsight I can see my methodological choices are clearly correct. As a gay man born in the 1960s I was silenced. Painting intermingled with fragments of text mirror my struggle for a voice, with portions of the narratives present while other sections are obscured. The images are narratives of my life told in ways that are safe for me, at some levels, the images feel as if they are a queer way of telling stories society told me I was not to tell. I am narrating them as a form of healing. The Arts-informed methodologies I employed did not just allow me to research and accumulate facts which had not been earlier considered but, also, these forms allowed me to provide a more textured revealing of my information gathering. Research conducted like this provides an entrance point for my community, academics, and the greater population into information which many might find difficult to fully comprehend. They provide the viewer/reader the possibility to, on a deeper level, consider the information.

The results create a site for transformative learning and a juncture to activate an audience to become part of making change. It is activism.

When I began I thought the tent was the dissertation but, as I worked through the process of delivering many talks, writing the narratives, and sharing those narratives, I questioned whether my process of being an artist/researcher did not end with the act of painting, but rather, it was a component of my professional practice. If this is the case, other components to this project might also be considered the doctoral project. In this project there are few if any lines drawn between making the marks, writing the narratives, telling the stories, and creating space for others to tell their own stories.

Further, through the process of writing this contextualization of the research, I have come to clarify that I am writing an “insider’s story” (Grandin, 1996). I have conducted research that allows me to unapologetically speak from the perspective of a gay man. I am presenting images of the life I lead and the stories that make up that life from the early age of three to that of my teen years, allowing myself and others to see how I came to know myself. Scholar, Irene E. Karpik states that, “Through the acts of telling our stories, writing our stories, and reading others’ stories, we become known both to others and to ourselves” (2008, p.81). As I sorted through my memories, did fieldwork in and around the places I grew up, and provoked deeper sensations of those memories by being the Artist-in-Residence in the high school where my studio was, it was as if I was learning it anew. Scholar and educator, Doris Lessing describes this process saying, “That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you’ve understood all your life, but in a new way” (Lessing, 1969, p.96).

I thought I had made it quite clear for myself and that I would now be able to fully articulate what I had been doing in producing this project; however, after a recent keynote address I gave at Emergence (2012), a gay and lesbian festival and conference at the University of Western Ontario, Wendy, one of my colleagues who has known me for quite some time asked, “What is the relationship between this research and The Queer Project?”
Outcomes of Painting

Through the process of painting the tent I was able to decipher the narratives of my storied life that were the most significant junctures, had the most significant characters, and most significant learnings in my identity development. Through the process of painting I was able to find the narratives that I both rendered and wrote about, and that, through further analysis, I might come to some findings which may aid future sexual and gender minority youth to more safely and happily navigate their lives and tell their own stories. And, through the act of painting, I was able to reveal them in ways that others might be able to see them and make their own meanings from them.

Surprisingly, many of the images or narratives I rendered are not that different from the narratives of anyone who grew up in rural Ontario at a similar time. They too address relationships with land, friends, and family. They reveal those that aided in my development and those who hindered it. Not surprisingly audience members found some of the images quite foreign to how they imagined my life as a gay youth. They had imagined elements far different from what these images portrayed, or more often, they never imagined the early years of any gay youth at all. The first exhibition of the tent, in its not yet finished state, was one of great celebration and wonderment. The audience was made up of students and their families from the school where the project was painted, art aficionados, media, as well as my close friends and family. People moved around and through the tent. No matter how much they knew me everyone found images they would not have imagined and things they could relate quite well to their own lives.

Most of the images on the exterior of the tent tell stories of isolation, exhibitionism, and awkward engagements of other people that do not speak about my actual life. They are historical images of ‘freaks’ that, at the time, would have found it financially hard to survive if they were not supported by their families or if they were not put on display as oddities. Although the isolation, exhibitionism, and awkward engagements do not mirror the story of my life, they do reflect and infer the negative emotions and situations I navigated. As a young gay person who was unaware of anyone else like myself, but to whom it was made quite clear that if there was, that person would be an abnormality and someone to avoid, the sense of isolation was strong. When I came out as being gay, the ongoing sense of being watched, as the example of what such a person is actually like is prevalent. I am often asked to be the voice of gay people. I am also often faced with the task of helping others through their discomfort, confusion, judgements, and awkward moments of interacting with me. These are not my discomforts, but theirs and yet it is expected as the person who is ‘othered’ that I must carry the burden of aiding them (Butler, 2006).

Also on the exterior walls of the tent, there are three images that directly confront the negative stereotypes that are imposed on me. I have intermingled them with the images of the freaks of a time gone by to disable anyone from calling me a freak when I called my earlier work the Fag Project (Reid, 2009). I cannot be called a freak or imagined as one and expected to feel shame if I position myself there. Choosing to include my image repeatedly with the freaks, disables others from hurtfully calling me freak as I am challenging that possible name calling by calling myself a freak. This is similar to disarming anyone from calling me a fag when I called my earlier work the Fag Project (Reid, 2009).

In one I wear a dress. Although I do not cross-dress in my own life, this is an assumption that is often made and would result in a supposed shaming, if it were true. As a way of aligning myself with those who question, bend, and alter their genders, those who do
cross-dress, I painted this image to confront society’s misogynistic humiliation of those who may don the garb prescribed for the opposite gender. All of our clothing is just a costume. Suggesting I am lesser if I wear a dress is confronted in this image. It asks why it would matter if I wore clothes of a female and it asks why society would feel wearing female clothing is less powerful than wearing male clothes (Coyote, 2006; Harrison, 2002; Reid, 2009).

In one I am a clown. I wanted to position myself with those who make fun and were made fun of as a way of making their living. I position myself as a clown, the character in the narrative who commonly asks us to look at our selves and see how funny we really are. Dressed as a clown I refer to the many aspects of my life that are not taken as seriously as those outside of my community. Though many human rights advancements have taken place, I want to ask questions about the moment in history that sexual and gender minority populations are presently at, for in relation to those of our heterosexual counterparts, the laws do not reflect the climate of understanding.

Finally, on the outside of the tent there is an image of me holding a small boy’s hand, reflective of the perseverances that are assumed about me, by those who know nothing about me. This is the boldest partnering with those who were deemed to be freaks, for every aspect of their lives, both when they were on display and after the curtain came down, was imagined, scrutinized, exoticized, and dehumanized. The boy’s hand that I hold is not a relationship of perversion, but rather he is my god-son. I am no more interested in him in a sexual manner than is any of the audience who gazes upon us.

This collection of images is on the exterior of the tent for the images are the false and surface ideas that people carried about those that are not taken as seriously as those outside of my community. This collection of images is on the exterior of the tent for the images are as to who makes up one’s life and how we make sense of our lives through the stories that weave them together. This image speaks to both the pivotal moments of my life and the methodology used in this research to make meanings of those moments. In many ways it is a visual explanation of the methodology.

The final few panels of the tent show images and text which relate to the struggle of growing up gay in rural Ontario. They also remind the viewer these moments rendered in the tent are not recent but are a looking back upon earlier times in my life. In painting the tent I was very conscious of the fact that utilizing the two methodologies I employed allowed me to make deep connections with a time past while also allowing me to be able to make sense of that time through the lens of hindsight. I could remember those moments, render them so others could vicariously interpret them, and through the analysis of making them I could make deeper meanings from the images that other researchers may not have been able to. The final image is of me both accurately rendered now as an adult and an image less clearly articulated of me as a small child dressed in a clown costume. As an adult I confront the viewer with my gaze, asking them to consider their own involvement in other youths’ lives, both in the past and presently. The painting of me as a child suggests innocence and yet presents someone who is not so clearly seen. I was well aware at that age, that I saw the world differently than many others did and because of that people did not clearly see me. Both the image of me as a child and the image of me as an adult staring out, are wedged between the outside and theinside of the tent, alluding to being caught somewhere between how I am perceived and how I perceive myself.

At the age of the younger image, I imagined there was actually someone just like me who lived a block or two away. I imagined there were two men sharing their lives and raising their children, just like I hoped to do some day. And I imagined there where people a little bit nicer and a little bit less confused about what it meant to be a boy who was attracted to other boys. When I was as young as the image of me as a child portrays, I did not...
yet think there was anything about me that others would dislike or discriminate against. In that image I am trapped between what and who I knew, and who I thought I would soon know and meet. I am also not yet aware of the boundaries or discrepancies between inside and outside the tent which would both frame and trap me.

In the adult image I am aware, that there are others like me. I am aware that many levels of discrimination exist against me. And I am aware through a complicated layering of meaning making, that I have become someone who both is happy with who I am and someone who confronts others who discriminate against people for any reason. In that image I am also very aware of how I am caught between the two worlds that make up the outside and the inside of the tent. This knowledge is a large portion of what brought this research about, as I was quite certain that the history or story I was looking for was one located somewhere in this in-between space. It is a narrative of how differently I have always seen myself from how those around me see me. Though confusing to many, it is a story of how I did not see myself as ‘other,’ but rather, that being a gay youth and a gay man is my normal. There is very little about me that is unusual. I hoped that this painted project of the tent. This knowledge is a large portion of what brought this research about, as I was quite certain that the history or story I was looking for was one located somewhere in this in-between space. It is a narrative of how differently I have always seen myself from how those around me see me. Though confusing to many, it is a story of how I did not see myself as ‘other,’ but rather, that being a gay youth and a gay man is my normal. There is very little about me that is unusual. I hoped that this painted project

Outcomes of Writing

As is often the case with Arts-informed research there is not a clear beginning, middle, and end that can be logically laid out and followed in conducting research. Rarely, using this methodology, is it the case that one would do a literature review, then conduct some research to gather information, then analyze that information, write it up, and then conclude. Often there is a back-and-forth process in which reading is interspersed with conducting research, and writing, or making components of the body of the work is mixed with more reading and so on. Using an Arts-informed methodology allows for making sense of the research at various moments along the project’s path. This doctoral project stayed true to the sometimes uneasiness of not being fully on a singular trajectory; there seemed to be more than one beginning, middle, and end. Some of the more clarified theoretical reading happened much later in the process allowing the creative elements to unfold more naturally to suit the subject being researched.

Part of the way through the painting of the tent some themes started to emerge which were both embedded in the images being painted and the stories they told, and became written narration of these epiphanic moments that had been remembered and rendered. During the painting of the tent I began to tell some of these stories, first in the studio, and later at sexual and gender minority youth events and conferences, as paper presentations, and as keynote addresses to those outside of the community. Hearing those stories, others and I more clearly understood myself (Karpiak, 2008), and I began to write them down as a way to both conduct more research and record them. Those stories of my life are largely what make up the body of this artist’s catalogue.

The Fearless narrative, which opens the written component of the dissertation, both establishes for the reader a strong sense of my character and sets the tone for the doctoral project to be a series of stories. In this narrative the reader sees how inquisitive and daring I am, which is later contrasted by the stories in which elements of society attempt to shut down my strength of character and willingness to be daring. It also alludes to the complicated relationships I would have with the world not fully understanding me through the interaction I have with my mother when she back-and-forth pulls me close out of fear and love and then shakes me out of concern.

This narrative is followed by a panorama of the painted doctoral project allowing a reader to contemplate the methodology of the research and some of the outcomes of the project. The next narrative introduces the tent and the process of the residency through which it was produced. It provides information so that the images from the panorama can be more clearly understood as a form. This narrative creates the scenarios through which the work was made, exhibited, and engaged with as research. It makes clear my goal as a scholar to the research at various moments along the project’s development and encouragements in my self-exploration. Clearly this relationship was a formative one in working towards my earliest moments of navigating the world as someone who was different; but, in the suggestion of how and when the collar was to be worn, becomes a subversive message of silencing. High school was a place of great growth, reinforcing my ability to be an individual and to explore all aspects of my character. I was rewarded and praised for my accomplishments. Yet, the same location and time-period provoked some of the more violent moments evident in these narratives. Being small and, thus easily victimized, had a direct impact on how the fearlessness established earlier could easily be tormented. The story around family Christmas provides the details of my internal and external struggles to be who I knew I was and who the world wanted me to be. Looking back, the tools I
wanted for Christmas are a strong metaphor for my want to be like everyone else and yet slightly different. Again I am supported in some aspects and challenged in others.

Telling the Rememory story felt risky. It is a revealing of very early feelings towards other males. I believe most people could easily recall and tell the story of their first kiss and yet this story sexualizes me at a very young age. In truth I cannot remember when I had my first sexual thoughts and urges, but I can be quite certain it was years after kissing this boy. There is very little that differentiates heterosexuals from homosexuals in their day-to-day lives; however, the elements of sex are often overlaid on more innocent acts. Even at the early age of this narrative, an audience and Todd’s mother sexualizes the kiss. In this narrative I am young enough to not fully understand some of the subtleties or the importance of my actions. I am aware I like Todd in a different way than I like other boys or the way I like girls; however, I do not read our actions as fully subversive. Something has already established for me that I should not share this information. Todd’s mother tells him he should not continue his friendship with me and clearly he is unserved to the point where he agrees to comply. The coincidence of this happening at virtually the time when my father decides, and without my knowledge, to cut down the tree he earlier supported me in protecting, brings the act of kissing under the tree to a much more grave meaning. I merge the two together and am left with some very strong messages to silence and erase parts of who I am.

In a Map for Social Change I tell a story that allows my reader to understand the crucial role of engaging with art, making art, and considering the world through the lens of art plays in my life. It also positions my work within a community of scholars who attempt to shift the troubled world through the production and exhibition of art from their own studio practices. Married with the earlier chapter on how to read the dissertation, the reader begins to comprehend how Art for Social Change dovetails with the methodologies I have utilized to conduct my research. This chapter explains and exemplifies the strengths of these methodologies. Epistemologically, I both make sense of this world through artful practices and investigations and attempt to alter the ways the world is through the same processes and forms.

This chapter makes clear how some of the storied moments of my life can reveal more than just the narrative, how some of the pathways I have navigated to produce this research were tackled, and what are some of the overarching elements that can be achieved when using these methodologies to conduct research into the human condition. It is far less storied than the rest and both reveals elements that a reader might have missed and encourages them to return to the narratives for the deeper textures of the storied life told here. It ends with moments, junctures, and observations that bring into question what can be gained by this research. It is not the conclusions of the text, for the conclusions lie in the viewers’/readers’ engagement with the unfinished incompleteness (Greene, 2003) of the project. The viewers/readers are the active agents of change in the conclusions they draw.

The final two narratives bring the artist’s catalogue to a close. The first tells the story of the exhibition in which the tent was brought close to home. It reveals moments of contemplation of how I am both alike and different from those who are not gay who are around me. It speaks of what is possible if we make research more accessible and more creative, championing more such work to be made. It shows how this doctoral project has the ability to heal me as a person and to prompt my community to reconsider how they navigate and understand some of the moments of their lives. It asks the greater community to reimagine some of the stories they think they know about the sexual and gender minority community by listening to the narratives of our actual lives. The second of the final chapters is a narrative asking the readers to go back to the narrative with which the dissertation began. It asks them to think of the strength of spirit of that naked young boy springing effortlessly and fearlessly from the safety of his home out into the world beyond, not for a second imagining it would not be welcoming. It asks the viewer to think of the magical relationship between a very young gay boy and his grandfather, who certainly understood that his grandson was different though most likely not fully knowing all of the differences, talking to each other and trying to make sense of the world. This chapter asks its readers to think of what might be possible if we support that young gay boy.

When I finished painting the tent, had written the subsequent stories, and completed a much more detailed reading of Arts-informed research and Autoethnography, I was left questioning if there was not possibly more than one dissertation. The tent was the dissertation as my committee and I had agreed upon. It was supported by an examinable artist’s catalogue that made clear both the methodological considerations and the contextualizations that an Arts-informed project requires. And possibly there is a less tangible doctoral project which is the space in the studio, the exhibits, and the moments surrounding the Artist-in-Residency. This questioning brought me to varying moments to ponder in the duration of the production of the imagined dissertation — the painting of the tent and this writing — and the operating of my studio space at Georges Vanier Secondary School.

**Moments to Ponder**

Before my studio at the school was cleaned out and functioning I was called down to the caretakers’ office to meet and walk with the plumber back to my studio. Peter, the head caretaker, introduced me to the plumber and we headed back through the route I had come. I thought it odd that the plumber would not know where the room was and why he would need an escort. We exchanged pleasantries as we walked as we both sized each other up.

“So you are an artist? What are you doing here? Peter said you aren’t teaching classes?” he questioned.

I tried to sound more official and important than I really thought I was so I could deflect some of the questions I wasn’t yet ready to answer, “I am the Artist-in-Residence and I am going to paint my PhD in this studio, once we get the water running.” I thought I sounded like a bit of a pompous jackass and that I was going to have to figure how to answer such questions in a better way.

“What is the subject of your PhD?” he asked as he stopped to pull up his pants a bit while I opened the studio door. I could not believe this. I thought to myself, I am going to have to explain that I am gay and what the project is about. The door closed and
I thought, what if he is homophobic and questioned myself as to whether I am really safe here in this room. Another quick check in with my thoughts went in a different direction, questioning why I was assuming these negative things about him. He looked quizically at me, not moving, waiting for my answer.

“Is it about growing up gay in rural Ontario in the 60s and 70s.”

“You say you are going to paint it?”

“Yes, I mean there will be writing to explain why I am painting it, but essentially, in this room I am going to paint my PhD.”

“Well it is about time. That just makes sense. You are an artist and you will paint it so other people can see it. It is about time people like you talked about this stuff so people like me, well, you know, people who aren’t gay can get over it.”

Over the course of the next few years I saw him many times, just stopping in to see how it was going. And often, each of us told stories of our own lives. At the first opening of the tent he returned and proudly told people that he got the sinks running so I could ‘do my important work.’

As part of my involvement in the high school we set up a series of anti-homophobia assemblies. It was agreed that I would deliver one to each grade so that I could be visible to all of those who might be a person of sexual or gender minority, as well as be the face of changing the homophobic climate in the school. I have delivered these assemblies hundreds of times now to quite a variety of audiences. This does not suggest that they are ever really easy or that they are not a bit of an emotional roller coaster ride to deliver for me. During the first assembly one of the students I had met before coming to the school and numerous times in the early weeks of working here stood to ask the first question for his grade. As he pointed and explained where he grew up to another friend of his who was surprised to see him up to ask a question and then once more at me before he spoke. He began by explaining that it was not really a question and then stated;

I have been actively involved in gay bashing. I think half of us here have done it. But knowing the man that he is and being around him. To me he is one of the greatest people I have ever met. To me he is just another man, who happens to be gay. He is not a gay man. He is a man that happens to be gay. And that is what we have to get in our heads. Thank you.

And he squeezed back into the aisle of seats he had come from.

“Congratulations,” my firefighter friend Sam said to me and he threw his arms around me and gave me a big hug.

“Give Spencer a hug,” Jennifer said to her kids, Simon and Grace, and I bent down and gave them both a squeeze. And then took them over to the bowl of red foam clown noses I had bought for the kids and other clowns who showed up to see the tent.

“Wow,” Tasha said to her kids, “Pretty cool eh guys?” as they each put there hand in to take a clown nose for them. “What do you say?” and three thank yous were quietly spoken.

My friend Kristy who had flown all the way from Edmonton gave me a big smile, “Come here you big Freak!” and squeezed me, one activist to another.

“This is so great,” Erika, one of my classmates from my Arts-informed class, said, grabbing my elbow.

The crowd really started to fill the space. Around the tent. In the tent. And in the open area near me. The audience for the first showing of my research, process, and results was larger than I imagined. Numerous students from the high school introduced me to their parents and showed the tent and I off as if they somehow owned both. As I watched those students proudly explaining what they knew about the project I thought to myself, maybe they did.

I stepped inside the tent partially to get away from the big crowd outside and partially to see what people were saying. This brought me to a dead stop in my tracks. People were exploring. They were pointing at images, text and fragments on the tent walls, but they were telling each other their own stories. I over heard a woman I did not know say, “This looks like my neighbourhood growing up,” and then she started to tell the people around her about her life.

My friend Robert said, “This is like a house from my street,” as he pointed and explained where he grew up to another friend of mine that I knew, before tonight, he did not know.

A woman with a British accent said, “This is like the wallpaper at my auntie’s,” and then told those around her, her story.

It was working. My research was prompting others to think past the images they were seeing and tell their own stories. I stepped outside the tent. The crowd had tripled in size. I spied my parents and my sister but, as I tried to move toward them, I again stopped dead in my tracks. Between them and me were five of the kids who had come into the studio and come out to me as being lesbian or gay. I scanned the crowd and did a mental head count. I could see at least twenty-five of the kids who had told me of their own sexual minority status and I thought about how each of them when asked if they knew of others in the school said, “No, I am the only one.” Usually followed by the qualifier, “I think.”

I moved closer to my family but behind me I heard a sobbing noise. I turned to see my friend Marlene, with tears rolling down her face, “He was just a little boy.” And I thought that at least someone saw the sadness painted on to the tent walls but hidden by the more prominent narratives.

“I am not going in there. He is a faggot!” I heard from outside my studio door.

With many brushes wet with paint awkwardly in my hands I stepped out into the hall to see three boys talking with each other.

“You can come in if you want. You don’t have to. You can’t catch it; however, you cannot talk like that. It will get you in trouble. I will get you in trouble. Do you like it or think it is fair when people say derogatory things about your skin colour or your race? Come on. Grow up and be more respectful. Come in if you want, but stop that language.” Colin, the teacher in the next room
The boys in my studio asked a bunch of questions. The usual stuff about what did that room used to be, what was I doing, and what was the bowl of apples for? I answered them all and suggested they take an apple if they wanted one. "That is what they are there for. My way of saying thanks. Take one if you want it but you should wash it in the sink over there as they where just picked but not washed." They didn’t really need washing but I used this always as my trick to get students to spend a bit more time in the studio and relax a bit doing something quite familiar to them in a somewhat unfamiliar setting.

Those two boys came back numerous times. I think always to just get a free apple. They often tried to coax their friend to come with them but it took them quite some time to convince him. I always made as if I was not very interested, though I answered all of their questions. Months into painting the project the boy who had earlier been in my studio. "Hey," he said, his common greeting, "Everything okay here?" he asked of the three boys and me. Two of them stepped into my studio and the other stepped into the stairwell moving away from the conversation. Colin pointed and I shook my head to not bother as we both stepped back into our respective rooms.

I took another look at me, clearly trying to figure something else out, polishing his apple on his chest and stepping towards the door. "Well, see ya." And he was gone. Later that same day, after lunch was over when the studio usually gets quite quiet, I was intently working on a portion of my painting when there was a knocking on the open door frame of my studio. I looked up at the boy who had earlier been in my studio.

"Want another apple," I questioned.

"No, can I come in?" he asked and I gestured that he could. "I wanted to show you something. Sort of as a way of apologizing for calling you a…” and he stopped uncomfortable now that he had said it. He pulled a photograph out of his knap-sack and turned it so I could see it. It was a photograph of an old man standing by a camel. "It’s my grandfather. Back home," he said and a bit sheepishly smiled and then finished, "I thought you should see it."

We compared each other’s photographs. We both talked a bit about how much our grandfathers meant to us while munching on apples. At the end, right before he left, it fell silent and he just looked at me. In that discussion of our grandfathers and those moments of silence I stopped being a fig and became a person.

"Well see ya. I better get to class," and he picked up his photo and tucked it back in his bag. He came back often over the next two years and always with somebody new. Some times he asked me questions but most of the time he did the explaining to others he pointed out and told me what he saw. And at a few points I walked around and into the tent with my friend Pinchas and his daughter Rumi. It was the first time I was meeting her and she was with her father who I had come to think of as a second grandfather. He was one of the Holocaust Survivors with whom I traveled to Poland and Germany a few years ago. I had spent many intense moments of learning with him in sites where he had been imprisoned. Traveling on the bus together we shared lots of moments, asked lots of questions, and learned about how we had devoted portions of our lives to activism. Together in solidarity he had shared some of the stories of the most trying moments of his life during the Holocaust. Now we were inside my tent and I was sharing some of the more intimate moments of my early life with him.

Pinchas pointed at a few images and asked me to explain. Others he pointed out and told me what he saw. And at a few points he pointed and shared another fragment of his life by telling me a story.

Although I had met Pinchas through very unfortunate and tragic circumstances, this is not how I saw him or thought of him. On the trip we had discussed how happiness is possible even after all he had experienced. He suggested I understood many of the aspects of this through my own life. He was not comparing what happened to him to the oppression I have and do face, but rather he was showing me how isolation, discrimination, and shame made me more able to understand his situation. I remember saying to him, "Discrimination against anybody is just wrong. It is wrong." And him smiling and giving me half a hug a telling me I would be a great teacher.

"Can I get a picture of you two?" Rumi said and we stood together with our arms on each other’s shoulders in the dim light inside the tent. We shifted to another place inside the tent but got into the same posse. "How about outside the tent where I can see you both better." She asked.

"Where?" Pinchas asked.

"There, beside your name. The amazing Spencer J. Harrison," she read and pointed to where she wanted us to stand. Again we both smiled and the shutter clicked.

"Vwonderful, it is just vwonderful," he said with traces of his Polish accent sneaking in. "You are a good teacher," and he pointed at the tent. "You made me tell my story so I could see you and you could see me." He paused. He smiled. He hugged me once more. "Your grandfather would be proud," he paused. "Discrimination against anyone is wrong," he repeated my words back to me.

I walked around and into the tent with my friend Pinchas and his daughter Rumi. It was the first time I was meeting her and she was with her father who I had come to think of as a second grandfather. He was one of the Holocaust Survivors with whom I traveled to Poland and Germany a few years ago. I had spent many intense moments of learning with him in sites where he had been imprisoned. Traveling on the bus together we shared lots of
I am responsible for running the Gay Straight Alliance in the high school. A teacher volunteered to assist, but it is quite clear that I am the one who is facilitating the meetings and the conversations. This year, no one has come out during the weekly meetings but I think anyone of the dozen or so kids that come every week think that at least one of the others is gay or lesbian. During our third meeting of the year, when we were just really getting into the conversation, two students stepped into the vestibule of my studio. From where I was sitting I could not see them but some students at the other end of the table encouraged them to come in.

"Can we come in?" a voice from outside said and a few of us answered that they could. Two girls stepped inside the room and one of them said quite nervously gesturing a lot with her hands, “We aren’t gay or anything. Can we come in?”

“You are in. Grab chairs from over there and an apple from the bowl. We are just talking about language we hear in the halls that people shouldn’t use. Can you think of any words?” I asked somewhat in their direction and somewhat to the rest of the group. The conversation carried on back and forth for about the next fifteen minutes and then the one girl said, “Well I used to be against gays and everything. I am Muslim,” she said gesturing to her head covering and then went on, “but then this summer I got over it. I met some people who were gay. I have to lie to people to come here.” She paused, “Is it still all right that I am here?”

Someone passed her the bowl of apples as it was going around and many voices assured her it was okay.

The next day when I saw her in the hall she smiled and said, “Hello, sir.” She was bursting with pride that others heard her and that she had said it and acted as if nothing odd had just happened.

The Discussion: Where I ended up

I imagined my doctoral research to be something very traditional and scholarly mainly because I have a nervousness that research has to be that. At many moments, my supervisor Ardra, my writing partner and friend Rachael, and the methodological texts I kept returning to suggested I not abandon my already established methods of research. Through painting and storytelling, I am an experiential learner. These are processes I have employed most of my life. Deeper reading of texts around Arts-informed and Autoethnographic methodologies have allowed me to articulate my questions and findings more clearly. They have allowed me to develop the language to still see my work as art while explaining it also as research.

Through the writing of the artist’s catalogue, Rachael kept reminding me to think about the phenomenon I was researching and asking me to repeat to myself what am I trying to do with my research. When I began this project I talked to others and myself about a “missing gay history,” but I had a tough time explaining what history I was really referring to. I knew I did not want to find and repeat fragments of the history of my community working through oppression or the history of coming to like ourselves. In Queer CanLit, a catalogue of an exhibition at the Thomas Fisher Rare book Library at University of Toronto, Scott Rayter speaks of the other narrative that is standard in sexual and gender minority members’ lives: the coming out stories (Rayter, Mcleod, & FitzGerald, 2008). And, though these narratives are integral to my community’s lives, they are also cloaked in the history of oppression we must navigate. This also was not the history I was after. I continually spoke of a history told around the kitchen table (Manely-Tannis, 1995), imagining where such a setting would be for a collective of sexual and gender minority people. As I began to paint and tell stories, I realized the history I was looking for was not a history that had already been told but, rather, the stories of my own life and the narratives that might be prompted by telling my own.

I was studying the phenomenon of growing up gay in rural Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s, but the piece I was looking for and the purpose of my research was not to keep repeating that history/story. I wanted to change the narratives that are told about my community. The tent and the subsequent narratives in this catalogue do that. The moments that happened in the studio, at the exhibitions, and in the other conversations with those who saw the tent are the changing narratives.

I wanted to add to the methodologies I have employed and as described through out this text, the painted tent and storied text do that. However, I feel the most substantial learning outcomes for this research are in the viewer’s/reader’s engagement with the painted doctoral project, with hearing and telling their own stories, and in the spaces the residency and exhibitions created. I believe they became intertwined with the methodology.

Earlier, I explained some of the meanings of the images and revealed in the narrative components of my identity development as well as presented some of the moments which surround the spaces where the paintings were created and exhibited. These images, narratives, and moments of interaction are the history/story I am providing. It is in the reading of the narratives, the viewing of the painting, and the sharing of these interactions with others, however, that the more textured and quality learnings take place. For it is in these moments as Maxine Greene (2003) earlier identified where, “imagination [is] the place where the possible can happen; a place of ‘resisting fixities, seeking the openings,’ where ‘we relish incompleteness, because that signifies something still lies ahead,’” (pp. 22-23 as cited in Sullivan, 2005, p. 115).
“I arrived over an hour early for class. I was giving out my first course syllabus. I sat down and looked around the room wondering, what after all of these years of building towards this moment, I didn’t like teaching or I wasn’t good at it. Students arrived the first class came and went. Through the act of teaching and the discussions in that class I learned so much about the subject I was teaching.”

(From my journal entries after teaching my first class at OCAD University January 2009)
In some ways putting up a circus sideshow tent is a lot less work than I thought. In other ways it is far more than I ever imagined. We packed the van the day before. Just four of us loading the poles, canvas tent, cables, and lights from my studio in Georges Vanier Secondary School into the back of a rented, white, extended van. We needed the extended cab for the center pole of the tent stands just over 14 feet in length and is attached to a 4 feet square steel plate. It had to be fed in from the back door and it rested on the dashboard. The steel plate blocked a great deal of the back doors of the van. The other poles, which are 5 feet eight inches tall were loaded around the plate of the centre pole or through the side doors and were stacked like a woodpile alongside the centre pole. Their steel plates are just under 2 feet square and caused the greatest difficulty in the stacking of these poles. The tent walls were rolled around carpet tubes, which I had gotten from my cousin Earle’s company. They were gently laid on top of the poles. The tent top, which is as neatly folded as a circle can be, was placed on the very top of this pile. Tools and the boxes filled with the cables and strings of lights were placed in the van last through the side door. We drove away and parked the van in a secured space under my friend Rachael’s condominium where it would be safe for the evening and await our early drive to the farm in the morning.

After breakfast and taking the dogs for a walk, my husband and I climbed into the van and began our early morning journey. We turned off highway 115 onto the paved country road. We arrived and my nervousness was replaced with the task at hand. My parents, my sisters, my nephew Trevor and some of my closest friends were joined by volunteers from the university, and instructions as to how we were to proceed were given out by my friend Tasha who had acted as the crew boss erecting the tent for an earlier exhibition. Trevor explained how he made the steel plates for the bottoms of the poles and cautioned people about moving the biggest one due to its weight and its tendency to spring up ward once you righted the pole. Introductions were shared between those who did not know each other and hugs were exchanged between many others. We began to unload the tent and the two people who were there to document the project got to work with their cameras.

In the midst of rural Ontario, only a thirty-minute drive from my Grandfather’s family farm, around which much of the interior images of the tent were created. The theatre itself is comprised of three barns, arranged in a horseshoe shape wrapped around the old barnyard. Two barns have been converted to an L shaped stage backdrop and a seating area has been constructed in the third barn.

This exhibition would be the opportunity to bring the project home. The tent was to be set up outside the barnyard with the back of the barn and countryside as its surroundings. Due to the geographical location of this exhibition and visual backdrop of rural farmland surroundings, this staging of the project was a way to clarify whether the narratives would be reflective of their sources. This one-day exhibition would give me a chance to document the project in the rural landscape about which it was made.

While all of these ideas spun around in my head most of my thoughts in the van were about the logistics of what we were about to do. To successfully mount this exhibition I needed about twenty volunteers to assist in the process of erecting the tent. To be respectful of the actors who would be going through two last dress rehearsals prior to the premier, we needed to put the tent up with very minimal noise. The project was designed to be mounted indoors only but for this exhibition the guide ropes, which hold up the tent would for the first time have to be fastened to pegs, which would be pounded into the ground. To further the feeling of the circus or freak show tent and to add a layer of safety to the edges of the steel plates which hold the poles securely wood chips would cover the ground inside and outside of the tent. Also, the painting on the walls of the tent is not waterproof so a crew would have to be ready should a storm break out to take the tent down in a matter of minutes. Driving to the site the excitement and the tension was palpable inside the van.

We turned off highway 115 onto the paved country road. We then dropped onto the gravel road that furthered our journey towards the farm. We followed the signs that lead us right into the middle of the rural Ontario farmland and up the lane into the Winslow family farm. Pulling the van in behind the barn we were met by a few of the volunteers who I had asked to help. We were about ten minutes early. I felt the most nervous that I could remember being before mounting a major exhibition. Within minutes, all of the volunteers arrived and my nervousness was replaced with the task at hand.

4th Line Theatre is located on the Winslow family farm
The centre pole was moved to what had been determined would be the best location, later allowing the viewers to move around and enter the tent when it was erected. The jar of milkweed wishes* was screwed into place on the top of the centre pole and the top of the tent was carefully slipped over the jar. The pole was then erected allowing the tent top to hang loosely from its center point. A circle of the other twenty poles was laid out around the centre one and a demonstration was then given as to how the hook at the top of these twenty poles would be slipped through the twenty grommets around the outside of the tent top. Each volunteer then maneuvered his or her own pole. Together everyone moved slowly back. The crew boss then directed people through the process of shuffling to the point where the tent top would have no ripples or sags. Each volunteer then slipped the loop of rope over the hook that was through the grommet. These ropes were then pulled back to help me tear it down and pack it into the van. People headed

PLATE 38
FREAK SHOW: Tent Pinnacle, (Milkweed Wishes).

The pole they were holding the first round of applause went up. We were halfway there.

The walls of the tent were then rolled out and fed between the poles and the ropes. Careful not to scratch the surface of the paintings, eight volunteers on the outside and eight on the inside moved the first wall into place. My friend Marcus helped me roll up the one panel that is not displayed in the exhibitions and folded it in on itself to make the entrance to the tent. Once in place, the toggles at the top of the walls of the tent were fed through the fabric loops that hang from the roof. This allows the wall to hang like drapes and further pull down on the poles, weighting them to the ground. After the first wall was secured another round of applause rang out. The second wall was fed through, but this time with half the number of volunteers as those who had not seen the tent in person had stopped inside and outside the tent to look. Once in place this wall too was hung and a panel at the door of the tent was rolled into place. Another round of applause was then heard. The support strings were tied securing the tent walls together and securing the ends to the poles. Those inside the tent and outside applauded as we neared the finish of the installation.

The string of lights my father had built was now strung between the walls of the tent and the flap of the roof, which hung over the walls. Above the center of each panel, between each pole, a light socket is pulled through and a 15-watt bulb was then inserted. Once the bulbs were in place I did a bit of tweaking to make sure they hung in the circus-like manner they had been designed to do and fully illuminated each section of the wall. Coming out of the tent I was met by a group of volunteers who were spreading the wood chips around the ground which surrounded the poles. Carrying bags of the chips they moved inside and covered the tent floor. My long time friend Kim placed a neon yellow tennis ball that had been punctured, over the top of each peg for safety. The tent was up. The applause I expected at this point did not happen because people were inside and outside the tent looking, pointing, and talking to each other about what they were seeing.

As I moved around the tent for the next half hour or so, I overheard people asking questions of each other. Sometimes they would ask for explanations of details from me. Those who knew fragments of some of the stories depicted narrated what they knew. Two of my artist friends, Brad and Sue took it upon themselves to tighten one of the rolled panels to make the project look a bit more crisp. I saw some of my friends and fellow artists congratulate my mother, father, and nephew. A few shook my hand while a few others hugged me. Marcus and Jen’s teenage sons Piper and Elia asked questions about the photographs and maps on the inside walls of the tent. Eventually we were all inside and eventually we all looked up at the stars twinkling on the ceiling.

As we poured out of the tent people started heading back to their respective vehicles, prepared to return later that night and do it all over again, but backwards. I stopped them and suggested a photo of the group. Many quickly moved to the entrance where the photographer was directing them while some mumbled about not liking getting their pictures taken. Looking at the tent from where the photographer was going to stand I saw how small it looked beside the barn and yet how all of those who had helped put it up made it feel, in a different way, very large. First, a family photograph was taken of my parents, my sisters, my nephew and his fiancée, my husband and I. Then a photograph of the whole crew was set up. As I stood in amongst this second group, and we all laughed as many tried to get the entire group to smile at the same time, I thought of all the people who physically and metaphorically were involved in building the tent. I wondered how many of those I was surrounded by in this group felt that they too had made a mark on this project. And I again wondered how they would later tell the story of this day.

People said goodbye to me and made plans for those who were going for lunch, those who would be coming back later for the talk, the play or both, and for those who would just be coming back to help me tear it down and pack it into the van. People headed

* My sister Connie had given me a jar of fluffy milkweed seed which as kids we would put in our hands and blow on thinking that if we did not see them touch down the wish would come true. She said, “I think you have a lot of wishing to do to make this work the way you want it to.” I did blow a few of them out of my studio door at very trying times, and felt they would be a great symbol for the top of the tent.
The maps of my other grandparents’ farm held true like the original paper they had been drawn by my mother on. The photographs, which had been directly transferred to the tent walls, had the real transparent qualities they were meant to have. They were firmly there showing the history this project reflects yet allowed you to also look through them to the memories they represented. The underpainting of text, the early free writing on which this project is based, bled through in some places as intended and in others was obstructed from view by the images painted over them. The varying images told different stories depending how you read them, just as I hoped they would. With the grass and wood chips below my feet, looking up at the reflector stars above it almost felt like moments lying on my back with my grandfather staring up into the night sky. When I look to the image of my grandfather with his face slightly scrunched from the sun that would have been shining down on his hat, the bright sun shines through his image and I almost expect to hear him speak. I wonder what he would say to me, here on this farm, inside this tent that tells of my life growing up gay in rural Ontario so heavily based on his guiding words helping me build my strong positive character. I shake back to reality when I hear Richard outside of the tent calling me to come and get lunch and I remember exactly where I am, both on the land and in my life. I move to step out of the tent and I stop. One more sensation, this time the smell of the cool farm air blowing in through the entrance, mixed with that of the sun warmed canvas tent. It smells like camping with my Aunt Mary, Uncle Don, and Cousin Earle. It smells like inside the church tent at the Peterborough Exhibition when I was just four or five. And, it smells like Pete’s canvas bucket full of oats that my grandfather would let me hook on to his harness as he took a break from plowing the field.

The space inside the tent is warm and inviting. It feels like this no matter where it is installed. It comes from the heat of the 15-watt bulbs and the bodies of those who step inside. The images tell stories which are highly influenced by those who read/look at them. They are impacted by what they bring to them. Some of the words are quite clear. They deliver a message aided by the images that surround them. Some of the words are obstructed, acting as a disturbance to the viewer demonstrating what it is like to have to hide parts of your narrative. Both show how difficult it is for the person whose narrative it is to only be able to share some of their story, as well as how difficult it is for those around that person to make sense of the narratives by which they try to live. The space creates a catalyst for discourse. It prompts its viewers/readers to talk to each other about what they see and share their own stories.

I stepped out of the tent, grabbed my husband’s hand and headed to the van. “You okay?” he asked.
ways that were different from a doctoral project and allowed me to contemplate another positioning of this research.

This view reminded me of my confusion seeing my mother’s face, with tears welling up in her eyes, when she stood in her childhood bedroom on the day we had returned to the farm so I could conduct some field research for this project. It was almost fifty years after the farm was sold, but the present tenants allowed us to walk around the land. After a while and with questions they asked us to come and see what was the same and different inside the house. When I questioned her later about what those tears meant she pondered for only a short moment and said, “They were because my room was gone. I felt like I no longer existed, and it was the ending of that life in which I had felt happy and important. My entire history was gone; lost, except in my head.”

Seeing my tent on a farm, which was both geographically close and central to some of the main narratives of the painted project and its subsequent narratives, helped me make sense of her tears and her explanation of them. This exhibition was a coming home for my research. It was a collision of the contradictory feelings I had of myself in childhood and those others would later have of me. Like my mother, my childhood felt happy, important, and I would add, safe. In childhood I was naive to the future negative perceptions others would formulate about me. It was only later when I began to encounter other’s impressions that the ground became less stable. When I came out as a gay person, an invisible threshold was crossed, but a time later in history, when many advances in human rights for everyone to see them. We where standing in her room. The space was gone but its foundation stood as a reminder, permanently drawn on the landscape. And though we walked side-by-side, stopping only to clarify moments in the family stories we both share or to explain to each other elements one of us had noticed that was different, we were not actually walking on the same land. She understood the moment before, but a diaspora had been created that would not exist. My relationships with my friends and family would continue otherways, like my mother “my room was gone and my history of that happiness was only in my head.” My home would continue to be a place of adventure.

It all seemed quite innocent to her outside the house. This was my research not hers, and she was simply helping me with my memories. She was not really there to explore or question. She was standing with her son who was investigating a very different space and set of relationships than she had experienced. My memories did not include many moments inside the house. Her’s obviously did. When the tears filled her eyes, she wiped them away not wanting anyone to see them. We where standing in her room. The space had been physically unchanged, but the innocence of that time was gone. She could no longer locate those moments or feelings she imagined resided there. They were only now fragments in her head. She was standing in the room, but she could no longer return.

The tent, which stood centered in my rearview mirror, told the stories of both how I remembered making sense of my world when I was young and how my views of that world were contradictory to how others saw it. Sharing these stories in the form of the tent erected on a farm that reflected much of my childhood memories, but a time later in history, when many advances in human rights for sexual and gender minority people have been introduced, felt like a way of bringing those contradictions closer together.

For me this was the moment where Autoethnography, Arts-informed research and Art for Social Change became clearly aligned.
When I was younger, in the years before I went to school, my bedtime was seven or eight o’clock depending on the night. In the summer, it was often later depending on how hot it was in our house. On hot summer nights my sister and I would put on our pajamas and sit outside on the front stoop waiting for the breeze to blow through the house and cool down our rooms. Some nights when it had been really hot in the day I could stay up until nine, but most of those nights I would fall asleep before I went to bed. Sitting on the front stoop usually involved some sort of snack and some sort of story. The only time I really remember having sugared cereal was late on summer nights on that front stoop.

One of my earliest vivid memories is of a particularly hot summer night when I was dressed in my favourite yellow seersucker pajamas and eating dry Captain Crunch cereal from one of the plastic bowls we only used outside. My friend Kevin Bunker was on his stoop, in front of his house, in his pajamas just across the crescent from our house. I remember waving but not being able to say hello or yell out to him because the time on the stoop was when we were supposed to be settling down and getting ready to sleep. My pajamas were freshly washed because they made that crunchy noise that seersucker makes when it is new or crisp off the line. The cold cement felt great on the bottoms of my bare feet. The television light from the living room behind me passed through the screen and made the top of my head look very big in the shadow it cast on the stoop. The street was in darkness except for a few circles of light from the street lights above and the blue from a couple of other televisions seen through other front doors. It was a fairly quiet night. My mum and I were talking. I saw something streak across the sky above the roof of Kevin’s house.

“Did you see that?” I yelled, jumping up and pointing up to where the light had shot across the sky but was now again dark and, before my mother could answer, another streak shot just as bright and almost in the very same place.

“There it is again!” I exclaimed.

From inside the house behind me my sister questioned, “What, what, what did you see?” as she ran to the screen door.

My mother explained, “It’s a shooting star. Your grandfather says when you see one you should close your eyes and make a wish and if you can still see it in your mind by the time you have made your wish, that it will come true. Quick, close your eyes and make a wish,” she instructed. “Can you still see it in your mind?”

“I can still see them both,” I said.

“Make two wishes and be quick about it before they are gone,” she replied. “You must be very lucky to have seen two at once.” I made my wishes as she began to explain what shooting stars really were. I am not certain if her explanation was right or made any sense but I spent the rest of the night watching the sky for more. After being ushered to my room and presumed to be asleep I got out of bed, quietly rolled the blind back up, and put the pillow at the other end to how I usually slept so I could stare into the night sky looking for more shooting stars. I drifted off to sleep.

Later that week on Sunday we headed to my grandparents’ place as we often did for dinner and a little time on the farm. As we drove up the lane, through the tunnel of trees and past the barn to the house I was almost bursting to get out of the car and tell my grandpa about the stars. The car came to a stop between the shed and the house and I swung open my door even before the dust on the lane had a chance to settle. I bounded towards my grandpa who I could see working in the field with his favourite horse Pete. I slowed as I neared them for he had taught me not to tear up and startle Pete. A big smile showed up on his face as I reached my hand way up and slid it into his. I quickly forgot what I was bursting to tell him as he let me hold the one of the horse’s reigns and I remembered how careful I had to be with Pete as he was six times my height. We finished up what grandpa had been working on and headed to the pump to clean off our hands before we went in to the house for dinner.

“Grandpa, Grandpa, the stars, the stars; I saw some shooting stars!”

“Bill? Are you boys just about finished out there? I want to put the dinner on the table,” Grandma called out the summer-kitchen door at the back of the house.

“We better hurry,” Grandpa said, “your grandmother has been cooking since we got home from church. You can tell me all

I THOUGHT OF MY GRANDFATHER AS FEARLESS
AND HE THOUGHT THE SAME OF ME

FEARLESS. TO ME, HE
WAS TRULY FEARLESS

PLATE 41
GRANDPA CHAMBERS

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about it when dinner is done. In fact you can tell me about it as we look up at the stars over the farm when dinner is done.” And we headed in to join the others.

Dinner was delicious as always was and it was followed by freshly baked pie for dessert. I liked having Sunday dinners at the farm because I always got to sit near Grandma who taught me things, like about being proper, how to be a gentleman (like she said my grandfather was), and about to how to cook what we had eaten. Oh, and I always like the desserts we had without fail. I helped clear the table as I always did, being careful with Grandma’s Sunday best. I scraped the dishes with the back of my hand into the pail for the pig.

“I want to show Spencer something outside, if you are through with him?” Grandpa questioned. With a nod and being handed me a cloth for my hands, Grandma let me go. Down off the back porch and out onto the lawn between the garden and the fence we went. This is where Grandpa and I often sat when we were taking a break from work, having a snack fresh from the garden, or when he needed to teach me something serious. Sometimes we would sit with our backs to the fence, but at night we would lie down, get comfortable, and look up at the stars. There were so many more stars above the farm than above our house in the city. The night sky was bigger there than at home. Imagining I saw things was so much easier above the farm.

Grandpa lay down with his feet pointed away from the house so the light, which shone in front of the shed, would not be in his eyes. I made a T with my body to his, propping my head up near his belly. We both stared up for a minute before anything was said. My grandpa had taught me to stare up at the stars for a minute in wonder so I could really see how brilliant they are and see the messages behind them. By this point I had looked many times and not yet seen the messages behind them, so I was very quiet as I searched the night sky.

The sky that night was very clear, without a cloud to be seen. “I saw two shooting stars,” I said with a burst of excitement. “I was on the front stoop a few nights ago and I saw one and then another, in the stars above our house. I made two good wishes. Mum said I must be very lucky to see two in one night. I had never seen one before. They were not over our house but more over Kevin Bunker’s,” I explained.

“Was that on Thursday night? Because if so, I saw them too,” my grandpa replied.

“But you weren’t at our place. These were in the stars over our place. In the city.”

“No, I was here. On the farm. I was coming in from the barn. And out of the corner of my eye I saw them in the sky above the house. They were very bright because I could see them even though I was looking towards the house and the light beside the shed. I saw them too. We both saw the same stars.”

Now totally confused I tried to explain, “No, but, but these were in the stars over our house, our neighbourhood, not in the stars over the farm.”

“Spencer, they are the same stars.”

“What do you mean? There are so many stars over the farm. The sky is so big. There are not as many stars over our street. They are not as bright. There are not as many. They are different stars.”

“It just looks like there are more stars over the farm and that they are brighter because there are not as many street lights blocking your view out here. There is only the light at the shed and you can’t really even see the lights from the other farms because of how far away they are,” he explained. “We both saw the same stars. We both wished on the same stars. We all share the same sky. We are all the same. Part of what makes us all alike is we share the same planet. We all share the same sky and stars. We are all the same.”

I became quiet and stared up at the beautiful night sky. I thought about what he said and thought how much there is to learn when you are only four. I remember tears welling up in my eyes and thinking that I wasn’t quite sure why they were there, but that it must mean something important. I didn’t feel sad and they weren’t happy tears. Something had just happened and I could tell it was important to remember. I felt a little confused, lost and excited. I think I was getting the messages behind the stars.
PLATE 42
FREAK SHOW: (detail) The words under the stars.

PLATE 43
FREAK SHOW: (detail) The words under the stars.

PLATE 44
FREAK SHOW: (detail) Stars.

PLATE 45
FREAK SHOW: (detail) Stars on tent ceiling.
“In a celebratory act I finished the tent by writing the words that were most relevant to my research on its canvas roof and then sewed a fragment of one of my childhood Christmas tree light reflectors over top of each word. Once the tent was erected and the lights inside turned on, these fragments became private messages of struggle, hope, and pride, flickering like stars in the night sky. The created stars now held the words like secrets imbedded in the tent.

While writing the narrative about the relationship between myself and my grandfather, I remembered how when laying on my back staring up into the sky he would quiet me and tell me to look for the messages behind the stars.

It was not until I was editing that story that I put these two notions together and realized that in making this project I had written the messages of survival and joy that he had assured me were right behind the stars of the night sky.”

(Personal reflection about painting the tent and writing the narratives and their connection to experiential learning. August 8, 2012)
When I began this doctoral research project I had some fairly simple goals: I was searching for missing elements of gay history, I wished to change the narratives told about the sexual and gender minority community, and I wanted to add to Arts-informed and Autoethnographic methodologies. After a few years and what feels like a lifetime of learning later, I find myself with similar but more refined goals.

I came to realize that the pieces of sexual and gender minority history I was looking for, those that are not framed by struggles for equity in issues of basic human rights or confrontations with layers of homophobia, but rather, the history that tells the stories of our lives as we see them, are just beginning to be told and written. Because of this doctoral research I am often invited to speak to audiences of sexual and gender minority youth and through telling my stories of my history, they are prompted to tell theirs. Almost as frequently I am invited to address groups who are struggling to come to terms with their own homophobias, and in telling my stories to these communities, facts, figures, and statistics fall away and discourses around the commonality of humans arise. Most people have knowledge of discrimination, but fewer have thought through the human qualities of all who are involved. They are stuck in the place of us versus them. The viewers better know themselves and lessens the distance between sexual and gender minority people and the greater population. The viewers better know themselves and others (Karpiak, 2008).

With each exhibition of the tent audiences engage with the narratives that wrap around them and then tell their own stories to those they are sharing the viewing experience with. This subtly lessens the distance between sexual and gender minority people and the greater population. The viewers better know themselves and others (Karpiak, 2008).

With each telling of my stories and/or viewing of the tent and the subsequent sharing of others’ narratives, the discourse which wrapped around the sexual and gender minority community shifts and becomes more reflective of our lives. I am not alone in this work. Artists such as Kate Reid, Rae Spoon, and Ivan e coyote name only a few, all share narratives of the tragedies and struggles of their own lives and stories of how people perceived them, while at the same time trying to disentangle those stories from how they see themselves. With the telling of these latter narratives they leave lasting impressions on their audiences. Organizations such as Camp fyrefly provide spaces, recourses, and skills so new generations of sexual and gender minority youth can and will tell their stories of resistance, resilience, and possibility. In hearing them tell their stories I realize how different they sound to my own. The narratives being told about my community and the discourse through which we imagine ourselves are indeed changing.

Combining Arts-informed and Autoethnographic methodologies allowed for deeper information gathering than if I employed more traditional research methods. Exploring the autobiographical narratives through lenses that allowed me to not only to see details and find themes that I had not earlier comprehended, but also made it possible for me to explore and unravel how they shaped my identity. Through a critical analysis of these details I was better able to make sense of my own narratives. Utilizing the process of painting, not for aesthetic reasons, but so that through mark making I might better understand what I was researching, allowed me to move past the barriers of language. Images were created so that I might better see what I was considering and so that an audience could view the results not as definitive answers but rather as multiple possibilities.

The synchronicity of combining these methodologies both advances how they might be used in future and allows for the reader/viewer to be more actively engaged with the findings of the research. Though the narratives and images are more powerful lenses to see into the community than simply exploring facts, more importantly, they are retelling stories that earlier in my life I was not able to tell. This process will allow me to be more present and truthful in the future work this research enables.

This research positions me as an educator in an art and design university teaching classes around issues of subject matter as well as methodological considerations. It takes me away from teaching techniques. It establishes me as a researcher who uses the process of painting as a means of inquiry. I am and hope to continue teaching around issues of identity, equity, and art for social change. Although art and design universities focus on the aesthetic, more contemporary art and design is self-reflexive and concerned with how it can better the world in which it exists. Core courses in these institutions focus on contemporary issues in art today and ethical and sustainable design. Narratives are a way of making sense of the world. If students explore their own and others’ narratives in these courses they begin to find commonalities that make them automatically consider both ethics in design and contemporary issues in art. They feel less confronted by errors or omissions they have previously made and are better able to shift their thinking and studio production to be reflective of these changes. This is where my own studio and story telling processes combine with my teaching practice.

Looking back on this research I am most interested in how the barriers between the conversations that took place in my studio, the art production and exhibition, and the subsequent telling and writing of the narratives seem to meld. I believe the combination of the three is most likely the answer and reflective of the fluidity of queer identity.

I have further questions around creating bibliographies that cite moments of understanding or epiphanies and would like to explore these ideas in future research. I want to continue to expand my practice of telling stories and prompting others to tell theirs in areas of human rights and equity. I will conduct further Arts-informed and Autoethnographic research that will explore sexual orientation on a deeper level. I am aware that this doctoral research explores how I built my fearless identity and this helped me navigate the homophobia in my world but that my subsequent research needs to go further in considering the ways this is part of my queer identity.

This research will add to the growing body of queer theory, fiction, and non-fiction whose central themes are of resistance, resilience, and possibility building. In my lifetime I have seen great advancements in rights for sexual and gender minority people in Canada. These advancements are not consistent globally. I hope this research adds to this momentum. I also hope this research becomes obsolete as other, newer understandings of what it means to be queer come about through research, telling stories, and living our lives.
The bibliography is divided into five sections reflecting the areas from which this research draws influence. The review of literature was ongoing, as is common to arts-informed research and, though many texts were explored, not all were cited in this thesis. Works from which citations were made are marked with an * asterisk.

The Methodologies and Ways of Knowing section refers to works, which were considered in developing and understanding the methodologies best suited to this research. Many of these texts deepened my understandings of ways of knowing.

The Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity section provides the bibliography of those works considered in understanding human rights, differing sexual orientations, and the accompanying politics, and issues of identity.

The Narratives section contains a selection from the over 200 works of fiction which were read so I might understand and enhance the tone my narratives should take. These texts contain works of sexual and gender minority youth stories, Canadian narratives and, in a few cases, classic literature. Also in this section there are poetry or prose as well as music, created by activists working on issues of human rights for sexual and gender minority communities like myself.

The Art section refers to visual art theories and practices as well as ways of reading works of art. In some cases it also provides some catalogues of exhibitions which were significant in the writing of this artist’s catalogue and painting the tent.

**METHODOLOGIES AND WAYS OF KNOWING**


SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY


Greene, R. J. (2012). *This high school has closets*. Vancouver, BC: Icon Empire Press.


Kilbourn, J. (2001). *And I was not afraid: Writings by local queer youth*. Peterborough, ON: Rainbow Youth Coalition.


**GENDER MINORITY, AND CULTURAL HISTORY**


**ART**


