LOVE AS INQUIRY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STORY ABOUT MY ENGAGEMENT WITH ARTS-INFORMED RESEARCH

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Abstract: Four years ago, I was invited to take on the position of managing editor for *Art/Research International (ARI)*. As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of *ARI*, I seek to honour the voices that have informed my own engagement with arts-informed research. As an artful researcher, who is comparatively new to the academy, I wish to centre the importance of looking back in order to look forward. In this article, I slow down and trace my own steps. I honour the guidance that I received having Dr. Ardra Cole as my doctoral supervisor. I detail my process conceptualizing and defending an autoethnographic dissertation containing a collection of stories about coming out as queer later in life. I offer one of the stories from my dissertation, and reflect on how my own work was informed by the question posed by Pauline Sameshima and Carl Leggo (2013), "what does love have to do with education?" (p. 90).

Keywords: arts-informed research; autoethnography; love; social justice; story slam

The other day a colleague told me that he met, face to face, several students he taught in an online graduate course. They were so thrilled to meet him in person that he was asked to pose for several photos.

“He looks just like a movie star!” one student exclaimed.

Similarly, I once had a student draw a picture of me on the front of a card. The likeness is good—I am depicted teaching in my bright pink suit. Each student in the course signed the card, and it was presented to me at the end of the term. The card now sits, framed, on my bookshelf. It is funny to reflect on these moments of celebration, the ones that occur somewhat outside of the context of teaching, but still adjacent to one’s practice. Yet, I can relate to the awe that students sometimes display because I have felt that same feeling myself. It arises, for me, when I read work that resonates deeply with my poetic soul. The first time I encountered Lorri Neilsen’s (2002) article, *Learning from the Liminal: Fiction as Knowledge*, I finally had the language to share my belief in the necessity of story. Over two decades ago, Lorri articulated the importance of honouring storytelling in research contexts:

> The shift in educational inquiry marked by alternative forms of representation, including the literary arts, is a shift as much ontological as it is epistemological. Fiction is knowledge. Poetry is knowledge. The arts are ways of knowing. The lingering belief that knowledge is and must be proof, proposition, muscle for prediction and control is bound inextricably with our Western belief in the individual as a separate, autonomous being. It is bound inextricably with our need to tame the earth and its creatures, and it is bound inextricably with our fear of the unknown. (Neilsen, 2002, p. 208)

I have loved writing since grade two when Mrs. Hanrahan crafted blank books with wallpaper covers for us to fill with stories, but, at the beginning of my career as an educational researcher, educator, and writer, I needed words like Lorri’s to help me explain to others why this type of work is vital. Researchers who use the arts as and/or within the research process are fortunate to have such lyrical voices to build their own words upon. At the beginning of my doctoral studies, I held a special place in my heart for the work of Maxine Greene. My copy of *Releasing the Imagination* (1995) has an astounding number of sticky notes clinging to its pages. Like Lorri, Maxine echoes the capacity of the arts to offer openings: “Originating in the lived lives of endlessly diverse human beings, paintings and plays and poems and musical pieces affect experience in ways that are not susceptible to calculation and control (Greene, 1980, p. 316).

A number of years into my own doctoral studies, I nervously accepted the position of managing editor for *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal (ARI)*. The invitation marked an opportunity to help share and advance artful research

from around the world, in various disciplines. We are now celebrating the tenth anniversary of the journal. As we reached out to those whose work was foundational in terms of advancing the arts within the research process, I was once again revisited by the familiar feeling of reverence. I feel somewhat wonderstruck to have my words published alongside those who have inspired so many, including myself. In my own writing and teaching, I try to illuminate the need to step into what has been unsaid, and what has remained unknown. If we fail to explore that which has historically been silenced, we will also fail to make change in a world that so desperately needs a shift toward justice.

In this article, I slow down and trace my own steps. I honour the guidance that I received having Dr. Ardra Cole as my doctoral supervisor. I detail my process conceptualizing and defending an autoethnographic dissertation containing a collection of stories about coming out as queer later in life. I offer one of the stories from my dissertation, and reflect on how my own work was informed by the question posed by Pauline Sameshima and Carl Leggo (2013), “what does love have to do with education?” (p. 90).

A Driving Vignette

I was recently driving in my car listening to a podcast. The guest was required to name her hero and, subsequently, a question she might ask the hero. The guest, naturally, selected Dolly Parton.

“Who is your hero?” a friend of mine asked in response to my recounting of the episode. Again, I was driving. This time toward the beach with my friend and my daughter. I looked out at the August trees.

“I feel like it’s Ardra,” I said.

My eyes immediately filled with tears thinking about all the years that slipped past since I was first introduced to Ardra, my PhD supervisor, in 2018.

“Don’t cry and drive!” my friend said.

“I am not crying!” I lied.

Ardra's Office

When I met Ardra, I had just started reading about artful research. At the time, I did not know that Ardra's work was foundational in terms of paving the way for others to undertake arts-informed research within the field of education. During our initial supervisor/student meetings, I did, however, observe Ardra's flair for clothing. As a PhD student with a penchant for sequined blazers, I felt a sense of belonging while looking at Ardra's whimsical earrings. Creativity, I observed, did not have to be separate from the ways in which we showed up in the world. A red leather boot seemed rather fitting for a "scholartist" like Ardra to wear.

Ardra's office, at Mount Saint Vincent University, had windows overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Her bookshelves were lined with texts that would illuminate my understanding of what was possible for doctoral students undertaking research informed by the arts. Before entering Ardra's office, I had no idea that a suitcase filled with objects could be submitted as a doctoral dissertation (Loi, 2008). Nor did I ever imagine that a full-sized painted circus tent could accompany a dissertation written in the form of an artist's catalogue (Harrison, 2014). I also did not know that a dissertation could make one hungry until Ardra showed me the work of Teresa Luciani (2006), a PhD student who included Italian recipes, images, and autoethnographic stories in her research.

As I learned from Ardra and the many texts on her bookshelf, it was not just the form of the work that was important, it was also the call to reach audiences outside of the academy, and the drive to design research with the potential to create meaningful social change. As Ardra and Gary Knowles succulently put it:

> Arts-informed research, with one of its main goals of accessibility (and breadth of audience), is an attempt to acknowledge individuals in societies as knowledge makers engaged in the act of knowledge advancement. Tied to moral purpose, it is also an explicit attempt to make a difference through research, not only in the lives of ordinary citizens but also in the thinking and decisions of policymakers, politicians, legislators, and other key decision makers. (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 60)

As a lifelong writer at the outset of my doctoral studies, I knew that I wanted my research to be exploratory and creative in nature, but I had yet to understand the wider sociocultural issues that might be illuminated by my own storytelling. I remained open to the possibility of anything informing my research—from the work of contemporary Indigenous artist, Kent Monkman, to the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke.

Whenever I had a meeting with Ardra to discuss my progress in the program, I would appear in her office with stacks of books—usually fifteen at a time—borrowed from the university library. It was quite heavy, but the experience of carrying all those books around felt significant. It felt as if the books were, somehow, an extension of me. I was beginning to discover the importance of embodied learning, especially in relation to arts-informed approaches. As Celeste Snowber (2012) suggests, “We do not have bodies; we *are* bodies” (p. 55).

One day during the fall term, I felt deeply moved by a passage Rilke had written to a younger poet. Of course, I happened to be carrying around a copy of *Letters to a Young Poet* (Rilke, 1875/1984) when I visited Ardra’s office for a supervisory meeting. I am unsure of why I felt so compelled to read a passage aloud. Perhaps it was an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which I was striving to embrace the unknown as my research unfolded. I recited the following passage with great excitement:

> I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (p. 34)

While reading the passage, I was not imagining that my own hero had her own hero, but I did notice that Ardra’s eyes became watery as I read Rilke aloud. She then explained that she had offered the same passage during her mentor’s funeral. The beauty of art, of course, is that it illuminates our interconnectedness. That day, the words of a poet introduced me to the words of another poet—one whose approach would fundamentally inform the process of my own dissertation.

Just as Ardra has worked with many students who, like me, would like to honour her supervision guided by care, curiosity, and creativity, Carl Leggo was also a revered mentor to many artful researchers. Both Ardra and Carl took up Elliot Eisner’s (1981) invitation for educational researchers to resist the urge to locate concrete answers because “truth implies singularity and monopoly. Meaning implies relativism and diversity” (p. 9). Carl’s work (Leggo, 2012) guided me toward acknowledging the complexity of both research and life. He suggests:

> I write poetry because poetry honours the fragmentary, and my life always feels like it is full of shards, slivers, snippets, and splinters, reflecting, refracting, and inflecting experiences of past, present, and future. The lasting lesson of poetry is that linguistically (and autobiographically) the rheme that informs theme is never definitive, but always infinitive. (p. 153)

Inspired by the idea of seeking rather than finding, I wrote poetry and undertook letter writing (Flemming, 2020; Flemming, 2022) as research methods during the early stages of my PhD studies. My daughter, Matilda, was born six sleepless weeks before my first PhD course began. There is a photo of baby Matilda on a blanket beside a copy of John Dewey's *Experience and Education*. Inspired by poetic researchers like Carl Leggo, I knew that it was possible to collapse the imaginary division between who I was as a researcher, and who I was as a mother, educator, writer, swimmer in oceans, wearer of sequins, and reader of countless memoirs. Like Laurel Richardson (2018), I sought to "follow my own lines of flight" (p. 661) with my doctoral research. The letters were written to my then-baby daughter, exploring my lifelong commitment to unlearning. I was trying to work through the ways in which I could reconcile life's struggles with all the advantages supplied to me through my intersectional identity markers. As a White, educated, cis-gender, able-bodied woman from a middle-class economic background, I knew privilege ran deep. In her memoir-like book, *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson (2015) writes,

> I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth. I would also like to cop easily to my abundant privilege—except that the notion of privilege as something to which one could 'easily cop,' as in 'cop to once and be done with,' is ridiculous. Privilege *saturates*, privilege *structures*. (p. 97)

I started to recognize that my own vulnerability was a manifestation of privilege. I could cry freely in front of professors on my PhD committee, or even while facilitating a course, because I was protected by my Whiteness. My identity was not something I had to carefully construct. I began to explore these ideas with students in my facilitation of master's level and B.Ed. courses within the field of education. Much like Carl, "I am committed to exploring the intersections between creative practice and critical pedagogy, and creative pedagogy and critical practice" (Leggo, 2012, p. 146).

I agree with bell hooks (2010) about the importance of building community in the classroom through the sharing of stories. Taking inspiration from the New York based non-profit group, The Moth (Bowles et al., 2023), I began to hold story slams in my graduate level courses. The Moth story slams have "a simple premise: people telling true stories on stage—no notes, just them and the mic" (Gentry, 2019, p. 15). Similarly, in my courses, each storyteller delivers their oral story, standing at the front of the classroom, without notes. In one particular course, the theme of our story slam was critical transformation; therefore, students were asked to tell a story about a moment that transformed their view of equity, diversity, and inclusion. As bell hooks (2010) suggests, "When students learn about one another through the sharing of experience, a foundation for learning in community can emerge" (p. 56). This assignment differs

greatly from written assignments as telling an oral story is an act of courage. In many cases, storytellers can cathartically reclaim a moment of great struggle by re-storying the event from their own perspective. Learning is not solely located in the telling, it also arises through the practice of actively listening. As McCann et al. (2019) assert, “listening serves as a powerful means of learning and connecting emotionally with others” (p. 477).

To extend the idea of learning in community, I had students invite their friends and family members to the story slam in my most recent critical reading course, which took place during our final session together. Having parents, friends, and children in the audience imbued the story slam with another layer of meaning. That course, in particular, was special because I, as the facilitator, was the only White person in the classroom. During the story slam, Black, Korean, Indian and bi-racial students offered powerful stories about moments they faced racism—both in educational contexts and in public spaces. After reflecting on a hurtful experience during Black History Month in her elementary school days—an experience wherein the teacher centred Whiteness in a way that threatened to erase her bi-racial identity—a student wrote (shared with permission):

> Ultimately, sharing my story became more than an assignment—a deeply personal act of reflection and reclamation. Revisiting a childhood moment that once left me feeling confused and diminished allowed me to see its broader implications through the lens of critical literacy. The readings and class discussions, particularly the reading groups, helped me recognize that my experience was not isolated, but part of a broader pattern in how education often mishandles conversations around race and identity. Through class readings, discussions, and sharing my story aloud, I was able to name what happened, reflect on its emotional toll, and transform it into a source of growth. (personal communication, 15 May 2025)

Racism flourishes in spaces where people refuse to acknowledge injustice. It was, therefore, especially meaningful to see the students’ young children in the audience during our story slam, bearing witness to their parents’ reclaiming of experience. It was joyful to witness the students’ children as we applauded each storyteller by clapping and cheering and, also, as we shared tears together.

“This is her first time in a university!” one man in the audience said, pointing to his five-year-old daughter. I hope her visit to the university might make the thought of higher education less intimidating, should she wish to apply, someday far off into the future.

In all of my courses, I have invited students to explore social justice issues via the creation of artful representations, in various forms. One student explored how privilege can exist alongside of economic disparity through the creation of a lump of coal, a rock painted black with diamonds on one side—a reference to his positionality as a descendent of coal miners. He spoke about growing up with economic constraints but, at the same time, experiencing privilege as a White male. Another student baked a large cake with iced details representing both the unearned privilege and the challenges arising from her varied intersectional identity markers. The inside of the caked was dyed the colours of the bi-sexual flag to represent how she often feels like a queer imposter as a bi-sexual woman married to a man. Another student cast her face in plaster and positioned it off-centre within a white frame to show how she is always on the margins as a Black woman within the academy. Yet, ultimately her work celebrated Blackness—represented by a fracture in the white frame and the broken chains she positioned around the likeness of her face. Others have delivered spoken word poems, presented paintings, embroidery, sang or played music, crafted terrariums, wood carvings, and other forms, in order to explore the narratives we must learn and unlearn throughout our lives. Various students have even included their children and partners in the creation of their artful representations.

I am honoured that, through art, I am continually invited into the lived experiences of adult learners. In a recent online course, several students expressed thanks to me for creating space for the tears that often accompany the vulnerable kind of sharing to which artful representations give rise. In response, I showed students a magnet given to me by a friend. The magnet reads, “Frequent Crier Program: Lifetime Member.” Luckily, I have story, not as an antidote to tears, but as a form of reasoning for their existence. As Thomas King (2008) suggests, stories are medicine.

With my love for story, perhaps it should have been obvious, but I eventually came to know that I wanted to undertake autoethnographic methodology in my own doctoral research.

Love as Inquiry

I did not always know how I would structure the autoethnographic writing in my dissertation. One morning, years into my doctoral research, I jumped out of bed and wrote down, “Love as Inquiry!”

Prior to that moment of insight, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, I spent a lot of time in the deserted university library. When the library first reopened in 2020, I was the only person there most days, aside from the janitors and the librarians. The library itself

was largely in darkness, rather eerily, because there was no one was around to set off the motion sensor lights. I was using writing *as* process and writing *to* process. Around this time, I had separated from my husband (who remains one of my best friends), found out that my daughter is on the autism spectrum, and I also came out as queer. When my coming out was not accepted by those closest to me, places and spaces held a different weight. I needed to feel safe and secure somewhere. Yet, the pandemic had shown me that everything *can* drastically shift, so that is why I finally faced a truth about myself that I had been shoving down my whole life.

I gradually came to understand that, at the heart of things, my research centred around various manifestations of love. In using love as both process and product, I aimed to help explore the question posed by Pauline Sameshima and Carl Leggo (2013), "What does love have to do with education?" (p. 90).

Many writers and educators before me have written about the idea of love as a framework for research and teaching. In my own research, and in my teaching practice, I see love as a sort of foundation—as an unsaid presence during writing, course-planning, and class discussions. I agree with Pauline and Carl , who suggest that love is "an epistemology, a way of seeing the world, a way for organizing research, a way for teaching, a way for learning, a way for living" (p. 90).

I was also reminded that Ardra and Maura MacIntyre used love as a framework in their arts-informed research on caregiving and Alzheimer's disease (2006):

> Love is the central defining concept and construct of our work. We use 'love' in the broadest and most inclusive sense—as concept, phenomenon, structure of experience, theoretical construct, emotion. For us love, in all its meanings and manifestations, is about connection. (p. 62)

While I knew that my dissertation (Flemming, 2024) would contain love as both process and product, I needed to find a tangible way to structure my writing. Inspired by the doctoral work of Douglas Gosse (2005), I divided the dissertation into two parts. Part One contains a series of autoethnographic stories about my coming out as queer later in life. The collection of stories is meant to be disruptive. I believe that stories have the power to enable people to recognize the need for change, through an honouring of diversity, and an evocation of emotion. In this way, stories can unhinge narratives that may appear to be fixed, expanding our capacity for loving, learning, and living authentically. While the stories perform as sites for research, they also provide a rendering of the many facets of love—losing love, finding love, maternal love, romantic love, and, perhaps, above all, the task of recognizing one's worthiness of love.

Part Two of the dissertation serves as contextualization for this type of autoethnographic storytelling. Although the dissertation is divided into two sections, the elements in both parts are deeply intertwined. Stories as research must grow and reach outside of the self to interrogate wider sociocultural issues. As Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest, “evocative autoethnographers carry the burden of making meaning out of all the stuff of memory and experience. We theorize by telling stories that put meanings in motion where they can be used, discussed, debated, and prolonged” (p. 117). Just as the two parts of my dissertation are connected, I see my teaching in the field of education as guiding and informing my research. When I teach, or think about, the social and cultural contexts of learning, I work to deliberately honour and celebrate the voices of those who have been historically misrepresented. Social justice discussions are not inherently negative—much like storytelling, critical thinking provides us with pathways toward joy, community, and connection. Difference should be celebrated.

As I conceptualized Part Two of the dissertation, I came to see love as a force for forward movement. In some ways, this second half of my dissertation is a love letter to those who helped birth the creation of a new family for me. Many members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community struggle, in many ways, to be themselves. I wanted to illuminate the challenges that still exist for those who do not find acceptance in the most intimate spaces—the places they call home.

Structure-wise, in Part Two I elaborate on why stories are important to research, before sharing a series of research-framing questions which I developed early on during my doctoral work, and aimed to explore as my studies progressed. I elected to return to those questions as a means of offering structure to the second section of the dissertation, but also, importantly, as a means of self-reflection. As I read a variety of completed dissertations during the course of my own PhD studies, I wanted to craft research with the potential to help other students navigate autoethnographic writing and reflection. I, therefore, also view this section as a hand-holding gesture for new researchers, to allow for a glimpse into the process of crafting a dissertation—all the years of thinking, and writing, and imagining, that create the final product. In Part Two, I also elaborate on my experience and process with regard to autoethnographic ethics. To conclude, I offer a series of questions for those who are curious about autoethnographic writing and the many considerations that accompany this type of methodology. I view the questions as a means of offering others the type of generative encouragement and support that I received having Ardra as my supervisor.

A Story

At one point, tasked with the objective of defending my dissertation proposal, Ardra suggested I read a story to the PhD committee, as a means of displaying my creative intent. I have already mentioned Ardra's wardrobe, so it seems fitting here, to offer a glimpse into mine. The following is a story from the autoethnographic collection within my dissertation.

Clothing

We were silently standing beside my grandmother's casket in the funeral home when I said, "She made a great blueberry pie."

"Her black forest cake was the best," my aunt added.

After the viewing, when we were back in the car, I remembered that I'd written about my other grandmother's cherry cheesecake in the eulogy I delivered during her funeral.

"I don't have a dessert," I told Jack, "What will people say when I die? That I did a PhD?"

"They would say you were stylish," he said.

* * *

"I love this whole power suit thing you have going on here. OH MY GOD, the shoes!"

A young man working at the bookstore clasped his hands in front of his chest the other day when he saw my robin's egg blue patent leather brogues. They went well with the tailored teal suit I happened to be wearing.

"Every single place you go, someone compliments you," Jack said when we first started dating. "You go for Chinese and the waitress likes your necklace, you go for a walk and someone on the street likes your coat, you go to the movies and the girl selling tickets likes your dress. What's it like to be complimented everywhere you go?"

"I don't know," I remember saying.

The truth is, it's not bad.

My interest in fashion started in junior high, at which time I was voted "Fashion plate of St. Agnes."

In high school, my English teacher beckoned me over to his desk one day and said that I reminded him of Sophia Loren. A paper bag looks more like Sophia Loren than I do. I can only assume the compliment had something to do with the way my clothing helped me carry myself. If a timid teenager can somehow resemble an Italian bombshell, there is a lot to be said for a well-thought-out ensemble. For a brief stint in grade ten, I took to wearing my grandmother's white bellbottoms from the seventies. Whereas I was always shy, my clothing never was.

In undergrad, it wasn't uncommon for someone to ask whether I was from New York. It thrilled me a bit to think that my style of dress exuded the excitement of a place much bigger and better. Even now, strangers in Halifax often ask, "Where are you visiting from?"

When I lived in Montreal, friends would rush over to my closet just to take a look, as if it were a museum—which, in some ways, I suppose it was. A collection of selves.

"How does she know which shoes to wear?" a friend's boyfriend asked when he saw a photo of my bookshelf of heels.

After graduate school, the famed fashion journalist Jeanne Becker came to my apartment with a camera crew, and my closet was broadcast all across the country. The profile of me as a "stylish Canadian" aired on daytime television. The idea of the segment was to present viewers with the opposite of a makeover by featuring someone who didn't need one. In one scene, I hold up a nautical-looking coat, navy with gold buttons, and tell Jeanne that I was reading *Moby Dick* when I bought it. When she pulls out a dress with a tulle ballerina's tutu on the bottom, I tell her, "Well, if it's never actually *in style*, then it can never go *out of style*!"

"Why don't you have a fashion blog?" people have often asked. I try to explain that it isn't words about clothing that I find so enticing; it's the physical objects themselves. The colours, the feel of different textures, the way you can play. In a museum, I will spend hours reading the art labels, getting the stories behind the artists and the subjects of each painting, eventually having to remind myself to actually look at the art. But with fashion magazines, I gravitate toward the photographs.

At one point, I contemplated studying fashion history.

"All women like fashion," my father proclaimed dismissively.

I always felt a bit ashamed by my interest in clothing. The frivolity of it.

When I first came out as a lesbian, Lena suggested that it might take me some time to figure out how I want to be in the world. While she was categorically right in terms of the work it would take for me to probe who I am, I assured her that I wouldn't be changing my style of dress in order to suit some preconceived notion of what a lesbian should look like. Yet, almost a year later, when I found myself going on a date with Parker and her queer friends, I stood in the mirror and wondered whether my dress looked too feminine. When I asked Parker how she would describe her style, she said, "I dress like a sixteen-year-old boy who hasn't quite got it together."

People make assumptions tied to gender based on clothing. But, as Jenn Shapland (2020) notes, "Clothes offer a way to try on different identities, different manifestations of selfhood. They express more than gender, certainly more than binary gender, and more than sexuality, too" (p. 114).

My two idols when it comes to style are Tom Wolfe and Oscar Wilde. Their outsides seem as artistic, fanciful, and extravagant as the insides of their books. Once, I got to see Tom Wolfe read in Boston during a conference on narrative non-fiction, and he wore a three-piece white suit with a baby blue pocket square and a matching blue dress shirt with a wide seventies collar. I am not the only writer who jumbles up writing and wardrobe. Heidi Julavits (2014) shares, "Even when I was very young, I knew I wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to be stylish, because to be stylish was to be poised on the precipice between reality and fiction" (Julavits & Shapton, 2014, p. 6).

When I was a young girl, the first novel I read was *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1907). As I tumbled down the rabbit hole along with Alice, the strange vividness of Wonderland surrounded me as if I had slipped from black and white into technicolour. While I was concerned about the plight of Alice, the nonsensical world—at once whimsical and terrifying—was what truly enchanted me. It was the first time I was aware of this link between story and style. I wanted to be the Queen of Hearts. I wanted to own the Cheshire Cat. And I wanted to have tea with the Mad Hatter. I think what I love is how when you are reading a good story, there is a sense of possibility—an *anything could happen* feeling—and this is the feeling you sometimes have in a small-town vintage shop, or as a child in your mother's closet. In other words, a good story can conjure up the feeling that you are somehow, in that moment, connected to all the important tales that have ever been told; and when you are wearing just the right thing, you can feel as if you're part of the wider world made up of all the

people who have lived throughout time, something bigger than just yourself moving through space.

* * *

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (2020) writes, “Sometimes, when you don’t write about something, it goes away. And sometimes, when you don’t write about something, it never goes away” (p. 43).

One summer evening when my friend Sloane and I were thirteen, we stood on the edge of a park, near the road, and counted how many men in passing cars honked at us. We wore ice-cream-coloured tube tops and denim short shorts. At the time, it felt like power. It seemed as if we were orchestrating the symphony of honks. Another time, in a green mini skirt, I caused a traffic accident. This happened when a car stopped to allow me to cross the street, and a man on a motorcycle ran into the back of the car because he was staring at me. *Let them look!* I thought triumphantly. But it felt less like power when a man grabbed my ass one time as I walked out of a movie theatre wearing black velvet pants. And another time, when I was jogging home from the gym in my workout wear, a man popped out of the bushes, pretending to ask for directions, but then exposing himself to me. As Sara Ahmed (2017) writes,

> Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight. The past becomes heavy. We all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen; and how we are not seen. (p. 23)

I suppose I am thinking about this now because in a heterosexual world, you learn from a young age to associate the way you dress with desire. Now, I feel differently moving through the world because I know that I am not attempting to attract the male gaze. Even if, on the outside, this is just a secret I keep with myself.

Fashion & Embodied Learning

Through my role as managing editor of *ARI*, I have learned about the value of mentorship in artful research contexts. As this type of artful research is often, but not always, personal in nature, our mentors can inform the work in, sometimes subtle, sometimes large ways. In the story above, I mention casting off my own interest in fashion as frivolous, however, Ardra’s care and precision with dress suggested otherwise. Perhaps I would not have attempted to include a sartorial story in my work if it was not for Ardra’s story, *The Christmas Doll* (2004), within which she both honours

and critiques the meaning behind her mother's propensity for stylish attire. Ardra's story of her mother explores the idea of women using clothing as cultural capital. Through Ardra's eyes, we encounter the potential dangers of masking one's truth in carefully constructed façade, accompanied by a tender tribute to her mother's meticulousness. At the close of the story, Ardra tells a friend that she herself would not retire on a rural island because "fashion possibilities are limited" (p. 16).

Fabric and fashion can be productively disruptive in research contexts. When I taught my first master's level course, I invited Shauna Butterwick and Marilou Carrillo to discuss their community-based research, featuring the creation and execution of political fashion shows. Shauna writes about fashion as a feminist tool. As she suggests, "reconnecting women to their bodies is a radical position, necessary for fighting oppression" (Butterwick, 2017, p. 73). I will always recall an image from one political fashion show featuring a domestic foreign worker wearing a dress made out of calling cards. As described by Shauna:

> One particular dress shocked me. From a distance, it appeared to be an attractive brightly colored form-fitting cocktail dress. Upon closer inspection, and as I listened to the moderator, I saw that hundreds of brightly colored phone cards, each one connected to the other with small metal rings on each corner, was the fabric. The dress was constructed by Filipino domestic workers who had brought the cards to a study circle to show their efforts as domestic migrant workers (under Canada's Live-in Caregiver Program [LCP]) to stay connected with their children and families in the Philippines. The seductive and oppressive aspects of the LCP were symbolized in this creation. As Rosca (2010) points out, the LCP is based on a 'seduction of hope' and an illusory citizenship. (p. 73)

The political fashion shows illuminated the use of the arts to challenge unjust political programs like the LCP. This type of research also serves to legitimize the use of fashion and fabric in research within the field of adult education. As Kathryn Church (2008), in her work on exhibiting as inquiry, suggests, the types of questions prompted by an exploration into embodied learning point to "larger social and political struggles around what counts as knowledge and who counts as a legitimate knower" (p. 424). In one of my recent courses, a student, inspired by Kathryn's research, created her own backyard installation. She hung three pairs of pants on a clothesline—pants of various sizes. In her artist statement, she wrote about hating her thick and sturdy body throughout the many years of her life; yet, in her later years, observing friends with health problems, and attending the funerals of others, she came to accept the steady reliability of her own body. While engaging with the student's work, I was reminded again of Celeste's research on dance and the lived body (2012). As she suggests:

> One cannot live in Western culture and not take the impact of cultural constructs that emphasize what we look like instead of how we experience sensations through our bodies. It is clear that body knowledge has become endangered within the human species, and we are often alienated in our own bodies. The emphasis has been on the outer body as opposed to what I would call, in more phenomenological terms, 'the lived body.' The lived body is the felt body where we make connections to the multiple sensations around and within us. The feel of the wind on the skin, fingers typing at the computer, the pain in the lower back, the joy of one torso swimming, and the tears in the belly all connect us to the lived body. We are creatures of turns and twists, contractions and expanse, gestures and postures, although it feels as if Western culture has forgotten we have hips. (Snowber, 2012, p. 55)

Perhaps part of collapsing the divisions between our researcher selves and our bodily selves involves listening to both our heads and our hearts.

A New Laptop

Recently, my laptop died. It was the computer that accompanied me as I wrote my dissertation, facilitated a graduate level writing group via Zoom, planned and taught my first courses on Collaborate, and moderated online panel discussions—amongst other endeavours, such as writing my first stand-up comedy routine, and composing the speech that I would deliver as I accepted the award of valedictorian during graduation.

It was also the laptop that helped me to meet with Ardra for our weekly *ARI* editorial check-ins via Zoom. As it seems to be the way for women in their early 40's, the computer crash was just one more obstacle in a conglomeration of things going awry. I frantically attempted to turn it on, but, realizing it was a lost cause, I met with Ardra on my phone instead. To my dismay, I could not stop crying for the duration of the Zoom meeting. Ardra patiently assured me that I could keep the laptop, tucked away, as a memento of all it had helped me to accomplish.

In thinking about my emotion surrounding the laptop's demise, I am reminded of Sandra Flood's (2002) assertion that objects,

> like children—are conceived, brought forth, and launched into the world. And like children, objects are not passive in their impact; they come into our lives, changing our habits, provoking emotions, trailing social messages…Objects dictate to us how we relate to them. The high-back wooden dining chair does not permit sprawling. (p. 99)

What types of accommodations did I make with the old laptop? I know there are stories I will tell on the laptop I am using now to write this article, stories that could not have been told on the last one because I was not ready to tell them. Rilke (1984/1875) wrote about living your way into answers; in a sense, the idea is that we have to live our way into our own stories. For example, at the beginning of my studies, I would not have known that I would have a supervisor who would suggest that each PhD defense is a celebration of one's learning. Taking that notion seriously, Ardra wore a beige blazer with a sequin-lined lapel to my dissertation defense. Naturally, I was wearing sequins too.

Returning to the opening of this article, the podcast guest was required to name her hero and an accompanying question she might ask the hero. Lucky for me, I can, and do, often ask Ardra questions. As in arts-informed methodological approaches, the questions and answers are often less important than exploring the complexity of human experience. In many ways, I am still exploring the question, "what does love have to do with education?" (Sameshima & Leggo, 2013, p. 90). Part of the answer has to be found in the connections we make with each other.

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