COLLECTIVE MEMOIR AS PUBLIC PEDAGOGY:
A STUDY OF NARRATIVE, WRITING, AND MEMORY

by

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the ways in which literary practices can be used to generate learning. It is guided by the following research questions:

- How can the processes of writing memoir change our perceptions of the past?
- How can these writing processes be theorized and understood as educational events?

Data are provided by two research groups, one composed of seven older lesbians and one composed of 26 older LGBT individuals known as the Queer Imaging & Riting Kollective for Elders (Quirk-e), an arts-engaged community group with whom I have worked for the last five years. In the first case, practices of close reading, memoir writing, and discussion were conducted, and discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed. In the second, data are provided by the artwork produced by the members of Quirk-e and by my reflections upon my practices as their writer-in-residence. Data are also provided by my own creative compositions, which serve as interludes between the standalone papers that comprise the body of the dissertation. Data are analyzed through critical and literary interpretations, autobiographical and narrative methods, and conceptual inquiry. I conclude that unpacking memories and life experiences by writing memoir can lead to more nuanced understandings of the self and the culture in which it has developed. I also conclude that such learning can be assisted by first paying close attention to specific memories, using processes of association, and then by considering the emergent genres and structures that frame the work as it is revised. Finally, I consider my practices as a public pedagogue in the light of these reflections, to begin to consider how teaching might be usefully considered as a form of artistic composition, with its own emergent genres.
Preface

The extract from my full-length memoir that appears on pages 12–16 is taken from *Love in Good Time*¹ and I am sole author of this work. It is reproduced here with the permission of Michigan State University Press. A version of Chapter 1 also appeared in my article, “Minutes from the Escape Committee: Experiments in Education and Memoir”.² I was sole author of this paper and retain copyright of the work. “Fictional Practices of Everyday Life: Unfixing Identity Through Close Literary Practices”³ was written as part of a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and carried out in collaboration with Dr. Dennis Sumara from the University of Calgary and Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler from Queen’s University (and is reproduced here with their permissions). More details about the design and method of this research program can be found in the paper itself. My authorship on the paper represents 80 percent of its completion. “Privet,”⁴ the short story that appears in Interlude 4 appeared in the same form in the anthology *Countering the Myths*. I am its sole author and retain copyright to the work.

Ethical approval for research conducted with human subjects was given by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia (UBC BREB #Ho7-03016). The actual names of all research participants are included at their request.

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The members of my two research projects—the Owls and the Quirke-s—have been important teachers who have put up with a great deal of highfalutin’ theory as I have progressed through the program. For their patience, wisdom, humour, and art, I thank them.

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P.S. Bella and Cricket—I’m sorry I was in my study so many times when you wanted to play. I will try to do better.
To Joy
INTRODUCTION

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man—let me offer you a definition—is a story telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right. Even in his last moments, it’s said, in the split seconds of a fatal fall—or when he’s about to drown, he sees, passing before him, the story of his whole life.

―Swift, Waterland

I entered the PhD program at UBC after working for three decades as a teacher, a professional writer, and a writer-in-residence in community art programs. These experiences had all convinced me that writing personal stories offers a way to learn about the self and the social and cultural contexts that it inhabits. In entering this research, then, I had three objectives in mind: I wanted to understand the educational potential of writing and reading memoir more fully; I wanted to find ways to unleash this potential more effectively, and I wanted to be in a better position to communicate my findings to others in the field of education.

Two related research projects have informed this dissertation. The first is my work with the Queer Imaging & Writing Kollective for Elders (Quirk-e): an established, ongoing community arts-engaged collective for whom I have served as writer in residence since 2006. This group is composed of 26 old and older LGBT individuals, many of whom have worked with me as their writing teacher on a weekly basis since the group’s inception. The work of the Quirk-e collective, particularly its public stand against homophobia and ageism, has played a key role in bringing me to this doctoral research and has continued to inform it. The second group I worked with was a subset of Quirk-e. Composed of six older lesbians who called themselves the Owls (Older Lesbian Writing Scholars), this group met separately from Quirk-e for a period of almost two years (from September 2007 to June 2009). I brought these women together so that I could
work more closely with individuals as they engaged in reading and writing and so that they might also benefit from this engagement by studying texts and writing their personal stories.

I opted to work with old and older people who identify as gay because their life narratives have been reinscribed over a long period of time by social, cultural, and institutionalized practices around sexual orientation and around age and ageing. I believed that it would be interesting to see whether persistent narratives such as these might shift as they were crafted, revised, and brought into relationship with the stories of others. My research questions were as follows:

• How can the processes of writing memoir change our perceptions of the past?
• How can these writing processes be theorized and understood as educational events?

The first recorded stories are probably the earliest cave paintings, estimated to be 32,000 years old (Clottes, 2003), so narratives have a long history in human culture. They are far-reaching in another sense, in that all of our experiences are predicated by interpretation. Recent brain research suggests that the mind is the last to know things (Freeman, 2003, p. 118). That part of the brain that registers meaning or significance only does so after thousands of automatic and interpretive cognitive events have occurred. In other words, we process events before we are aware of them, making them our own through interpretation and organization – the key processes of fictionalizing. In addition, stories allow us to extend our temporal horizons; as we move backwards and forwards in time, we construct autobiographical, coherent selves (Dautenhahn, 2002, p. 107), or at least the notion of them. As New York Times science journalist Benedict Carey (2007) put it, “seeing oneself as acting in a movie or a play . . . is fundamental to how people work out who they are, and may become” (p. 5). Freudian analyst and educational researcher Deborah Britzman (2006) agrees that our emotional lives provide the “very ground for
thinking itself” (p. 66) and that they precede our intellectual processing of events. These emotional lives are accessed, communicated, and processed through the stories we tell about ourselves.

It is not surprising, then, that from the very beginning of our lives, we have a “readiness to hear and understand stories” (Read & Miller, 1995, p. 143). Chomsky (quoted in Jusczyk, 2000) believes that even a child who is very young “will be able to construct and understand utterances which are quite new, and are, at the same time, acceptable in his language” (p. 21). The only way to account for this, he believes, is to suggest that all normal children acquire “grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity” because human beings are specially designed to formulate hypotheses through the construction of language. As well as serving an important function for the individual in the process of self-making, the telling of stories serves a vital social function in communal acts of constructing societies and cultures, a point I take up as I consider memoir as a public pedagogy. As we gossip about others, or tell each other what happened, we are constructing a shared social world (Dautenhahn, 2002). Indeed, the very meaning of the word communicate is rooted in the Latin word communicare—to build something in common. From the field of art, the famous film maker and story consultant Robert McKee (1997) describes stories as “the dominant cultural force in the world” (p. 59) and traces their evolution through “tens of thousands of years of tales told at fireside, four millennia of the written word, twenty-five hundred years of theatre, a century of film, and eight decades of broadcasting” (p. 79).

Against these celebratory discourses, it is necessary to set some of the more cautionary voices that have emerged from what Denzin (1994) has called the poststructural moment. Famously, Barthes (1977) troubles both author and narrative by questioning the author/ity of
both. The author, he asserts, “is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I” (Barthes, 1977, p. 3). Though writer and text are conjoined in the moment of inscription, their relationship ceases immediately it is over, he believes. The text belongs to its readers and is renewed every time it is read. Rather than seeing text as an original, individual creation, Barthes regards it as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (Barthes, 1977, p. 3). Writing at roughly the same time, Lyotard (1984) also frames the self as elusive, ephemeral, and responsive to its cultural context—the wider story within which it exists. One is always situated, he suggests, in a position or post “through which various kinds of message pass” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 13). In this sense, nothing can be said to be original; we are the products of our culture. This theme is taken up by other commentators, most notably, Foucault (1977), creating a “crisis of representation” (Denzin, 1994, p. 296) that calls into question the ability of language and speech to represent a reality out there and suggests that rather than mirroring or reflecting our experiences, narratives serve to create and police them. No text (whether literary or research) can fully represent the lived experience of the subjects it attempts to describe (Lather, 2007). There is “no account of oneself,” Judith Butler (2001) suggests, “that does not, to some extent, conform to norms that govern the humanly recognizable, or negotiate those terms in some ways, with various risks following from that negotiation” (p. 26). Whenever we try to represent reality, we do so in complicity with norms that cannot be separated from the very language we are using.

These are important concerns. Nonetheless, we continue to use language to represent our situations and sometimes even to change them. Even those who question the authority of language and the value of identifications have also pointed to their inevitability. Throughout his work, Foucault (1977) challenges the notion of human agency by pointing to the power of our
internalized social control, but he also believes in the power of authentic language as a way to care for the self, defining it as fearless speech, or *parrhesia*:

... a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his/her personal relationship to truth, and risks his/her life because she/he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself/herself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses her/his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault, 2001, p. 183)

Sarah Ahmed (1998) reminds us that it can be politically dangerous to deny the notion of authorship and abandon our identifications. When we lose a sense of who is writing, she argues, the author may become invisible, masked in an authority and objectivity that is entirely specious. “The ‘who,’” Ahmed (1998) suggests, “does make a difference . . . as a marker of the specific location from which the subject writes” (p. 125). To do away with labels and personalities, she believes, can mean that we enter into a “universalizing mode of discourse” that “negates the specificity of its own inscription (as a text).” It may be, says novelist and literary theorist David Lodge (2002) that “every time we try to describe the conscious self we misrepresent it because we are trying to fix something that is always changing; but really we have no alternative” (p. 91).

Pinar believes that “to find a ‘real’, definitive, or final self, is the autobiographical version of ‘positivism’” (2004, p. 54), and recent research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience (Abram, 1996; Donald, 2001; Johnson, 2004) suggests that the attempt to do so would be, in any case, a hopeless pursuit. Our experiences of consciousness result from complex relationships with the cultural web, serving to create a “distributed cognitive network” (Donald, 2001, p. 154). Rather than being located in the brain, the mind exists more ambiguously in the biological body and the human and more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). It is distributed across our technologies, among other things, and as Sumara (2002) has suggested, these technologies include the written texts and other works of art that human beings use in the project
of constructing selves and cultures. Self-identity is not something that is just given, but “something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens, 1991, p. 52). Consciousness, then, can be understood as both participating in acts of reading and writing and, at the same time, being altered and transformed by them (Lewis, 2000).

Donald (2001) and Thompson (2007) posit that in order to even create a coherent identity, human beings must be aware of other minds and note that these other minds are also aware of other minds. Since the mind cannot observe its own processes directly, it forms an idea of itself indirectly by observing and recognizing that others have a consciousness too. Though we can never really claim to fully understand what others are feeling, we are constantly engaged in the effort to do so. Zunshine (2006, p. 6) suggests that literature is a useful way to practice and hone our interpretive skills in this regard, as we practice such skills as unpicking the motivations of fictional characters, empathizing with people who are unlike us, and sifting through the information that we receive in order to determine the validity of its sourcing.

Many practising writers have been intuitively aware of this situation for some time and indeed celebrated it. As the poet Lyn Emanuel (1992) has pointed out, the dense, thick texts of poetry and fiction are well placed to communicate some of the subtleties of our quotidian experiences. Since reality is, as she puts it, “provisional, shifting, and molten,” writers must constantly struggle to accurately represent its complexity (p. 256). She sees the act of composition as an attempt to keep up with constant reinterpretations, rather than the inscription of some reality out there. “What is vision,” she asks, but “revisions coming at us at the speed of light?” (Emanuel, 1992, p. 256). The capacity of literature to capture the nuances of the way we think and the way we experience reality has also been investigated by Denzin (1994) and Lodge.
(2002), who point to the ability of novels such as *Ulysses* to reflect the operations of consciousness, even before they were considered and (at least partially) understood by hard science.

Many writers believe that writing is a way to think about and understand some of the subtleties of our own experiences and the experiences of others, offering its own kind of education. Novelist Carol Shields (2002) puts it this way: “on days when I don’t know which foot to put in front of the other, I can type my way toward becoming a conscious being” (p. 109). Annie Dillard (1990), perhaps one of the most prolific and compelling contemporary writers on this topic, also suggests a strong correlation between acts of writing and the processes of thinking. The line of words that emerges from the pen, she suggests, is a tool that opens up a path for the writer to follow (Dillard, 1990, pp. 549–550). In the act of composition, writer and text form an alliance, or short term relationship, in which they are dedicated to enhanced perception:

> The interior life is often stupid. Its egoism blinds it and deafens it; its imagination spins out ignorant tales, fascinated. It fancies that the western wind blows on the Self, and leaves fall at the feet of the Self for a reason, and people are watching. A mind risks real ignorance for the sometimes paltry prize of an imagination enriched. The trick of reason is to get the imagination to seize the actual world—if only from time to time. (Dillard, 1990, p. 290)

It is not so much the business of writing things down that Dillard (1990) describes here, as the business of seeing more clearly by getting past the “ignorant tales” of the ego—a concept that she returns to again and again, pointing out how we see only what we expect to see and thus missing out on “pennies cast broadside by a generous hand” (p. 21). There is a striking similarity between Dillard’s conclusions and those of the poet John Keats, writing over 150 years earlier. He too notes the necessity of what his biographer calls a “heightened receptivity to reality” (Bate, 1963, p. 18). In his letter to his brother about negative capability (Wu, 2005), he notes how important it is to be “in uncertainties, Mysteries and doubts, without any reaching after fact
and reason” (p. 1351). In other words, he suggests that in the process of composition, we may disturb our existing mental constructs and invite new knowledge. As Winterson (1995) has put it (more succinctly than I), “true art challenges the ‘I’ that we are” (p. 15).


These political and cultural considerations are taken up by the feminist scholar Ann Cvetkovich (2003), who posits that, particularly in the queer community, it is important to construct an “archive of feeling”—a body of artistic works which represent (in this instance) lesbian experiences, so that they can be made visible and examinable. Building upon Cvetkovich’s work, Sumara (2002, p. 154) has demonstrated how reading books and stories can open up pedagogical spaces for reflection in schools and other contexts. By using texts as
commonplaces for shared interpretations and discussions, learners can examine their personal and cultural situations. By creating and performing them (Sumara, Davis, Filax, & Walsh, 2006), they may be able to recover experiences lost to insidious trauma and thus come to understand their situations differently. Sumara and his colleagues describe this process as creating archives of resistance, not in the Freudian sense of the word (though a play on that seems intentional). Rather, they argue that the emotions that we have repressed become a mode of resistance to cultural norms, once they have been articulated.

While many of the commentators above agree that our representations of our experiences may surprise and unsettle us, I would like to know more about how and why this might be the case, in other words, the role played by the psyche in such acts of learning (other than as an assumed backdrop). My consideration of this matter has led me to a modest study of consciousness (Juarrero, 1999; Lakoff, 1989; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Zunshine, 2006) and memory (Baxter, 2004; Felman & Laub, 1992; Freeman, 2003) and ultimately, to a consideration of psychoanalytic theory as it can be applied to the processes of reading and writing.

I have been much helped here by Britzman’s work (2006, 2009; Pitt & Britzman, 2003). Her book *Novel Education* (Britzman, 2006) was crucial to my understanding of the similarities between psychoanalytic, educational, and literary projects. Specifically, I have been struck by parallels between the explanations practising writers (Dillard, 1990; Salvio, 2007) make of the powerful processes of recollection and composition and Freud’s work on association, screen memories, imagery, resistance, and interpretation. I believe that further consideration of these parallels can help us to understand why personal writing can help us transform lovely knowledge—the stories we like to tell ourselves and others—into difficult knowledge—that which is furthest from our minds (Britzman, 2006; Freud, 1919, 1999; Phillips, 1998, 2006; Pitt
& Britzman, 2003). As Britzman puts it, “settling on significance is delayed for two reasons: the force of an event is felt before it can be understood, and a current event may take its force and revisions from an earlier scene” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 758). As I interpret this, Britzman believes that certain life events have powerful emotional significance, even though we do not consciously unpack this at the time. These earlier scenes are not forgotten, however, but stored in the unconscious, from whence they continue to exert influence. I believe that in the process of writing memoir, these memories may sometimes be accessed and better understood.

As I return to my stated goals for this research, I am reminded that as well as deepening my understandings of autobiographical methods, I wish to bring them to the project of education, more specifically to my work as a teacher in the field of public education, which I define here as publically funded, open and accessible to the public, acting in the service of community, and meeting in a public place. Just as art inevitably finds genre (even if this genre is invented in the process), so the art of teaching finds it, as it adapts to the contexts and intentions in which it is located. Though writing and reading are often seen as solitary pursuits, they are also, as Sullivan (1994) points out, the product of many collaborations, since they are carried out by beings who are intellectually dependent upon a range of relationships (both real and imagined). In my work as a community artist, I serve not only the needs of the individual, but those of the collective and of its broader publics. I have been helped in this line of thinking by Richard Butt’s work with collaborative biography (Butt, 1983; Butt & Raymond, 1989; Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992) and Davies and Gannon’s (2006) work with collective biography. These authors have pointed out ways to use memoir writing collaboratively and as a method for joint investigation of social constructs.
The papers that follow represent the narrative arc of my own learning through processes of close writing and close reading. As we look back upon our life histories, it sometimes becomes possible to pick out a through line—a plot or direction that has, as Shakespeare put it, shaped our ends, rough hew them how we may. Put another way, we have better access to unconscious desires of which we were unaware of at the time of living. As I have discovered some of these underlying motivations through the act of careful writing, I have felt, on occasion, that this writing has the upper hand, that it is writing me. In this way, though the chapters that follow approach my research questions from different theoretical perspectives, different methods, and even different research data, they pursue the same profound questions. What happens to us when we write? What do we learn? How? And why? Put another way (by Dillard, 1990, p. 69), they ask, “What’s going on here?”

Each paper is preceded by a piece of my own memoir or fiction—creative interludes that offer a different way of thinking through, or about, the topic that follows by opening questions of genre. When the private becomes public, it inevitably must find a shape or structure, and I argue that much can be learned when these structures are closely examined. I have encountered a number of tensions as I have engaged in this work—between academic theory and artistic practice, between teaching and learning, pedagogy and curriculum, the certainty that drives activism and the aporia that admit new understandings. For this reason, my writing self is reluctant to make bald statements about the relationships between the creative works and their academic counterparts. She knows that the writer shows, by taking the reader on an embodied journey, and the academic tells, by making clear, well-formulated, and well-supported statements. The writer complicates. The academic elucidates. My academic self is curious, however, to see what happens when the two have their conversation.
Interlude 1:

Book-Length Memoir

The following extract from my full-length memoir, *Love in Good Time* (Robson, 2003), provides a textual background and counterpoint to the more theoretical piece that follows: “Minutes of the Escape Committee: Experiments in Education and Memoir” (Robson, 2010).

There are important similarities between the two pieces of writing. Both are autobiographical in that they draw upon narrative techniques and are generated by life experiences (indeed, by the same life experiences). There are also, however, some key differences. The first piece of writing has a literary intention, inviting the reader on a virtual experience of events in order to generate empathetic affective understanding of the protagonist. The second uses this life as a starting point for reflection, using Pinar’s (1994, 2004) method of *currere*.

**Extract From *Love in Good Time***

Keeping my face diplomatically blank was one of the many skills I had acquired in the last six years as Deputy Headmistress at Sir Henry Mansfield’s School. Under the cover of my inscrutability, I amused myself with close, critical scrutiny of our Head of Religious Education. Ken Sitchell was an interesting subject—a plump, tweedy young man with a much older, even stouter one lurking deep inside, I suspected, trying to get out. He was the type of pompous misogynist that flourished at Mansfield’s, which had been a boys’ school for 450 years till the girls and I had arrived six years ago to swell the diminishing rolls and sweeten centuries of stale locker-room sweat. Ken was a man who would have been happy as an ambitious vicar in a Jane Austen novel, currying favour and blind to irony. When he wasn’t sending me prissy memos about the length of the senior girls’ skirts, or quoting St. Paul in the staff room, he could be found knee to knee with sensitive 17-year old boys, dispensing sound advice about staying away
from girls, none of whom were worth it. The less sensitive ones ordered catalogues for sex toys in Ken Sitchell’s name, or at least their cruel approximation of it. Brown envelopes addressed to “Mr. Ken Sexual, Headmaster’s House” plopped through the massive wooden door on a regular basis.

Begowned for morning assembly, massive behind his littered desk, Evan cleared his throat to address us. “Well, as you know, I’ve called us here because we need to take some sort of position on the issue of homosexuality.” He mouthed the word as if it were a piece of gristle in a beef sandwich. “One of our new governors has pointed out that we don’t have a written policy.”

Arthur, the other deputy head, shifted uneasily in his chair and glanced surreptitiously at his watch. We all knew he would rather be helping the first years make wrought iron pokers and wooden coat racks than here, talking about homosexuality, a topic which had probably never before entered his kindly, patrician head. To his credit, he enjoyed helping the first-year girls make pokers as much as he did the boys and had accepted me quite happily as his equal, particularly since I did most of the work and covered for him when he went off to the workshop.

I was struck, not for the first time, by the difference between what we all knew and what we pretended to believe, the image and the reality. The headmaster knew that I had lived with Sally for the six years I had been at the school, and never went out with men, although I strategically pretended to be uncertain about the wisdom of instituting a policy which might declare my lifestyle acceptable. I knew that one of our senior teachers—a pillar of the community, with a wry wife and an elderly Labrador and a seat on the magistrate’s bench—had a crush on our school secretary. I knew this because the secretary in question had gone through half a box of Kleenex in my office just yesterday, wondering if it was her fault that the senior
teacher kept begging her to kiss him, because she liked to wear pretty blouses and short skirts. I knew much more than I wanted about what happened in the boys’ boarding houses late at night, to lonely little boys who drank vodka, who bullied and buggered each other in endless Dickensian intrigues. I knew how Roger Wilkinson, Head of Boy’s PE, got drunk with the 1st XI hockey team and confided in them about his sexual exploits, how Bill Jaffey, commanding officer of the Combined Cadet Force called our lone black student the darkie and all women except me dearie.

He had called me that once too, until I had taken him to one side and asked him not to. Clad in what Sally called my Margaret Thatcher uniform—a Jaeger suit and well-made shoes—I was girded with the knowledge that even the most bellicose of our male staff were afraid of women. They didn’t understand how we were put together, our delicacy and deviousness. Every moment of every day I slipped under their guard, around their stiff, warlike posturing, following a few simple rules of battle. I never raised my voice. I never engaged in an argument I couldn’t win, and when I won, I always helped my opponent up, made some small concession, handed him his dignity back in one piece.

Evan glanced at me as I sat impassively at the edge of a leather armchair, my leather Filofax open on the immaculate tweed platter of my knees. “These are certainly more enlightened times,” he offered. I nodded, but didn’t help him out, held his gaze without blinking. “Well, since we are a religious foundation, I’ve asked Ken here to give us an update on the Church’s current thinking.” He threw himself simultaneously back on his chair and on organized religion.

Ken Sitchell threw one plump little leg over the other and leaned back too, in unconscious parody. As ineffectual men will, he worshipped at the altar of robust masculine
power. “The Bible is quite clear, Headmaster,” he said, glancing at the weighty tomes on the bookshelves in Evan’s study, as if for confirmation. “Leviticus tells us that homosexuality is wrong. It’s quite clear.”

The fact that no one chose to look at me told me exactly where I stood, what the rumours were. Evan cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said, “but doesn’t the Bible also preach compassion, Ken?”

Ken’s pudgy face turned a rosy pink. “Compassion for the sinner, headmaster. Not for the sin. I believe that we have a sacred duty to help our young men toward normal family life. I don’t need to remind you, headmaster, that we have boarders here. We have a duty to give them firm leadership, especially when there have been so many changes, with the girls joining us, and all that that involves.” He glanced at me for the first time. “There are enough temptations in their path, and enough modern influences.”

“Yes, of course Ken,” Evan said, rolling his eyes briefly up toward the ceiling as he did when he was uncomfortable. “Of course. We all want to set a clear example. That’s why we’re here.” He shifted in his chair slightly and came at it from another angle. “Now in terms of a written policy, Ken, something concrete that I can take back to the governors—I wonder where the church stands officially? Do you happen to know what the most recent Council of Bishops said, for example?” Evan loved written policy. The school had a ton of it, written up in a huge staff handbook which the staff used as bookends and paperweights.

Ken pursed his lips. “There are liberals, of course,” he said, “in the Church, as well as in our schools. They’re making inroads. As far as I remember, they said that it wasn’t a sin, neither was it a state to be striven for.”
I was filled with unholy mirth. How would one strive to be a homosexual, I wondered? Would one gaze determinedly at members of one’s own sex, hoping to eventually feel some attraction? Would one read gay erotica before going to sleep, or repeat some kind of mantra? “I will be gay. I will be gay.” Had I striven to be gay? Was I striving not to be? I couldn’t remember the last time Sally and I had made love.

Evan looked at me, and raised his eyebrows questioningly, inviting me to speak. “There was an interesting article in *The Times Educational Supplement* last week,” I offered. “It was about teen suicide. Did anyone see it?” Evan shook his head but looked hopeful. He loved newspaper articles almost as much as written policy. “Well,” I said, “it suggested that gay students run a much higher risk of taking their own lives, about four times, I seem to remember. Given that one in 10 of our students probably identifies as gay, according to *The Times’s Ed* figures, I’m just wondering what message we should send them? I’m wondering about our moral responsibility to them, and our legal one I suppose.”

I had played several trump cards at once here. I had read the newspaper article and my colleagues had not. I had statistics on my side and had gently invoked morality too. Most importantly, I had summoned the awful specter of one of our boarders suspended by his neck with a damning suicide note pinned to his jacket.

—Robson, *Love in Good Time*

**Discussion**

I believe *Love in Good Time* (Robson, 2003) to be honestly written (though honesty is never absolute). According to the standards held up by the writers I admire, this means that writing of this memoir was a profound learning experience for me—in some ways my first, and most important, research project. In order to learn about myself and about the cultural forces that had influenced me, I had to examine and unpick my life experiences. In composing this
particular extract, for instance, I came to better understand the operations of centuries of misogyny, racism, homophobia and colonialism at Manwood’s (called Mansfield’s in the text above, for legal reasons), a British school that was supported and founded by the Christian church and by various institutions, such as state and family. I had to think hard about my complicity in this situation, as well as my struggle to escape it.

It was not that I had been blind to these issues before I wrote about them, but rather that I had not needed to recall the complete picture. Effective stories construct (and reconstruct) scenes, inviting the reader to experience them alongside the protagonist in an embodied and sensual fashion. As the writer strives to be specific, more and more tangible, physical details are recalled. For instance, until I sat down to write, I had not remembered Bill Jaffey, commanding officer of the CCF, or unpicked the subtle nuances of my boss’s response to the question of homosexuality, responses which included, as I began to recall them, a wish to be at once up to date with current practice, in line with the teachings of the church, in accord with the board of governors (known in North America as the school board), yet all the while maintaining a personal reputation for morality and perspicacious leadership.

These processes of recollection are complicated by the writer’s feelings, in this instance, of shame and grief. Trauma is marked by “forgetting and disassociation” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7) and need not be catastrophic in order to achieve these effects. Citing Brown, Cvetkovich (2003) suggests that insidious or everyday trauma is experienced by marginalized people such as gays and lesbians on a daily basis: “The feeling of life under capitalism may manifest . . . in the dull drama of everyday life” (p. 43). As I read about my past self now, I feel compassion for a young woman caught in difficult domestic and professional situations. Typically, situations such

1 The school was founded in 1563 by Sir Roger Manwood, an eminent barrister.
as these can serve to open up that intersection between the personal and the systemic in which “abstract social systems can actually be felt” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 23).

The next chapter, “Minutes of the Escape Committee,” covers the same events using a different autobiographical method. Grounding herself in the present moment, a doctoral student (myself) moves into the past (the regressive stage of currere) in order to investigate and better understand her educational journey and gain fresh insight. Though she does not yet know what these insights may be, she has a sense that they will be found if she pays close attention to her personal story. She thus becomes open to new knowledge, in the progressive stage of currere. As she examines the situation closely with the help of other thinkers—Britzman (2006), Grumet (1988), Lasch (1984) and Pinar (2004)—she enters the analytic stage. Her consciousness is expanded in the act of learning and hopefully mobilized, as new knowledge is synthesized and she comes to understand her current pedagogy more clearly. Rather than a carefully constructed scene with a narrative arc (as in the memoir), we have exposition, as experience, theory, and reflection are brought together in the construction of an argument or position.

These differences are a matter of genre, and genre is the product of intention. Ultimately, even their differences are questions of degree. All memoirs contain exposition, and it is clear that the people who write them have developed theories about the events that they portray. In the same way, theory is situated and contextual, rather than an abstract Platonic ideal. It is positioned in and depends upon the cultural and personal narratives by which, as we have already seen (see my Introduction) it is preceded.

This next chapter, then, is firmly contextualized in a British public school in the 1980s—a time when Thatcher was determined to dismantle public education, causing many teachers to flee the profession. I joined the “Escape Committee,” determined to flee academia, but in a neat
narrative arc, I return to it after discovering the educational potential of writing memoir. I position and theorize this journey, as I begin to examine the importance of writing processes as they are used collectively by Quirk-e (the Queer Imaging & Riting Kollective for Elders, to give it its full name), under my direction.
CHAPTER 1:

MINUTES OF THE ESCAPE COMMITTEE—
EXPERIMENTS IN EDUCATION AND MEMOIR

The Iron Lady

In 1988, Margaret Thatcher was the prime minister of the United Kingdom, and I was assistant principal at Sir Roger Manwood’s School—a public high school established some 450 years before by the Chancellor of the Exchequer for Queen Elizabeth I. I’d taught in a number of schools before Manwood’s, and though I’d seen my fair share of laziness and ineptitude, I’d also found that many of my colleagues were quite dedicated to what we all called The Profession. For instance, when the Manwood’s school bell rang at the end of last period, around a quarter of our students stayed on to talk to teachers about their work, rehearse for the school play, practice team sport, play chess, debate, or make music. These activities were voluntary on both sides, and unpaid as far as we teachers were concerned. We worked long hours, partly because of a certain crusty pride. We believed that professionals did not work just from nine to five that extracurricular activities were good for the kids, and that part of our job was what we termed pastoral care.

Along came the Iron Maiden.

Margaret Thatcher’s Foreign Affairs Private Secretary at the time (Sir Charles Powell) has described her style of government as Leninist in its tendency to lay down the law (Hennnessy, 2001). In my experience, he got Thatcher dead to rights. She strode through the nation’s halls of learning like a Valkyrie, brandishing a mighty sword of reckoning. First, she decided exactly how many hours teachers should work in a year (around 1,700, as I recall). Our teachers’ unions responded by forbidding us to work for one minute more than the exact number
of hours she had prescribed, and, ironically, many of us ended up spending much less time with students. After-school clubs and teams that had run for decades—possibly centuries, in the case of Manwood’s—were dismantled almost overnight. Next, Thatcher tossed educational initiatives at us like hand grenades: Records of Achievement, National Standards, Common Examinations—and sweeping nationwide programs that should have been implemented over a period of years were forced upon us without consultation, training, or additional funding. Drowning under an ocean of paperwork, we watched as Thatcher, like a twisted Mary Poppins, quantified and measured the curriculum so that she could hand it out in dollops, like nasty medicine.

**The Escape Committee**

As a young lesbian feminist, I’d already made a number of compromises in order to navigate a school culture that was deeply conservative, misogynist, racist, and homophobic. As deputy headmistress, my tasks had included explaining to the head of the Combined Cadet Force that he might want to reconsider some of his SOP, which included calling women *dearie* (to their faces) and black students *darkies* (behind their backs). Our official position on homosexuality (one that I was expected to endorse) was that it was *a state not to be striven for*. I never understood how one might conceivably work hard to become queer. In my case the process had been quite effortless.

Less easy to put one’s finger upon was a pervasive meanness of spirit I’d become aware of at Manwood’s—a tendency towards blame and exclusion that was connected, I felt, with the harsh codes and systems that had been handed down through the ancient English hierarchy. I had learned to rub along within these systems, to wear Jaeger suits and stay in the closet, to play the game a little. There were certain rewards: acceptance, status, money, and the fun I had with
teaching. I loved the tiny space of learning I’d managed to open up in my English classroom. Autonomous and often free from scrutiny, many of us liberal educators who went through college in the 1960s and 1970s sought what Eisner (2004, p. 88) describes as “novel and creative responses” to the O and A level curriculum, which was narrow, but rich. Though the literary canon (read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen, Hardy, Yeats) and through the English language syllabus (read grammar and composition), we managed at least to encourage students to question notions such as fairness and justice, to talk openly about sex, relationships, families, parents, education, gender, sexuality and race, and to learn to write about such topics with reasonable accuracy, some idea of structure, narrative, or argument, and the beginnings of style and voice.

Now Thatcher had invaded our secret spaces with her damn measuring spoon, and morale, as they say, was low. It was hell, particularly for head teachers, who tried to appease everyone—the unions, the parents, the governing bodies, Her Majesty’s Inspectors, the grumbling staff, and, oh yes, sometimes even the students. One local head shot himself. Another was picked up for DUI. I didn’t really fancy the job, especially since Clause 28, another of Maggie’s initiatives, was about to make it illegal to even talk to students about homosexuality. I decided to exit the closet and start on the book I’d always wanted to write (the one most English teachers have tucked away in a drawer). I’d finance this venture by washing dishes, painting houses—anything else in the world except teaching. It was time to join what we everyone in The Profession called The Escape Committee.

In return for 16 years of service, I received a set of plastic luggage. In it, I packed the 20th-century equivalent of a typewriter and a ream of bond paper and set out for America.

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2 Clause 28 was a controversial amendment to the United Kingdom’s Local Government Act 1986, enacted on 24 May 1988 (repealed on 21 June 2000 in Scotland and on 18 November 2003 in the rest of the UK). It stated that a local authority “shall not . . . promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”
The Dropped Stitch

Over 20 years later, in 2010, I have traveled in a queer educational circle to find myself back in institutions, this time in the University of British Columbia as a doctoral student, and as a community artist for the Vancouver Parks Board, working with a group of seniors who self-define as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual.

In one of my first classes at UBC, Dr. William Pinar handed me a copy of *Bitter Milk* (Grumet, 1988), written in the very year that I quit teaching. As I read it, that period in my history fell into sharper focus, as if someone had reached gently into my brain and tweaked a lens. I came to understand that the unraveling I had witnessed at Sir Roger Manwood’s School 20 years before was but part of a more universal unraveling. Long before Margaret Thatcher took her scissors to the fabric of public education, a vital stitch had been dropped.

Grumet (1988) suggests that the subjugation of women in the education system has had an impact upon the school curriculum that is both negative and profound. Women’s ways of knowing, she argues, are produced directly from the “symbiosis of the mother/child bond” (Grumet, 1988, p. 15). Men, on the other hand, process the denial of affective relations, causing males, both as infants and adults, to exist in a sharply differentiated dyadic structure and females to exist in a “more continuous and interdependent, triadic one” (Grumet, 1988, p. 17). According to Grumet, our education system has always been dominated by a patriarchy that defines its success in terms of production. The paternal project of the curriculum is to claim the child, to teach him mastery of knowledge. The maternal project is to relinquish the child so that both can be independent. How ironic (and how depressing) that in my experience of the 1980s, it was a woman who carried out this patriarchal work, who strove to establish a curriculum, and indeed a
culture, that was “dominated by kits and dittos, increasingly mechanized and impersonal” and without the trust, risk, or intimacy that learning requires (Grumet, 1988, p. 56).

**The Nightmare That Is the Present**

Next on Dr. Pinar’s (2004) reading list was his own book, *What is Curriculum Theory?* and as I read this, I became even more convinced of the impact of that dropped stitch.

The first section of the book is called “The Nightmare That is the Present,” and here Pinar (2004) calls for a move away from the “miseducation of the American public” (p. 15). Though he does look for ways to unpick the mistakes we have made in constructing the modern curriculum, a sense of desperation runs through the text—a feeling that time is running out. Like some contemporary Paul Revere, Pinar (2004) is on a wild ride to call us to arms. “The hour is late,” he cries, “and the sense of emergency acute” (p. 247). The miseducation of American students he so deplores once again includes business-minded school reforms, with their emphases on test scores, standardized examinations, and academic analogues to the bottom line.

Safe in the graduate reading room, pencil in hand, I pause. *Currere*, one might say, has its way with me, as I regress down memory lane to those early days after I joined the Escape Committee and came to the United States. The romantic notion of washing dishes by day and writing books by night had become a reality (of which, more later). This particular memory was of a rare venture back into the classroom. In order to get myself a work visa, I’d signed on for a semester at one of Boston’s more prestigious universities as a kind of pedagogical Santa. Donning a spiffy red business suit (I’d bought it in a thrift store), I’d climb into my battered Hyundai and travel around, handing out advice to student teachers on practicum at the local high schools. At the end of the semester, I gave the students A grades if they had been good (if they had not, they got a B+).
On this particular afternoon, I was sitting in at the back of a Cambridge MA high school class watching a well-meaning young student (in a better suit than mine) plod through her lesson plan. She had objectives. She had well-polished shoes. She had handouts. She had a neatly typed quiz on Romeo and Juliet: Define iambic pentameter. How old was Juliet? When was Shakespeare born? What was the location of the Globe Theater?

No one cared.

Two girls in front of me were busy passing notes back and forth beneath their desks. Though their faces were fixed in an expression of polite attention, their hands scribbled away at this illicit writing: their own tales, no doubt, of sex, danger, and passion. I watched them compose on the sly as a fly banged its little head drearily at the window, trying to get out of this stifling classroom into the sunshine and fresh air on the other side of the glass. Suddenly, I was seized by an almost insuperable desire to stand up and scream out a warning, to tell these poor students to run, to escape, to flee, as I had done. But of course, I did not. Because they could not—at least not without dropping out of high school and looking for jobs washing dishes (I knew from experience that starving artists had snatched most of those positions).

As I returned to the present, to my privileged location at UBC, I realized that though I had escaped, all over the world the students were still there, penned in apathetic rows.

The Minimal Self

In the final sections of this book of Pinar’s (2004), I noted several references to the work of one Christopher Lasch (1984), and picked up a copy of his book, The Minimal Self. I was not surprised to find that it was yet another commentary from the 1980s that paints a bleak picture of contemporary culture. Lasch writes convincingly of the pervasive narcissism he believes has paralyzed human endeavour, rendering artists silent and citizens apathetic. In the face of chaos
and barbarity on a large scale—the holocaust, the arms race, and environmental disasters—we have been reduced, Lasch believes, to helplessness and denial. When all we can manage is survival, then art, education, culture, politics, and even human relationships seem pointless. In all fields of human activity, including education, it becomes difficult, if not impossible to “keep hope alive” (Pinar, 2004, p. 277).

I cannot help but see a connection between the despair Lasch (1984) and Pinar (2004) describe, the general failure of public education, and that dropped stitch identified by Grumet (1988). After all, Lasch points to the twin evils of fascism and materialism as the root causes of those disasters from which we shrink—that nightmare that is the present. Surely, as Grumet (1988) suggests, these are the natural outcomes of a patriarchal culture that has constructed “a highly rationalized economic system of capitalism,” and an “orientation towards external authority” (p. 1). Surely, the materialistic orientation of our culture and our passion for power and control all stem from that separation we have set between mind and body, between internal processes and external rewards, that fatal Cartesian dualism.

And yet, Lasch (1984) stops short of the Freudian feminism espoused by writers such as Grumet. Arguing that “feminine ‘mutuality’” cannot be played off against “the ‘radical autonomous’ masculine self,” he believes that the “‘feminine’ longing for symbiosis” is no less a desire to regress to the “undifferentiated equilibrium of the prenatal state” than is the “solipsistic ‘masculine’ drive for absolute mastery” (p. 5). I remain unconvinced, but however we ascribe the causes, the end result is the same. All three authors, Pinar, Grumet, and Lasch, suggest that there is an urgent need to discover new purpose, or perhaps rediscover an ancient one.
Harvesting Silence

When I fled England and teaching in 1989, it was to become a writer, but when I finally rented a garret (of course) in America and set up my computer, I realized that I didn’t have much of a clue how to begin. I had established the context that Grumet (1988, p. 94) suggests is essential to aesthetic practice—the studio where the artist “harvests silence,” but what the heck was I meant to do there? Thirty-five years of education! Hundreds of books and novels and poems, devoured, analyzed to within an inch of their lives, and yet somehow I had missed out on a vital piece of education—how does one go back to pick up the dropped stitch, to encounter the mystery that is oneself? How does one become what Grumet (1988, p. 79) calls a commuter—shuttling back and forth between the actual and the possible? How does one strive to become a writer?

Instinct told me that I should not sign up for classes or workshops, nor should I read any how to books about the writing process. I might know very little about autobiographical writing, but I knew that I had had enough of academia. I had a great title for the book, so how hard could it be? I fired up my computer, stared for a while at the blank screen, and wrote the word Chapter and then, after a short period of reflection, the word One.

Fast forward five years. You know this story from the movies—sheets of paper are ripped from typewriters and cast on the floor. Cigarettes burn in ashtrays. There are coffee rings and empty bottles. Long walks at night. Gradually, a pile of paper grows in my manuscript box. Editors scribble cryptic advice, and I write new drafts. I become published. I give readings. I finish the memoir and—oh joy!—it is published! A friend of a friend founds a one-stop school for writers and offers me a job as a teacher of memoir writing. I am excited—after all, I have a great name for the class: Digging for Diamonds. I feel that this image reflects the processes I
have discovered, ways of mining memory to discover key events there, sedimented and compressed by time, and sometimes, at least, transmuted from the ordinary to the illuminating.

The first class approached. Only then did I realize that (once again) this lovely title was all I had! Nothing in my 16 years as a teacher had prepared me for this. Hundreds of i’s dotted and t’s crossed, thousands of essays scribbled upon in red ink, and yet I did not know how to teach people to write, at least not to really write. How could I communicate the maniacal dedication required to really write—to hunt down exactness through revision after revision, as opposed to journalling or knocking off an interesting first draft? How would I demonstrate that real writing is more about clarity of perception than it is about technique? Back in the day, I’d talked about beginnings, middles, and endings, but I no longer trusted in them so absolutely. I had discovered that some stories start in the middle, or stop before the end; that narrative shape is elusive; and that it is as important to change one’s stories as it is to capture them. I knew that there are, in the end, no rules, but still, a need for craft, for both discipline and accident, order and chaos, humility and hardheaded pride. There are no roadmaps, though one always has to discover strong intention—that’s the real teacher, the intention of the story. My job, I came to believe, was to help them discover that, then to become an advocate for the story as it developed.

Where would I have them begin? I sat down with a blank sheet of paper, and at the top, I wrote the words Lesson and One.

At the start of Lesson 2, one of my students, a middle-aged woman called Marian, approached me to discuss a problem. Apparently, she could not seem to finish the piece she had begun in Lesson 1. She had written 50 pages, she told me (in some distress) but now other characters were demanding her attention; other scenes were unfurling. She couldn’t stop thinking about this damned piece of writing that she’d begun. What should she do? I thought for only a
moment, and then informed Marian that this problem was not unknown, indeed, professional writers have a special name for it. She was much relieved. What was the name, she asked. Solemnly, I told her that this problem she had encountered was often called a novel in writing circles. Somewhat horrified, Marian pointed out that she couldn’t possibly write a novel—she had only taken lesson one in the beginners’ class! I managed to convince her that this didn’t matter, because she had, in fact, been composing this narrative for years. All that had happened was that she had received permission to write it down.

In convincing Marian, I convinced myself. Never again did I classify students as beginners, intermediate or advanced, nor did I worry too much about the need to front load techniques. Three years later, Marian had finished her first novel and was well into her second. With her help, and the help of others like her, I was training in my new profession as a community artist and teacher. Some 20 years later, I am attempting to theorize what happened to Marian and to me in Lesson 1.

**Education for Social Justice**

One thing that I have learned at UBC is that my work can be justified, in a theoretical sense, as important, despite current suspicions about narrative and authorship (Barthes, 1977; Lyotard, 1984) in what Denzin (1994) calls “the poststructural moment” (p. 296). Though writing can be self-indulgent, serving to reinscribe familiar stories, it can also be positioned at the sharp end of curriculum reform and advocacy research (Cherland & Harper, 2007).

Wright (2000), for example, has positioned education for social justice taught in nonpedagogical spaces as an important starting point for third wave theorizing. Several commentators have suggested that autobiographical methods and memoir writing have much to contribute to this radical work. Specifically, it can help to shift power away from hegemonic
systems and towards the disenfranchised, by giving them the ability to talk back to themselves, as much as to others. Pinar (2004) has said that “at this historical moment, autobiography may have more political potential . . . than running for state senate, signing a petition, even voting” (p. 47). Janet Miller (2005) believes that whereas much educational and academic discourse attempts to “contain” meaning, autobiographical writing can serve as a “queer curriculum practice” (p. 217) that allows it to spill out somewhat, in order to serve as a “critical response to oppression” (p. 185). Anne Cvetkovich (2003) advocates for the creation of an “archive of feelings” by women who define as lesbians, suggesting that this can remove therapeutic intervention from the hands of clinicians and return it to where it can most usefully and equitably be carried out—within the lesbian community itself. According to Cvetkovich, art serves to illuminate those places where the personal and the political intersect, particularly where trauma is concerned—whether this is direct and catastrophic or subtle and insidious—the small slights and injuries that people who are queer experience on a daily basis.

In this next section of the paper, I will turn to my most recent work with queer seniors in the Queer Imaging & Riting Kollective for Elders (Quirk-e), an arts-based, activist group that works at this particular intersection.

Quirk-e

As I turned 50, I began to notice how old and older queers are both over- and underdetermined in normative discourses. The claims made about them are suspiciously exaggerated and packed with contradictory meanings. Those who are old are often seen as objects of ridicule or pity in a culture in which entire industries are dedicated to making us want to look and feel young. At the same time, they are portrayed as quiet, comfortable, and, wise. For instance, when I tell people that I am an artist working with students who define themselves as
old, most people assume that our work together must be low key, social, and recreational. The word queer is similarly stuffed with contradictions and stereotypes. Queer people are seen as dangerous and perverse, and at the same time as objects of pity and candidates for cure. Even in Canada, where gay marriage is legal, the existence of people who are old and queer is not well acknowledged. Shari Brotman (Brotman, Ryan, & Cormier, 2003) has found homophobia to be rampant in senior residences and care facilities. At the same time, old people are often overlooked in the queer media, which tend to valorize youth and beauty. For instance, a recent copy of “Xtra West,” a national newspaper for the LGBT community, contained 181 photos of people, only 11 of whom were identifiably old (Robson, 2007b).

It seemed natural for me to begin working with people who defined as I did (as old and queer), and in 2007, I established a queer writing group, joining forces in this venture with the Generations Project, a program of Vancouver’s LGBT Center that serves the needs of older people. The writing group became popular and was quickly oversubscribed. Through a happy confluence of circumstances, it was ultimately adopted by the Vancouver Parks Board as part of a larger research project, the Arts Health and Seniors Project (AHS). The Parks Board now manages the project and has acquired funding from a variety of agencies. I am writer-in-residence for the Quirk-e collective, which meets on a weekly basis at a senior center on the Eastside of Vancouver. Our choice of venue is deliberate and important, since, as Brotman et al. (2003) indicate, LGBT individuals have typically been rendered largely invisible in the context of community facilities. The group operates under my direction, with the coordinator of the Generations Project serving as both a full participant in the group and as its seniors’ worker at

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3 The Arts, Health & Seniors Program (2011) explores healthy aging through arts-engaged community practices.
the time of writing. A digital artist, skilled in new media technologies, also works with me in the project.

The Quirk-e collective has become visible in Vancouver and its members have begun to read and perform at community events. “The showings and readings are great for showing LGBT seniors making art in the community” commented one member in his/her evaluation (Quirk-e, participant feedback, personal communication, 2007). We have received generous media coverage in “Xtra West” (Correia, 2007) serving to make older queers more visible in the local gay culture. Quirk-e members are proud that their work serves to increase public awareness of the concerns and experiences of older queers in this way and feel a strong sense of connection with the group. They socialize with each other, meeting to hike, write, go out to events, and help each other out with practical tasks like moving house. Quirk-e has had a profound positive impact on several members of the group who battle isolation and depression.

The members of Quirk-e engage in writing and imaging about their lives and then decide, on an annual basis, what they want to perform from this work for the general public. They are quite committed to interrupting demeaning and hateful cultural narratives experienced by minority sexual subjects and like to live up to their name by presenting work that is funny, shocking, diverse, and unpredictable. In one presentation, a theatrical show called Outspoken (June 2008), they presented solo, group, and choral work, including large ensemble choral pieces in which the group danced with umbrellas, sang of their fears about dying (“We’ll be eaten by cats!”), and performed a graphic choral poem about electric shock treatment (being reconsidered, at that time, as an acceptable cure for homosexuality).

Foucault’s definition of parrhesia, or fearless speech, could almost serve as a mission statement for Quirk-e:
... a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to her/his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to herself/himself for other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. (Foucault, 2001, p. 183)

As Sumara and Davis (1999) have also suggested, it is particularly important for those of us who identify as queer to rewrite heteronormative discourses by writing our own frank accounts that help us to represent, understand, and normalize our experience. The following quotation, from Quirk-e’s recent print anthology speaks to this purpose:

Being old and being queer is not a single experience, to be expressed by a single voice. We are a discordant and unruly choir, insisting, despite the odds, on showing the height, depth, and breadth of our experiences. (Robson, 2007c, back cover)

Our first public show, “Transformations,” consisted of digital self-portraits and text that demonstrate this broad range of experiences. Some of the work we presented expressed grief at the loss of youth and easy physicality, while some of it embraced and celebrated the ageing process. Some of our members actually questioned the identification of old, to suggest that it might be, at bottom, an empty signifier. An ex-nun celebrated her escape from the Catholic Church, while another woman presented herself as a turtle, still in the shield of her shell. There were the traditional coming out stories, but also represented was the woman who came out as someone who survived through the practice of self-harm (“A Coming Out of a Different Kind”). Another member of the group, who suffers from MS, chose to superimpose a scan of her plaque-affected brain upon the image of a lost glacier. This piece, called “My Global Warming,” brought the personal and the political together in work that was sad, but not self-indulgent—a vibrant, queer response to trauma as Cvetkovich (2003, p. 7) puts it, rather than the “hushed tones of sympathy” (p. 4) she has observed in some feminist work generated by victimhood.

Bill, who is 74, decided that he wanted to show a nude self-portrait. Though the presentation of nudity is forbidden in Vancouver’s public spaces, we decided that we would
simply ignore the possibility of censorship and go ahead and hang Bill’s work, along with the rest, at Vancouver’s Roundhouse Community Center. He found a classic baby-on-a-rug photograph of himself in an old album, and then reconstructed the nude pose in the present moment—wrinkles, flab, and all. He imported both photographs into Adobe Photoshop, and juxtaposed them in a single frame (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. “Orientation,” by William Morrow

After a show at the University of British Columbia, a student (originally from Singapore, where she had rarely come into contact with queer culture) contacted me to discuss her response to Bill’s piece, and to ask if she could open up a dialogue with the group. Here is an extract from the term paper that resulted from Michelle’s correspondence with the group:
I found myself slightly shocked yet highly curious. The naked 74-year-old man lying in a sensual pose on a blanket seized my attention and revealed preliminary responses of uneasiness when viewing such a daring and rarely seen image. I found myself taking a step backwards and asking the following questions: Why am I reacting this way? Who says the elderly cannot and should not be sexual? Why am I feeling slightly uncomfortable? What makes this image unusual or even socially taboo? (Keong, 2007)

Over 300 students came through the show at UBC, and subsequently, we have established mutual mentoring with students, visited classes, and acquired a volunteer student intern—all as a direct result of this one show. Though we have applied for several grants to fund a sibling Quirk-e UBC project, interestingly, none of our applications has been funded, at least, at the time of writing.

Though this socially significant work is often fun, rewarding, and empowering, I do not wish to suggest that it is always simple, comfortable, or easy. In fact, instead of offering the usual reassurances about safety at the beginning of our sessions, I rather remind the group that making art can be risky. The first audience of any work of art is the artist herself, and it is she who may be most surprised by her own creation and who may have most to learn from it. Our sense of self is, I believe, emergent, fluid, and distributed (Varela, 1999), and making art can be a useful way to construct and reconstruct identity. Grumet (1988) points out that radical works of art interrupt our customary responses, contradict our expectations, violate memories and displace recognition with estrangement. Winterson (1995) puts it this way, “True art, when it happens to us, challenges the ‘I’ that we are” (p. 15).

Most of the members of Quirk-e will attest to having experienced this kind of challenge. Indeed, two or three members left at the end of the first year because they had expected, and wanted, to spend time socializing and sampling a range of handicrafts, rather than to concentrate upon two media and the hard work of revision. It took them, the group, and me some time to understand and process the fact that Quirk-e could not meet their needs. In a sense, the group
engaged in revising itself during this first year, clarifying its intention by striking a balance between the homogeneity that focuses the group’s political and artistic purposes and the diversity that authentically reflects the realities of being old and queer (as opposed to accepted cultural stereotypes). This revision was extremely painful and troubling for everyone involved—a reminder that all identifications operate to exclude others and are, in a sense, both artificial and traumatic.

Other members of Quirk-e have been resistant to the challenge of true art (as defined above by Winterson) but have managed to surmount their anxiety. An example is provided by Gayle, a transsexual woman who wanted to represent, in our first show, her transition from male to female. Initially, she chose to do so by taking a picture of herself in her previous identification as a man (Michael) on his wedding day, and setting it next to a current photograph of herself as a woman (Gayle). Gayle brought the work to me for feedback (though it was quite clear that she was very proud of it and considered it to be done). When I asked her what she had intended the piece to communicate, Gayle told me that she wanted to show how her female self had always been inside Michael, and how, though she no longer identified as male, Michael was still part of her history and experience. When I suggested that her work did not yet communicate this, Gayle became very upset. She told me that she’d spent hours on this piece. In fact, she was sick of working on it. What the hell, she wanted to know, did she need to do to improve it? I let her know that I could not make her artistic decisions for her. It was up to her what she put in the show and up to her what she did with the piece. She could show the piece as it was, if she really wanted, but in my opinion, it did not yet reflect her intention.

The next week, Gayle came back to the group with a new idea, which had generated a series of technical questions. She had decided to morph the picture of Michael into the picture of
Gayle much more gradually, using a series of shifting images. She worked with our digital artist for many hours to produce a more nuanced representation of her transition. In the final work, the picture of Michael fades and become smaller, as the picture of Gayle, (always latent in the picture of Michael) grows larger and more substantial. Eventually, Gayle’s image replaces Michael’s, though a tiny image of Michael still shimmers faintly in the region of Gayle’s heart.

![Figure 2. “Transition,” by Gayle Roberts](image)

Here’s what Gayle had to say in an email she sent me after the show, and in the artist’s notes that accompanied her work:

At times, I felt frustrated and a little annoyed . . . but I do think (my work) is much better now than it was . . . you never told me, do this or do that but I would go away and stew on things for a while and new ideas would spring into my head. I must say all of this has been a very good learning exercise. (G. Roberts, personal email communication, 2007)

Transition is a process of physical and emotional changes. Showing only two photographs . . . would capture some of the physical changes of the artist but not her emotional changes . . . . That required presenting the two photographs . . . modified in ways that suggest the passage of time and, with it, the gradual emergence of the artist’s female gender identity that was present all her life. (G. Roberts, program notes, 2007)
I believe that Gayle’s remarks go to the heart of the matter. In the process of stitching together her stories and exploring and exploding two photographs—one of her as a man on his wedding day and one as a transsexual woman—she has created new understanding and represented herself differently. This process is, of course, the process of revision, which implies, epistemologically speaking, both seeing, and then seeing again, differently. My role was first to ask Gayle to state her intentions as they formed in the process of making the art, and then to challenge her to get the art closer to these intentions as they emerged. From a pedagogical perspective, technique was called forth by the desire to communicate these new understandings more exactly, so my final task, as teacher, was to ensure that Gayle was provided with the technical skills she needed to do what was necessary.4

**Uncanny Encounters**

Lasch (1984) prefaces *The Minimal Self* with the following quotation from Henry V: “He is as full of valor as of kindness, Princely in both.” His choice of epigram suggests that he sees both strength and kindness as essential prerequisites of the “cultural revolution” and “reorientation of values” that he hopes for (Lasch, 1984, p. 253). Similarly, in her preface, Grumet (1988) also stresses the importance of human connection and relationship, suggesting that the “very ground of knowledge is love” (p. 8). This suggestion is examined more closely by Deborah Britzman in *Novel Education* (2006), where she argues that emotional life is the “grounds for thinking itself” (p. 66). Rather than framing knowledge as something that exists separately from the learner (a commodity that can be dished out in dittos by student teachers in nice suits), Britzman positions it as something inseparable from the tricky processes of the psyche and its individual history. She puts it this way: “Learning can be imagined as convening

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4 In this case, tutorials in Adobe Photoshop from my assistant artist.
those elusive qualities of an *uncanny encounter* [emphasis added] that compose the sublime” (Britzman, 2006, p. 9).

Despite the scepticism Lasch has expressed about Freudian feminism, I feel that it may be the place for me to start to theorize some of my observations of what it’s like to write memoir. Pinar (1994) suggests that when we enter the past in the first stage of *currere*, we can only cast around for clues, free-associating in what he calls “an intensified engagement with daily life, not an ironic detachment from it” (p. 23). In this way, we explore the “biographic past,” which also exists in the present in a complex and contributive way (Pinar, 1994, p. 22). Britzman (2006) warns us that in this emotional journey, there is no firm ground, rather, the unconscious rules through “its own unruly laws of primary processes: condensation, displacement, substitution, undoing, and reversals into opposites, all delightful deconstructions of symbolization” (p. 9). Through this kind of “aesthetic undertaking,” Britzman (2006) suggests, “the world is transformed, conviction is made, affect is given free reign, and new realities are created” (p. 9).

As Marian taught me, back in Lesson 2, Britzman’s (2006) statement holds true for the aesthetic undertaking the writer enters into through her art, a lawless territory in which there are no rules, no boundaries, no right way to proceed. As we become our first audience and read what we have written, we receive a novel education—Britzman’s uncanny encounter with self. We have tapped into things that we are not allowed to say or that we didn’t even know that we knew. Britzman, Grumet (1988), and Salvio (2007) have all acknowledged the role of the subverted unconscious in this work and gestured towards aesthetic practices as a way of exploring the material uncovered there. Grumet (1988) has called this process *ruminare*—the practice of turning over what we have learned to find “glimpses of meaning” (p. 136). Just as the cow ruminates, using its extra stomach to turn over and digest what it has ingested, so the learner
ingests and reflects upon experience. These ruminations, as Grumet points out, can then be resymbolized in the highly creative form of a work of art.

**Some Preliminary Theories About Writing Processes**

Although no road maps are available for this journey into the past, I do believe that there are certain helpful strategies that writers can use along the way. First, it is important to have a sense of where to begin. Many of the writing exercises I use are calculated to help writers find key locations in their biographic past—places in time that serve as *hubs* of feeling (to borrow a term from network theory), packed with emotional content. Over the years, I have developed a knack for designing prompts that help writers to locate these hubs and then to unpack the material they contain (suggested by the title of that first workshop—”Digging for Diamonds”). These prompts and exercises are designed, I have come to realize, to unsettle the writer, creating little cognitive breakdowns as Varela (1999) would say, openings through which new knowledge and insight may emerge.

Coming at things sideways is important—almost anything that distracts the writer from trying to go head to head with emotional content. Recently, I’ve been reading Lodge (2002) and Zunshine (2006), who pick apart some of the ways in which writing can reflect the processes of consciousness. I find the notion of *qualia* to be useful. By representing the actual lived experiences of consciousness (for instance, “I tasted bile at the back of my throat”), we take the reader there and also take ourselves back there to relive the experience and remember and feel more about what happened. I constantly encourage writers to show not tell—probably the most frequently used adage in writing circles, for excellent reasons. Other methods include paying close attention to imagery, imitating other styles, indulging in associative leaps, juxtaposing random words or engaging in free or automatic writing (in which the pen keeps moving on the
page), and moving from one point of view, say first person, to another, such as the third, or changing tense (perhaps from the past to the immediate present). I am much taken with the notion of enabling constraints (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008) which translate, in the realm of creative writing, to form and genre. As the poet Anne Sexton (quoted in Salvio, 2007) once put it, “form [is] a cage, and if you [have] a good strong cage, you [can] let some really wild animals in it” (p. 97). Some of the members of Quirk-e had great success, for instance, with an exercise of mine that demands that writers use a noun and a verb (which I handed to them on a slip of paper) to complete a poem in exactly 20 minutes, using each word at least once. Though I gave some thought to the words I handed out, in terms of their symbolic power (*bridge*, *open*, *convoy*), the proscriptions were, in a sense, unimportant, except in that they radically limited the time people could spend agonizing and prevaricating and provided constraints that offer freedom.

**Conclusion: The Mechanical Bull**

From Grumet (1988) and Britzman (2006), I have learned the importance of handing over to the unconscious. This includes, as I have said, paying close attention to imagery, particularly those images that drop at my feet by chance—those products of attention to intention that Dillard (1990, pp. 21–22) describes as “dropped pennies”—easy to walk by, but containing the potential for revelation. Just the other day, I was listening to a popular talk show on my car radio, when a phrase seemed to leap out at me, to stop me in my tracks: “She probably lost her virginity to a mechanical bull” (Thompson & Leary, 2007).

I paid attention.

The disregard for innocence, the reduction of sex to mechanical rapaciousness—surely, these all could be said to represent those things that Lasch (1984) has so deplored about our
culture, to sum up 20th- and 21st-century nihilism and heartlessness? When I Googled the origins of the phrase, I found it to be attributed to a fictional character—a 1-year-old called Stewie from the popular cartoon show, “Family Guy” (MacFarlane, 2003). Upon closer examination, I found Stewie to be the perfect poster child for narcissism—a product of the paternal project for the curriculum—the autonomous, masterful self. He understands all things technological but is emotionally stunted. For instance, though he cleverly constructs devices such as fighter planes and mind-control devices, he uses them to seduce women and to murder his brother, his mother, and others (including Julie Andrews and Gay Pride marchers). He rationalizes his matricidal tendencies thusly: “It’s not so much that I want to kill her. It’s just I want her not to be alive anymore.”

I was, of course, also reminded of Grumet’s (1988) very different use of bovine imagery to describe the process of becoming, in a sense, at one with the world by ingesting and transforming experiences into embodied knowledge. The use of this image in such divergent ways serves to indicate the huge chasm between the feminine longing for symbiosis and the masculine drive for absolute mastery and autonomy.

I shall leave you with a third bovine image—one that works to stitch back together, through the tale of an uncanny encounter, some of the polarities that our society and our education system have constructed—male and female, human and divine, political and artistic.

In the ancient Greek legend, Europa walks with her maidens to collect flowers when she encounters Zeus, who has taken the form of a bull. Europa greets him fondly, strokes him, and then climbs upon his back. Zeus carries her across the sea to Crete, where she becomes the first Queen of that island. The etymology of Europa’s Greek name is εὐρυ (wide or broad) + (ο)πε [eye[s] or face; (Kerenyi, 1951), suggesting intelligence and broad-mindedness, and also, I will
suggest, a look of amazement. As Lasch, I am sure, would be interested to note, the result of Europa’s wild ride with the Escape Committee is positive political change and the establishment of a matriarchy.

I take great faith in our willingness to be surprised by the uncanny.

What’s that I hear you ask? Was not Europa *raped* by that bull? Only in the later, patriarchal Roman reinterpretation of the original story. Clearly, stitches have been dropped before in the long history of our species—unravelled, stitched up, and dropped again.
Interlude 2:

Parable

A key characteristic of my research methodology (close writing) is that in memoir work, form, genre, and literary technique are productive, as well as reflective, of content, as they provide available structures for its emergence. Even novice writers who have little conscious understanding of literary techniques can use them, with a little prompting and assistance, to unlock ideas and feelings that are struggling to break through into expression. This remains true even when the material in question is difficult in some way (for instances, taboo, painful, or countercultural). Indeed, the use of strict forms might be even more helpful in these situations. At the end of the previous chapter (in “Some Preliminary Theories About Writing Processes”), I referenced Sexton (cited in Salvio, 2007, p. 97) in this regard. She describes literary form as a useful cage or container for this kind of difficult or dangerous material—a point that is also made by Langer (1957, p. 20) who believes that the use of form can make difficult subjects more accessible. For these reasons, as we considered the exile story in Genesis, I drew the attention of the members of one of my research groups (Old Writing Lesbian Scholars) to its form and structure, in this case, the elements of parable. As part of our work together, we wrote our own parables, and I open this second creative interlude with the parable that I wrote in response to the exercise. It serves as an introduction to Chapter 2, “Fictional Practices of Everyday Life,” in which I examine another parable, written by a research participant also in response to this exercise.
“Can You See Me Now I’m Gone?”

Yesterday, upon the stair,
I met a man who wasn’t there
He wasn’t there again today
I wish, I wish he’d go away . . .

When I came home last night at three
The man was waiting there for me
But when I looked around the hall
I couldn’t see him there at all!
Go away, go away, don’t you come back any more!
Go away, go away, and please don’t slam the door . . . (slam!)

Last night I saw upon the stair
A little man who wasn’t there
He wasn’t there again today
Oh, how I wish he’d go away

―Mearns, “The Little Man Who Wasn’t There”

Once there was a little girl called Mirabelle who lived with a lot of people. The only
trouble was that these people could not see her.

They could see each other just fine.

“Hello,” they’d call out as they passed each other. “How are you?”

“I’m fine thank you,” they’d reply. “What a pretty day!”

Mirabelle didn’t think that this kind of talk was very interesting, but she wished they’d
say something. But they didn’t. When they walked past Mirabelle, they just . . . walked past . . .
as if they saw right through her, even when she wore her pink leather trousers and her feather
boa. Even when she wore her bowler hat and did cartwheels, it was like Mirabelle wasn’t there.
She felt very lonely.

One day at lunchtime, the other boys and girls ran helter-skelter out of the classroom,
headed for the playground, and Mirabelle drifted over to the book cupboard to put her reader
away before she went out after them. She noticed a piece of white chalk lying on the floor in the
dusty closet and picked it up. That afternoon, she began drawing pictures—huge pictures that
were bigger than she was. She drew a picture of her dog on the sidewalk by the bus shelter, and then a picture of Mr. Johnson, the minister, on the wall of the church. People gathered around to admire them.

“That looks just like Mr. Johnson,” they said. “And we’ve seen that dog somewhere too. That dog’s always wandering around on its own.”

That Sunday, Mr. Johnson talked about the pictures in his sermon.

“There was only a blank wall there, before,” said Mr. Johnson, “and now look! It’s a miracle! My congregation has doubled! Praise the Lord!”

Mirabelle didn’t know about the Lord so much, but she did know that she didn’t feel so lonely anymore when she could draw her pictures. She got to look at people very hard for a long time, and when she’d done, she felt that she knew them and somehow that they knew her, even if they couldn’t really see her. And when she’d done, people gathered round and looked really hard at her pictures and talked about them, and it felt pretty good.

The best picture Mirabelle ever drew was the self-portrait she made the day before she left. Her eyes sparkled in the picture as she turned a cartwheel and her leather trousers were hot pink. A speech balloon came out of her mouth, and in it were these words:

“Can you see me now I’m gone?”

—Robson, “Can You See Me Now I’m Gone?”

Discussion

Towards the end of the last chapter, I introduced a definition of learning: “Learning can be imagined as convening those elusive qualities of an uncanny encounter that compose the sublime” (Britzman, 2006, p. 9). In Chapter 3, I shall examine this definition more carefully. For now, I take a closer look at some pedagogical structures and activities that might usefully convene the kind of learning encounter Britzman describes here—those literary practices of
writing and reading that can be used, I will argue, to deconstruct “lovely knowledge” and replace it with “difficult knowledge” in order to “encounter the self” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 735).

With the help of Drs. Sumara and Luce-Kapler, who were working on a SSHRC-funded project around practices of reading, I created a small group who called themselves the Owls (Old Writing Lesbian Scholars) in order to research what would happen when practices of close reading and close writing were combined. Dr. Sumara and I engaged them in close reading, close writing, and discussion of the texts, including their own literary productions. As the theme of home and exile arose spontaneously in these discussions, it occurred to me that the conversation might be enriched by a reading of the section of Genesis (Chapter 3) that describes Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. I believed that this archetypal narrative about exile might strike a special chord with the group. After all, even today, ejection from the family home by a judgmental parent is a common consequence of coming out of the closet, and gays are more likely to experience dis/location and live nomadically than their heterosexual counterparts (Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan, & Lin, 2006).

The formal features of parables might be summarized as follows: they are typically brief, they have human protagonists (rather than animals or inanimate objects, as with fables), they are simply told, they have a strong narrative line, they use clear controlling imagery (analogy), and above all, they have didactic intention. I suggested that each member of the group use these features as enabling constraints (Davis & Sumara, 2010) in writing a parable about home and exile. Since I believe that it is useful for the researcher/teacher to complete all assignments set (in order to understand pedagogies from inside out and to encourage and model creative response), I completed the assignment by writing “Can you see me now I’m gone?” (Robson, 2009a)—the piece that precedes this discussion. Bridget, one of the participants in Owls, also
wrote a parable, “White Handle Knives,” which provides the limit case example that forms the basis for the next paper.

Both parables pose an interesting question of definition—a question which it will be useful to address here: What is memoir anyway?

The word derives from the French (mémoire) from the Latin: memoria, meaning memory. Until the 20th century, there was little difference between memoir and autobiography, in that both genres were used by people of note to document the entirety of their lives. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, memoirs and autobiographies were written by well-known or influential people who had had interesting or important lives (Schuessler, 2009). The emergent genre of new memoir, however, saw an emergent distinction between factual, historic life narrative (autobiography) and the inner, emotional life more often explored in memoir. Memoir is now a more fluid genre, in that it may be less comprehensive (in terms of the time spans covered), more emotional in tone, more obviously fictionalized, and more likely to use a broad range of those techniques found in fiction and poetry (Schuessler, 2009). Using this definition of memoir, I consider the parables that Bridget and I wrote to be examples, even though they adopt a third person point of view.

For instance, as I read through “Can You See Me Now I’m Gone?” (Robson, 2009a) I am forcibly struck by its accuracy in capturing the lived experience of much of my childhood. I was a queerly creative child. Though I was cheerful most of the time, I felt invisible, as if I did not register in my cultural context in some important and yet indefinable way. The parable does not reach after the facts of my life (like Love in Good Time), but it neatly captures a single aspect of my affective experience. The same can be said of “White Handle Knives.” This is also written in the third person, but, as we shall see, equally effective in representing (or re/presenting) an
important personal experience for its writer, bringing new knowledge and understanding in the process.

“The Fictional Practices of Everyday Life” traces the memoir of a piece of memoir, written by a member of Owls in response to a series of writing exercises set by the researchers. In doing so, it begins to unpick the complex and recursive pedagogies involved in exploring the relationship between learning about self and writing about self. I have chosen to adopt a third person point of view in this chapter, in order to reflect the collaborative nature of this research.
CHAPTER 2:

FICTIONAL PRACTICES OF EVERYDAY LIFE—UNFIXING

IDENTITY THROUGH CLOSE LITERARY PRACTICES

“I wanted to still think that that was true, but it really wasn’t . . .”

—Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 9

The traffic roars by on East Broadway and the sun streams in above the dusty bamboo shutters, illuminating the Formica table, seven sets of cutlery wrapped in white paper napkins, a brown plastic tray with glasses and a jug of water, and a tumble of abandoned menus (by now, we know every item off by heart). Pat and Chris suggest opening the windows because it’s too hot. Greta and Val want to keep them closed against the noise. We compromise, opening the tops and leaving the bottoms shuttered against the strong autumn sunlight. Bridget scribbles our food orders on a napkin while the rest go pee and Claire fiddles with the digital recorders. It always takes us a while to get down to business.

Bridget is excited about a piece of writing she has just finished. It’s taken a while, because she likes to mull things over and do “a lot of thinking” before she commits anything to paper (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 16). “I need a bit of time,” she tells us. “The feedback I get from people makes me go back and examine my feelings, and I see how much I’ve changed” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 9). Indeed, it was a good 10 months ago that this new piece of hers began its journey. Bridget tells the story now, with some amusement. Instead of reading her own work, as requested, she had recited a poem by John Locke, and we were not impressed. In fact, she recalls that Robson had told her that the poem “pissed her off” (a remark that did not appear in the transcript of our conversation). “I was deflated,” Bridget says. “I thought it was a beautiful piece” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 8). She has been processing- this moment of aporia for a good 10 months, turning it over in her mind. Now she believes that when she recited the poem she was attached to
what she describes as a “nice space” of Celtic nostalgia (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 13) that she had constructed during years of exile but never fully examined. “I wanted to still think that that was true, but it really wasn’t,” she says. “I could never actually live there [in Ireland] because it’s so homophobic” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 9).

Today she’s ready to share her revised opinions, and a brand new piece of writing.

**Lovely Knowledge and Difficult Knowledge**

Learning is a process of loss and reconstruction, the ruination of what Pitt and Britzman (2003) call lovely knowledge—those certainties upon which we base our reality—in order to make room for more difficult or complex understandings (p. 766). In any educational project, as Pitt and Britzman (2003) point out, “the crisis of representation that is outside meets the crisis of representation that is inside” (p. 756) as we question both the author’s capacity to represent her experiences with verisimilitude and to have experienced them consciously, defying psychic processes such as resistance (Phillips, 2006), which are always at work. The narratives that we construct can never represent our experiences exactly, and they will necessarily resist interpretations, since they are rife with unresolved psychical conflicts (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 759). For these reasons, Pitt and Britzman (2003) suggest that research “must be understood as provoking, not representing, knowledge” (p. 769). We suggest here that the same is true of personal narratives. They can serve as productive sites of conversation between “between experience and its narration” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 769).

As a reader, writer, and teacher of memoir (Robson, 2003) for many years, Robson witnessed the boom of the autobiographical genre in the 1990s and saw how it continued unabated into the 21st century, defying the predictions of some of its critics.¹ She was struck by

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¹In a review of a recently published book of memoirs, Frank Conroy somewhat irritably notes: “Memoirs to the left of us. Memoirs to the right of us. A blizzard of memoirs good, bad and indifferent” (Baxter, 2004).
the number of people who lived and worked outside pedagogical settings who wanted to write about their life experiences in the alternative spaces of learning that she created in locations such as libraries, senior centers, and bookstores. The majority of her students were older women like Bridget who had experienced important life events—tragedies and triumphs that they experienced as significant (and the dominant culture often discounted as merely domestic). Although these women offered many reasons for embarking on this work (such as the desire to *leave something for the grandkids*), it seemed that common outcomes also included fresh insight and understanding of past events, sometimes painful and sometimes not. As a lifelong educator, Robson became curious about the ways in which her students appeared to be using memoir to construct meaning.

For their parts, Sumara (2002; Sumara et al., 2006) and Luce-Kapler (2004; Luce-Kapler, Catlin, & Kocher, 2008) had written extensively about the usefulness of reading in thinking about one’s life and identity. In particular, they had investigated the use of fictional texts as commonplaces for discussion and interpretations, both individual and collective. They had established an SSHRC funded research group in Alberta, Canada—a group of older rural women who identified as heterosexual and had engaged for two years in close readings and discussions of fictional texts. They now became curious to see what would happen when this new dimension, which we call *close writing* in imitation of Gallop’s (2000) *close reading*, was added to the research mix, and thus invited Robson to join them in establishing a second group, that would work with both reading and writing.

**Owls**

*When philosophy paints its gray in gray, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy’s gray in gray it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk. (Glaucus [owl], 2009)*

The authors founded their new research group in 2007, and it consequently adopted the nickname Owls (Old Writing Lesbian Scholars), to reflect the age of the participants and our
manner of working, since the owl of Minerva represents intuitive knowledge that comes from the periphery of awareness. The Owls group comprised six old and older women who self-identify as lesbians, all but one of whom were used to working with Robson as a teacher of writing in community settings. Robson and Sumara met with the group every other week for two years in a lesbian-owned-and-operated café (known in the community as a LOO) on the east side of Vancouver. Luce-Kapler continued to work with the group of women in Alberta. In the text that follows, we use the actual names of participants, at their request.

Our research questions were as follows:

· How do identifications with literary and other fictions influence the personal and cultural stories people remember and report about their experiences of consciousness?

· What happens to personal remembered experiences when normalized stories of personal and cultural identity are re-presented through literary fictional forms?

· Can changing one’s fictional identifications change one’s remembered history and, if so, how do these changes influence one’s sense of presently lived identity?

Theoretical Framework

Fixing and Unfixing Identities

Stein (1997, p. 19) suggests, and we agree, that the essentialist/constructionist debate has tended to dichotomize and oversimplify the complex lifetime processes of constructing identity. Though social constraints and sedimentations may prevent us from constructing ourselves “exactly as [we] please” (Stein, 1997, p. 20), we continue to try, nonetheless, on a daily basis.

The women in our group were a case in point. For many reasons, they are highly conscious of several identifications that they regard as particularly important. Members of a

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2 As the reader may have noted, the questions addressed in this collaborative research project are related to the questions I ask in the independent research (see Introduction) that I present in the rest of this text, though they differ somewhat in presentation.
multifaceted community that primarily defines itself as lesbian (rather than queer or gay), they meet and organize at political, social, and cultural events on Vancouver’s Eastside and elsewhere. They define and design many of these activities in terms of the old school lesbian feminism identified as Lesbian Nation in a recent article in The New Yorker (Levy, 2009). To various degrees, the women espouse or have been influenced by that radical, somewhat utopian, radical, feminist ideology described by Arlene Stein (1997, p. 13). Though all the women identify in many other ways, for example as parents/grandparents/sisters and daughters, as professionals of various kinds, and as citizens of various countries, they are clear that their identifications as lesbians and as old have been highly important components in their perceptions of identity. They also perceive the cultural context in which they came out to be a highly significant location. Their identifications were constructed during important historic events such as the Vietnam War, Stonewall, and the burgeoning of civil rights and anti-establishment movements for gays, workers, women, and racial minorities (Stein, 1997, p. 13).

Research has demonstrated that despite shifts in societal awareness, policies, and levels of acceptance achieved by feminist and gay social/political movements, sexist and heterosexist discourses continue to influence the ways that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) persons experience their lives and represent their experiences (Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Lather, 2006; Loutzenheiser, 2001; Sumara et al., 2006). The three identifications foregrounded in this research (old, female, and lesbian) are both over- and underdetermined (Althusser, 1962; S. Hall & Du Gay, 1996; Sumara et al., 2006) by such discourses. The states of being old, gay, and female have served as sites of ethical, scientific, political, and cultural controversy, and they have been performed in widely different ways. For instance, lesbians adopt a wide range of social mores—from separatism to churchgoing, and from butch/femme role play to a rejection of roles entirely. As one of the Owls group put it, “We wear T-shirts that have messages. We have
bumper stickers. But it’s all got to do with where we are in history and time” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 9, p. 6). These performances, in their turn, have been subject to an equally broad range of interpretations. In some countries, gays are executed, in others, revered. Other spectrums exist with regard to women and to the old, elderly, older, or senior—identifications that are as hotly debated by age activists as are the terms queer, gay, and lesbian by some gay activists.

Although these multiple influences upon and interpretations of their identifications have overdetermined the identifications of the women in Owls, they have had fewer opportunities to unpick these complications by viewing varied representations of their experiences in mainstream culture. Old lesbians are rarely represented in any of our cultural technologies and almost never represented as being normal, but rather as either asexual caretakers (Ross, 1995) or sociopaths (Fox, 2006), and dominant Western culture, including the gay media, has tended to privilege men and youth (Robson, 2007b). As Hall and Du Gay (1996) point out, when identifications are “in the process of change and transformation” writing about self is always conducted under erasure (p. 4), and what Cvetkovich (2003) calls “institutional neglect” (p. 241) has rendered lesbian experience particularly invisible. It is therefore necessary to create an “archive of feelings”—cultural texts that both represent the vibrancy of queer culture and allow it to be more systematically examined (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7).

**Becoming Unhinged**

It was our hope that in the processes of reading and writing, the members of Owls might unfix some of their established or fixed narratives in order to explore some of the complications outlined above. The roles of language and narrative as a way of understanding ourselves in this way has been the subject of much debate in the last two decades (Barthes, 1977; Denzin, 1994; Lyotard, 1984) as modernist faith in the written word has been tempered by our dawning
awareness that language creates experience, rather than representing it exactly and the consequent realization that no story or text, whether it be research paper or memoir, can capture the essence of a life or the nature of some reality out there. There is “no account of oneself,” Judith Butler (2001) suggests, “that does not, to some extent, conform to norms that govern the humanly recognizable, or negotiate those terms in some ways, with various risks following from that negotiation” (p. 26). Whenever we try to represent reality, we do so in complicity with norms that cannot be separated from the very language we are using. In this sense, we are always writing under erasure, using language to escape these norms, even as we mistrust it.

Britzman (2003, p. 13) and Cvetkovich (2003, p. 7) have indicated a second situation with regard to representation—another type of erasure: the fact that we miss, lose, resist, and forget what has happened to us, particular if the events were traumatic. Cvetkovich draws upon the work of Laura Brown (1995) to extend the notion of trauma from that of catastrophic event to the everyday slights and injuries that are often discounted in trauma discourse, despite the fact that older lesbians (as old, as women, and as gay) are subject to these on a daily basis, as they are overlooked and passed over in all kinds of situations (Macdonald & Rich, 1983). Our cultural norms and experiences are so well-inscribed and our capacity to resist so strong, that it becomes impossible to say what really happened.

Practising writers, conversely (and perhaps perversely), have tended to celebrate rather than regret these challenges. Rather than expecting language to congeal or fix reality, poets and fiction writers have used it to open up hermeneutic possibilities—to better represent what Denzin (1994) calls “multiple versions of the real” (p. 300). David Lodge (2002) points to the intimate connection between literature and identity when he describes the novel as “man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time” (p. 10). He suggests that literature has typically been a step ahead of science in its
representation of our developing understandings of consciousness. Of course, any “efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision” (Butler, 2001, p. 27), but as the poet Lyn Emanuel (1992) has pointed out, writers’ attempts to inhabit this uncertainty reflect our experience of consciousness on a moment-by-moment basis:

Even as I describe that to myself, that self that was mine has dissolved and I am rummaging among the junk of what she has left behind . . . And that is all vision is: revisions coming at us at the speed of light. Writing presents to us the nullity of ourselves, the inaccuracies of our conceptions of selfhood. We are both nothing and everything—provisional, shifting, molten. (p. 256)

Denzin (1994) points to the works of James Joyce as one such successful attempt to unhinge our discourse from “the concept of a stable world” (p. 304), suggesting that textured, layered, and imagistic writing such as Joyce’s lends itself well to such an enterprise. Such writing reflects and imitates the human mind, which (in one version of the real at least) cognitive scientists and psychologists such as Donald (2001) and Varela (1999) have posited as fluid, embodied and emergent. Just as language does not exist in a pure form with a clear and independent internal logic, so, Donald argues, the same is true of the human psyche. The biological brain is intimately connected with cultural technologies, including written and spoken language, in a distributed cognitive network (Donald, 2001, p. 154). Through language, then, we are able to explore and create whatever understanding we choose of self, world, and others.

Since language has these capacities to reflect cognition, it can be hypothesized that when writers pay close attention to the construction of their stories, they end up exploring their own identities. Several commentators have argued this case. For instance, Jane Gallop (2000) has suggested that close reading can replace the projection of the familiar with the surprise of something new. Gallop also suggests that the act of reading carefully trains us to listen to other people—a skill which comes in especially handy when we encounter those whose experience of the world is markedly different from ours, such as the racialized or sexual other (Gallop, 2000, p. 14). Others (Edelman, 2004; Sumara, 2002) have taken this a step further, to suggest that in order
to even create a coherent identity, human beings must be aware of other minds and note that these other minds are also aware of other minds. Since the mind cannot observe its own processes directly, it forms an idea of itself indirectly, by observing and recognizing the processes of others. Such practices of mind reading are not only useful when it comes to understanding others, they are important to understanding ourselves, and might even be considered a prerequisite for such understanding.

Lisa Zunshine (2006) studies the intersections between narrative theory, culture, and cognition and has examined this process of mind reading (or, in the parlance of cognitive psychologists, *theory of mind*) more closely (p. 6). She points out that interpretation is so fundamental to human existence that we are scarcely aware of it until we examine the assumptions we are required to make to interpret even the simplest human gesture, such as the raising of a hand. Does that person wish to ask a question, go to the bathroom, cast a vote, or point to something on the ceiling? Artistic representations, she suggests, engage us in the practice of skills that are crucial our happiness and survival. Such skills include a process that Zunshine (2006) describes as “source monitoring” (p. 5). Moment by moment, we track who said what and when and with what level of credibility, unless we have internalized information that is so soundly and multiply sourced that it can be taken as read. She applies these ideas to fiction in a very concrete way, as when, for instance, she unpicks the source monitoring in the following passage from Mrs. Dalloway:

And Miss Brush [Lady Bruton’s secretary] went out, came back; laid papers on the table; and Hugh produced his fountain pen; his silver fountain pen, which had done 20 years’ service, he said, unscrewing the cap. It was still in perfect order; he had shown it to the makers; there was no reason, they said, why it should ever wear out; which was somehow to Hugo’s credit, and to the credit of the sentiments which his pen expressed (so Richard Dalloway felt) as Hugh began writing capital letters with rings around them in the margin, and thus marvelously reduced Lady Bruton’s tangles to sense, to grammar such as the editor of the Times, Lady Bruton felt, watching the marvelous transformation, must respect. (Zunshine, 2006, p. 32)
Zunshine (2006) offers the following list to capture what she calls the “narrative gestalt” of this scene, starting with the “smallest, irreducible units of embedded intentionality and building up”:

The makers of the pen think that it will never wear out (1st level).

Hugh says that the makers of the pen think that it will never wear out (2nd level).

Lady Bruton wants the editor of the Times to respect and publish her ideas (2nd level).

Hugh wants Lady Bruton and Richard to believe that because the makers of the pen think that it will never wear out, the editor of the Times will respect and publish the ideas recorded by this pen (4th level).

Richard is aware that Hugh wants Lady Bruton and Richard Dalloway to believe that because the makers of the pen think that it will never wear out, the editor of the Times will respect and publish the ideas recorded by this pen (5th level).

Richard suspects that Lady Bruton indeed believes that because, as Hugo says, the makers of the pen think that it will never wear out, the editor of the Times will respect and publish the ideas recorded by this pen (5th level).

Woolf intends us to recognize (by inserting a parenthetical observation, “so Richard Dalloway felt”) that Richard is aware that Hugh wants Lady Bruton and Richard to think that because the makers of the pen think that it will never wear out, the editor of the Times will respect and publish the ideas recorded by this pen (6th level). (Zunshine, 2006, pp. 32–33)

Clearly, this analysis of Woolf’s subtle prose is unwieldy, but, in a sense, this is the very point. Zunshine suggests that fiction and memoir can represent many levels of intentionality simultaneously. The reader does not need to be consciously aware of these levels, any more than he or she is consciously aware of the levels of intentionality at a business meeting or social event. Nonetheless, passages such as this, Zunshine (2006) posits, are nothing less than “a thousands-year-long experimentation with our cognitive adaptations” and thus provide a strenuous workout for our Theory of Mind (p. 26).
Methodology

Robson and Sumara (2007–2009) shared the facilitation of the Owls group, at least initially, with Sumara leading the reading component and Robson the writing. These are the strategies and methods that were used:

Close, Focused Reading of Core Texts

“It’s the first time I’ve done that—gone back and back and back . . .” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, Grethe final interview)

The group read (in the order they appear here): Carol Shield’s (2002) novel Unless, Radcliffe Hall’s (1928) novel The Well of Loneliness, Rita Mae Brown’s (1977) novel Rubyfruit Jungle, DeSalvo’s (1996) memoir, Vertigo, Dorothy’s Allison’s (1995) Two or Three Things I Know For Sure, and Edmund White’s (2000) A Boy’s Own Story. These texts are memoirs or novels that read like memoir, and they explore notions of heterosexism, ageism, and misogyny, as they are experienced in families. As noted earlier, Sumara (2002) and Luce-Kapler (2004) have considerable experience with close reading practices, and Sumara encouraged the women to constantly revisit the texts, including their own writing, and the writing produced by others in the group.

Close Writing

Robson’s philosophy as a teacher of writing might be summarized as follows:

Show. Don’t tell. Readers experience the emotional or cognitive states of protagonists and characters through acts of interpretive mind reading (Zunshine, 2006), rather than direct descriptions.

Use enabling constraints. Enabling constraints can be defined as “the structural conditions that help to determine the balance between sources of coherence that allow for a collective to maintain a focus of purpose/identity and sources of disruption that compel the
collective to constantly adjust and adapt” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 147). This definition describes a tension that is conducive (perhaps essential) to learning—a tension between identifiable focus on the one hand and creative uncertainty on the other. In an educational setting such as the one I am discussing, enabling constraints are provided (though not exclusively) by pedagogical interventions.

**Consider intention.** Style, genre, form, technique, and imagery arise directly from the intention of the work. Therefore, the prime purpose of writing exercises should be to delineate intentions quite exactly by using enabling restraints. The exercises used with the women included the imitation of literary forms (Langer, 1957), imitation of specific textual excerpts (Denzin, 1994), the use of selected scenes or quotations from texts as a starting point, the adoption of various personae, states of mind, or points of view, the exploration of key themes, ideas, concepts, or experiences, and the unpacking of key moments in our life histories, and the use of detailed concrete *qualia* to take the reader there (Lodge, 2002).

**Revise.** As Lyn Emanuel (1992, p. 256) has said, human vision entails constant cognitive readjustments as we receive new information, change our perspective, or reinterpret our situations. The processes of revision offer us an opportunity to deconstruct lovely knowledge and construct difficult knowledge as we “rummage through” our “junk” (Emanuel, 1992, p. 256), to respond to new information, insights, and perspectives as they emerge in our work.

**Introduction of Theory**

From the beginning, the facilitators were as transparent as possible about their purposes in the research. Before the first meeting, we asked the women to read at least some of Sumara’s (2002) book, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters*. For their part, from the first, the women wanted to know more about the theoretical underpinnings of the research. To address their requests for information, Robson began to share papers she wrote for her doctoral classes,
as well as the work of various theorists, including Bryson et al. (2006), Cameron (1991), Foucault (2001), Ricoeur (2006), Stein (1997), and Zunshine (2006). The researchers began to explain academic terms and jargon (such as dialectic, Socratic method, and postmodernism) as they arose. As a practising writer and experienced writer-in-residence, Robson constantly modeled, discussed, and theorized the craft of writing.

**Reflection**

Tara Fenwick (2003) has noted that “people learn by integrating their concrete emotional experiences with reflection” (p. 46). Though writing tasks were assigned during group sessions, it is important to note that the bulk of them were carried out by the women in isolation and outside group time. Robson jokingly referred to assigned tasks as *homework*, and the term stuck. An expectation emerged that assignments would be carried out conscientiously and promptly. The women spoke of our meetings as a *class*, took notes, asked for copies of transcripts, and engaged in extra reading. In other words, they regarded the group as a site of learning, and were disappointed when it came to an end two years later.

**Individual Interviews**

Each participant was interviewed twice. The first interviews built upon the recounting of a childhood memory. The second focused upon the writing process, in particular, their work on what we called their *memoirettes*—short memoirs with a strong focus and structure, completed by each of the women. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

**Discussion**

Most discussions began with a discrete purpose—usually analysis and interpretation of a specific piece of writing or text, or a given topic or question. However, after over a year of this work, the women were able to range adeptly, rapidly, and enthusiastically between the various texts, their own oeuvre of writing, and the theory, ideas, and topics we had discussed, drawing
each other’s attention to points of similarity and divergence. As facilitators, Robson and Sumara tried to stay focused on their research questions, yet attentive to emergent learning.

**Reflexive Pedagogy**

As experienced teachers with a commitment to emergent learning (Davis et al., 2008), the two responded to questions, insights, or new directions as they arose, often abandoning their preconceived plans in order to follow interesting lines of investigation and conversation. A key feature of their pedagogy was to move the group from one genre, perspective or activity to another at strategic moments, in order to unsettle the conversation before positions became overly entrenched. The pedagogy employed was thus fluid, recursive, and rhizomatic, rather than structured, linear, and organized.

This next section represents one strand of this learning as we trace the journey of a single short memoir back through our data (transcripts, emails, writing, interviews, and field notes). We represent the history (or memoir) of one piece of life writing.

**White Handle Knives**

**Secrets and Lies**

In November 2007, two months into the process, Robson and Sumara invited the women to write about what, if anything, they had learned from their engagement in the group. In accordance with their pedagogy (as outlined above), they suggested that each participant choose a sentence or phrase from *Unless* (Shields, 2002) or *Vertigo* (DeSalvo, 1996) that seemed to speak to them strongly and then go on to use it as a generative prompt.

Chris M. began with the following quotation from *Vertigo*: “I know that a life that is entirely safe is a dead life, a life not worth living” (DeSalvo, 1996, p. 110). The piece she wrote, “Secrets and Lies” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 23, p. 7), was a first step in the

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3 The real names of participants are used at their request.
group’s extended exploration of the related notions of home and exile. As a Roman Catholic nun, Chris M. had tried, for many years, to ignore her attraction to other women. However, when the Church posted her to Chile, she became involved in resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship and concurrently developed a sexual relationship with Bridget, a nun from the same order (still Chris M.’s partner and also another member of Owls). In “Secrets and Lies,” Chris M. wrote that as she became politicized, she understood that keeping her love for Bridget secret meant that “on some level I wasn’t really living at all.” She went on to describe how she had left the convent and returned to the United States to live openly with Bridget. “In the end,” Chris M. wrote, “leaving the security and familiarity of life as we know it was the road less travelled that has made all the difference” (“Secrets and Lies,” Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 23, p. 7).

Reflexive Pedagogy in Action: Teaching on the Fly

“Secrets and Lies” generated a spontaneous and lengthy discussion about home and exile. It was the first time that the group had taken off in this way and the first of many occasions that the facilitators decided to abandon their agreed plan for the session, as Robson’s field notes attest: “We had agreed that I would set a writing exercise as a warm up, but I guessed/hoped that Dennis is okay with last minute changes to the agenda and decided to cut it” (Robson, 2007–2009, November 23, p. 7). As it turned out, Sumara was also thinking on his feet and immediately directed the group’s attention to a chapter in Unless in which Reta obsessively cleans her house (Shields, 2002, p. 50). After rereading this, the group talked at length about what, exactly, constitutes home for people who are gay, and what, for that matter, might constitute its antithesis: exile?

The next day, Robson recalled a text that might provoke the conversation further: “Virtually Queer? Homing devices, mobility, and un/belongings,” a paper by Mary Bryson et al.
(2006) that considers the strategies employed by queers to differently define the concept of home. Since the text is dense and complex, she wrote a one-paragraph summary, which she sent out by email the following week (together with the complete paper). For his part, Sumara had placed a rush order for eight copies of *Letters of Transit* (Aciman, 1999) and drew the group’s attention to Eva Hoffman’s essay in it, “The New Nomads,” in which she suggests that if we do not “create homing structures for ourselves, we risk a condition of exile that we do not even recognize as banishment” (Hoffman, 1999, p. 63).

In accordance with their reflexive pedagogy, the researchers had followed the group’s interest in the topic of home and exile, a direction that had brought the group into tight focus during the spirited discussion of “Secrets and Lies.” They had next unsettled the group and complicated the discussion by switching activities, from text to writing, then to discussion of that writing, then back to text, and then to theory. Now they invited the participants to step back into individual reflection and another piece of writing. This time, Sumara asked each of the women to produce what they described as a narrative that might “stitch these [senses of loss and exile] together and give them a shape, an interpretation” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, December 7, p. 7). The enabling constraints he set were in one sense specific and in another open-ended. Though specific sections of text and certain questions were defined as a starting point, considerable permissions and freedoms were offered as to the nature of the response. Here are the guidelines we sent out to the group by email:

Reread *Unless* pages 60—62 and *Vertigo* page 149—150 and page 133. Then write about the following questions. As usual, feel free to take off in any direction that seems appropriate. How do you define home? Can you describe it with the same passion and detail as Carol Shields? What is the difference between freedom and exile? In what ways are you an outsider? One? More? What price have you paid for freedom? Do you have any regrets? (Robson, personal communication, November 9, 2007)
Home and Exile

Chris M. took up the chronology from where she had left off in “Secrets and Lies” in the following piece:

Flying back to North America, I expected to return home where I could live with integrity. I returned to the home of my parents. It was not the home I grew up in. I could not tell them why I had really left the convent. I went to church and had to leave part way through mass as I experienced an overwhelming sensation of being crushed. This was not my home any longer. Finally, I found my lesbian feet and voice once I found myself, found friendships, and became part of a community. So home for me has two dimensions—outer and inner. I can only recognize home, only feel I belong as long as both are in harmony. I must come home to myself in a place that allows me to be all that I have become, all that I am. I feel more or less at home right now, and that’s as good as it gets. (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, February 1, p. 8)

Robson and Sumara were excited and encouraged by the subtlety of Chris M.’s analysis and by her evident response to the texts. As suggested earlier, Robson encouraged participants to show rather than tell when writing, by focusing tightly upon one moment or image (this instruction also represents an enabling constraint in itself, since both image and moment at once focus attention and open up large creative possibilities). In the piece above, Chris M. recalled the close detail of one such moment at mass when what was once home suddenly ceased to be so as new perceptions crashed in upon once safe and familiar contexts, neatly capturing what Varela (1999) would describe as a moment of breakdown in which new ethical insight is forged from necessity. In writing about this moment, Chris M. reconsidered the simple notion of home as a physical place and reframed it in the understanding that it can also be constructed internally, perhaps influenced by Hoffman’s (1999, p. 60) contention in her essay on exile that there are two kinds of homes—the given home of childhood and the constructed home of the adult. Rather than dichotomizing these external and internal senses of home, however, Chris M. frames coming home as a matter of integrating the two in a kind of uneasy harmony. Exiled by her family’s inability to comprehend her choices, Chris understands that she must construct a new place of safety and comfort by rebuilding identity (finding her lesbian feet and voice) and
seeking out an accepting community. It is then that she can come home to herself. Nonetheless, her narrative is not simple or purely celebratory. She describes the feeling of being “more or less” at home as a compromise: “as good as it gets.”

When it came to Bridget’s turn to share, the researchers were less ready to celebrate.

The Exile’s Return

Bridget began, somewhat inauspiciously, by framing her piece with a passage from Vertigo (DeSalvo, 1996, p. 227) rejecting scholarly introversion in favour of “taking tea, learning to bake bread” and paired this with a reference from Unless about the superiority of the heart to the brain. This somewhat anti-intellectual stance served as an interesting introduction to the piece that followed. Totally ignoring our guidelines, Bridget offered a spirited recitation of “The Exile’s Return” (McCarthy, 2007), a poem by the 19th-century philosopher John Locke (see Appendix) that offers, on the whole, an uncomplicated, celebratory, and romantic picture of Ireland.

This piece of robustly masculine Victoriana struck an odd note in this group of 21st-century urban lesbians, who were eating vegetarian quesadillas in a room plastered with activist slogans, and there was a brief silence when Bridget finished reading. As facilitator of this particular exercise, Robson felt the need to say something. But what? On the one hand, she felt the need to say something encouraging. On the other, she wanted to be honest in her critique. It was not so much the fact that Bridget had used the work of another writer that was bothersome (though it was an issue); it was more that she had presented a grand narrative of uncomplicated patriotism and a patriarchal deity. Robson waited to see how the other women would react, hoping that someone would name the elephant in the living room, but one by one, they murmured brief platitudes. After an internal struggle, Robson decided that honesty was the only option:
Robson: As a fellow Brit, I felt torn. I think there is something about the actual physicality of one’s homeland that feels like it’s genetic and part of me says that it’s just a romantic fiction, Bridget—that you’re in love with something that doesn’t exist. That, you know, if you went and lived there you would be insane within two weeks, you know what I’m saying?

Bridget: (laughing) A little bit.

Robson: Right. And, what is that? You know, I feel the same thing. I feel all that romantic swell towards something . . .

Bridget: Chris said, “Why don’t we live in Ireland?” I couldn’t live in Ireland. I couldn’t live in Ireland because it’s so homophobic. Like, like, I wouldn’t be . . . it’s another home . . . because of being a lesbian. (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, February 1, 2008)

On the one hand, Bridget’s reading of “An Exile’s Return” expresses an uncomplicated attachment to the place of her birth and girlhood, a conviction that is so strongly source monitored that it has become unquestionable—an item of lovely knowledge. On the other, Bridget also knows that she could never live in Ireland, because of the homophobic culture she would encounter—knowledge that is truly difficult to accept. Where Chris was able to integrate some complicated and contradictory feelings about home and exile, Bridget seemed, at this point, to prefer to keep them separate, or at least this is how we read her remark about the notion of Ireland as “another home”—a home that coexisted alongside the new home she and Chris have constructed in Canada. Robson had challenged her by bringing both convictions to her attention at once. As Hoffman (1999) suggests, this kind of cognitive dissonance is typical of those who have experienced two cultures (such as gays and immigrants) and the sense of yearning and distancing experienced can be a “wonderful stimulation to writing” (pp. 50–51).

Revision

The researchers decided that this was an opportune time to engage in some revision, which, as Emanuel points out (Levy, 2009), is one way to grapple with “the inaccuracies of our conceptions of selfhood” (p. 256). On this occasion, they chose left hand, or left page journalling
as a way in—an exercise designed to capture hidden, buried, unconscious, or nonconscious responses. Using the piece she had written in response to the exercise, Robson tried to dig under the text by scribbling down (on the left hand page) the random thoughts, feelings, and associations that emerged in her rereading. She Xeroxed the results, together with the original work, and circulated them around the group. The women discussed the process for a while and then were asked to try the experiment with any piece of their own work that they chose. It was further suggested that they might reread earlier feedback they had received on the piece and any of the core texts that it brought to mind.

Bridget decided to take a closer look at “The Exile’s Return” and in doing so, uncovered an important insight, as she related at a later date: “we had to choose a piece we had written and do the left hand page, and it was then that I realized why you were pissed off . . . .It was home where I learned that I was loved unconditionally. I wanted to still think that that was true, but it really wasn’t” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 8). As she realized this, Bridget came to another realization: “the one part that was real for me was the line in the poem ‘the heart that will sigh for the absent land’.” As she reexamined her feelings about Ireland, Bridget realized that this one line had been valuable in helping her to capture her sense of loss and exile, and she could let go of the rest of the poem.

Six months later, in September 2008, the group was still thinking about the topic of home and exile but had almost forgotten “The Exile’s Return” (with the exception of Bridget). The women were asked to reread two pieces of text. The first, from The Well of Loneliness (Hall, 1928, pp. 119–122), describes how Stephen, the protagonist, experiences a strong sense of dislocation from her family home after her father dies—the only one who understands and accepts her lesbian identity. Stephen’s mother is “terribly aloof; in their hour of great need they must still stand divided these two, by the old, insidious barrier.” Matters are brought to a head
when Stephen, out on the hunt, realizes that she identifies more with the fox than the chase, and that “she could never again inflict wanton destruction or pain upon any poor, hapless creature.” For Stephen this is the end of her simple acceptance of things as they are, as they have been irreproachably source monitored. This was paired with a reading from Unless (Shields, 2002)—the same house cleaning episode that had inspired Chris M. and Bridget’s first writing on the topic of home. The participants were invited, once again, to write about home, exile, and belonging. Here is the piece that Bridget wrote in response.

**White Handle Knives**

Fionnuala was always fascinated with white handle knives. When she was a very small child white handle knives were the cutlery that was used in her home. The handles were made of bone and she called them white handle knives.

Fionnuala grew up and left home. There were no more white handle knives. The knives that were used were cold stainless steel. She experienced this as another way of missing her home.

As the years progressed Fionnuala met her partner. They set up a home together. There were still no white handle knives. They appeared to be an item that was no longer in use anywhere.

When her partner’s mother died she inherited some household items. One of them was a wooden box of silverware. Imagine Fionnuala’s surprise when she opened the box and there among the *Made in Sheffield* silverware was a set of white handle knives, forks, and fish knives.

When Fionnuala went back home to Ireland to visit she said to her mother: “Where are our white handle knives?” Her mother looked at her fondly, smiled and replied: “We don’t use them anymore. When you were a wee girl you threw them all in the fire because you liked to see them blaze up.”

To this day Fionnuala uses white handle knives and forks. She will always be connected to home and family through white handle knives. (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, September 15, 2008)

**Discussion**

Though “White Handle Knives” is short and simply written, we will argue here that it represents a remarkable evolution for Bridget, both as a writer and as a reflective individual.
Bridget seems to have benefitted considerably from the writing strategies used in the group: in particular these include the use of genre, specific detail, point of view, and imagery. In terms of its simple language, strong plot, use of repetition, and vibrant central image, the piece neatly employs the elements of parable or fable—a form we had experimented with in response to reading the exile story from Genesis (cited in Hoffman’s essay). Although “White Handle Knives” is nonfiction, Bridget has chosen to write about the events she experienced in the third person—a point of view the researchers had encouraged as a way to gain critical distance from their stories, to take a step back, as it were, and to see themselves through the eyes of a fictive other.

The tale is highly concrete and embodied—it shows rather than tells. The white handle knives are skilfully used as an extended metaphor in the piece. When they first appear, they are a token of home as Fionnuala perceived it in childhood. They are the “cutlery that was used,” and as this economic phrase makes clear, there were no other choices on the table, so to speak. This was just fine with Fionnuala, however, since she was fascinated by them. When Fionnuala grows up and leaves home, a sense of loss is conveyed through the “cold stainless steel” knives that replace the organic and familiar bone. We note, in passing, Bridget’s sparing use of adjectives in this story. Typically, adjectives and adverbs are much overused in the work of beginning writers as they struggle to convey intense feeling. An over reliance upon these verbal Trojan horses is one of the many reasons that “The Exile’s Return” sounds trite to the modern ear. The adjective *cold* here is one of Bridget’s few, and highly effective, indulgences in this regard.

It was the feeling of some women in the group that lesbian fiction has tended to romanticize and simplify the coming out process, using it as a didactic, rather than a literary opportunity. Several of the women noted, for instance, that when we reread the classic lesbian coming out text, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (Brown, 1977), its celebratory tone felt contrived and
unconvincing—a narrative far too simple to convey the difficulties and joys of reidentification. Though Bridget does allow herself a moment of exposition in her parable, it is resonant and sparing: “She experienced this as another way of missing her home.” This quietly suggests a multitude of other ways in which Fionnuala missed her home, and coupled with the clinical and chilly stainless steel knives, it effectively andconcisely communicates Fionnuala’s sense of loss. Like Chris’s “Secrets and Lies,” Bridget’s short fable is able to unpick intellectual nuances conflated or ignored by Brown. Though we may recreate our sense of home elsewhere, exile still brings regrets, and in “White Handle Knives,” there is a sense that Fionnuala misses something. Even when she is happy with her new home and partner, “there were still no white handle knives.” It takes a while for new traditions to be established when generational continuity is lost. It is not until Fionnuala’s partner’s mother dies, and she inherits a set of Made in Sheffield silverware, that the partner can provide a complete home for Fionnuala.

As if this were not enough, the piece complicates the story even more. When Fionnuala revisits her family, she finds, like other exiles, that though she has clung faithfully to old conventions, her family has abandoned them—they no longer use the white handle knives. Also, her seemingly precise and indelible memories of home were what Zunshine would call an unreliable narration. Though she remembers the handles of the knives as being made of bone, their ability to blaze up indicates that, actually, they were made of plastic! What’s more, though Fionnuala remembers loving the knives and being fascinated by them, she has entirely forgotten the fact that she threw them all in the fire to watch them burn. Fionnuala has clung to the image of the knives as something safe and enduring, but to her mother, they have always represented the fact that even as a child Fionnuala was an iconoclast fond of seeing the explosive consequences of adventure. As Hoffman (1999, pp. 51–52) points out, the perspective offered by experiences of two cultures can open us up to sharper insight.
In the writing of this piece, Bridget forges a more integrated understanding of her personal imagery. She understands that her tendency to nostalgia has distorted her memories of home, that it is possible to recreate traditions differently, that through these realizations, she can connect more realistically to family and to home and understand, through her mother’s “fond smile,” that her mother sees and loves those very qualities of transgression and rebelliousness that made her feel that she did not belong.

It will not have escaped any of our readers that our exegesis on Bridget’s fable is almost four times as long as the fable itself—a testament, we believe, to the multiple levels at which it operates. If we were to apply theory of mind, we believe that “White Handle Knives” would score highly in terms of the levels of intentionality it presents. Zunshine might have represented them something like this:

Fionnuala came to understand that her mother knew that Fionnuala had cherished a nostalgic attachment to the white handle knives and had believed that the family would still be using them (3rd level).

Bridget wants us to recognize that the mother remembered that Fionnuala herself had destroyed the knives a long time ago—a fact that Fionnuala had forgotten, but which the reader imagines had probably angered the mother. The reader understands that in hindsight, this causes the mother to realize that actually she loves and cherishes her feisty daughter (5th level).

Bridget wants us to recognize that that the mother remembered that Fionnuala herself had destroyed the knives a long time ago—a fact that Fionnuala had forgotten, but which the reader imagines had probably angered the mother. The reader understands that, in hindsight, this causes the mother to realize that she loves and cherishes her feisty daughter.

The reader also understands that Bridget is suggesting through this parable that other gay and lesbian children might reconsider the notion of home and belonging (7th level).
Conclusion

When we write memoir, we practice the complex cognitive processes required by theory of mind. This may not be so much the case in unexamined first draft work or journalling, but will occur more often as we work, in a conscious way, with the multiple levels of intentionality involved in writing narrative by shifting points of view, remembering new details, incorporating other ideas, and trying to unpick our own motivations and those of others, or to represent them more accurately. The process of revision (re-vision) is a useful way to sort through the complexities of our experiences in order to make better sense of them. Many practising writers report an element of surprise in this process of examination—a sense that they stumble across unexpected meaning. Commentators such as Felman and Laub (1992) have theorized such observations by suggesting that when we give testimony, we “encounter strangeness” (p. 7) and may produce “unintended and unintentional” testimony in an unconscious act (p. 15), in order to stumble upon ourselves as an observer might. Britzman (2006) suggests that in the context of psychoanalysis “making words from things has therapeutic action” as free association transports discourse into “the realm of the unapparent, the erased, the unnoticed, and the things one did not mean to say” (p. 12).

It was not until we traced, for the purposes of this paper, the journey of “White Handle Knives” that we began to understand quite how complex are the processes of learning upon which we have all embarked. The following table summarizes the journey of Bridget’s story:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Summary of Pedagogical Interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007 September</td>
<td>Reading: <em>Unless</em> and <em>Vertigo</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 November 9</td>
<td>Participants choose one quotation from texts as a starting point for writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 December</td>
<td>Introduction and discussion of related theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 January</td>
<td>Participants write about home and exile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 February</td>
<td>Bridget reads “The Exile’s Return” and Claire offers feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 April</td>
<td>Bridget chooses to left-hand journal on “The Exile’s Return.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 September</td>
<td>We read new texts and practice close reading of a specific section that focuses on exile. We ask everyone to reconsider their reading, feedback offered and write about home and exile again. Bridget writes “White Handle Knives.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The story of this piece of writing, its memoir, one might say, makes us realize that teaching and learning is not a simple pairing of one pedagogical cause with a happy learning effect, but something much more complex and difficult to identify, a narrative with interesting twists and turns that would have been lost if we had not paid attention. In this sense, the pedagogical processes involved in this kind of work may be themselves unintentional and unintended—requiring reflexive strategies that emerge in response to these narratives as they unfold. The memoir of “White Handle Knives” is, of course, a partial and unreliable fiction—constructed retrospectively in order to congeal the past in the way in which we might have liked it to happen. Who knows what other influences have been at work in Bridget’s 74 years of education, what conversations she may have had with Chris M., how much she wished to please, impress, or annoy her teachers, or what she saw that day on television? We have coconstructed a story from our data—a classic narrative with rising tension, an arc, a climax and denouement. As
Denzin (2000) has said, “Interpreters as storytellers tell narrative tales with beginnings, middles, and ends” (p. 500). We cannot make sense of what has been learned until we sit down and write interpretive texts such as these, telling the story first to ourselves, and then our significant others, and then to the public.

It must also be acknowledged that though Bridget was happy with this particular piece of work and felt that she learned something in the process of its composition, this state of affairs did not always occur. The members of Owls encountered considerable resistance to difficult knowledge—“the passionate work of denial and disavowal” (Britzman, 1996, p. 5). Some of the women spoke at length about the ways in which their experiences with authority and with formal schooling had undermined their confidence—“the word ‘essay’,” said one, “put me back in the classroom as a high school student” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 23, p. 8). Others bemoaned the difficulty of switching points of view and changing perspective: “I tried 30 times to think about something from another’s perspective, and I found that really challenging. I almost had to bully someone else into doing it” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, December 7, p. 9). The same woman described the writing of one very emotionally difficult piece as “working through a fog. I obviously protected myself from this period in my life, so I’m not sure that I wasn’t even guessing when I wrote this” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, December 7, p. 11).

Nonetheless, it is our best guess that the fact that Bridget and others in the group have become aware of complications in their narratives is consequent, to some extent at least, upon the close literary practices in which they were engaged. One participant put it this way: “It feels like I have changed a bit and changed my story. I had thought that my childhood was a long continuum of impositions that I had to tolerate. I now see my childhood in terms of a struggle, and the eventual emergence from an oppressive household” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, November 14, p. 8). “What I have gleaned from our readings and reflections in group,” said
another, “is that writing the minute details of everyday life with ordinary people and ordinary lives can be and is insightful. It allows me to reflect on who I am, where I’ve been, where I’m going. Everyday lives are important to sense of self” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, May 23 08). At the end of our time together, the members of Owls certainly felt that they had gained access to new memories, remembered things differently, and were able to represent their experiences more accurately.
Interlude 3:

Poetry

In the next chapter, I consider Keats’s notion of negative capability, using it as a starting point for some reflections about the role of the unconscious in creative composition. Here, I offer a poem of my own by way of introduction, arguing that although it is very different from Keats’s at first glance, it is in some ways quite similar, in its investigation of the uncanny nature of inspiration. I was interested to see what would happen if I stayed with the genre by using the poem of my own, written on a similar topic.

“... but Is It Art?”

Returning from poetic wandering,
I find a strange woman has replaced my partner.
She hisses when I block the television
shooes me with violent hands regardless of the fork she holds
(unknowing it would seem
since our dog eyes her food untouched upon the plate)

Watch! Watch! is all she will say
her eyes distended
and (inexplicably)
He’s going to take the bag off!

Obedient to hissing woman and her careless cutlery
I watch watch . . .
some stupid studio audience
a has-been host
a woman in a sari
an Indian guy with his hand in a bag.

The dog sighs.

The couple looks coy.

I consider escape.

But the woman who looks like my partner
is clearly the reincarnation of the Ancient Mariner complete with glittering eye
and a skinny hand with which she grabs me.
I resign myself to watching
some sorry crap that’s meant to startle
but is not Art.

I speculate, as poets will -
this quiet Indian’s a guy who gambles all his cash away, perhaps,
or blows it on women’s clothing from the shopping channel.
Maybe he’s wicked to his humble wife -
by the look of her a classic victim.

Who cares?

Everyone it seems - the audience, my partner, the jaded host, now even the dog -
everyone is watching this Indian guy
except for me - “The Poet” - with better things to contemplate
like scars upon my navel and my knees
inflicted by my stumbles on the stony path of Art.
I need, quite frankly, a little tea and sympathy -
some solace after scrabbling up Mount Parnassus
in search of a floozy Muse
who must be with a shepherd boy
because she’s sure not answering my calls.

Come to think of it,
Zeus and his pantheon could have their own talk show.

I can see the captions now:
“Men who Fuck Birds and the Women Who Love Them”
“Women Who Hate Men and Wear Vipers in their Hair”
“Husbands Who Swallow Their Kids Whole—What Psychologists Believe”

It’s so contemporary, I think.
Maybe talk shows are the very stuff of Art . . .
. . . and seconds later . . .
. . . perhaps it’s a poem!

I reach for pen, as Humble Wife in Sari
(suddenly fit subject for my alchemic wit)
reaches for the black velvet bag and eases it from Quiet Indian’s hand
to prove him a god indeed.

Five hideous serpents sprout from his left hand
to writhe in tangled spirals to the floor.

In case you smile, hopeful for light entertainment,
I insert this special warning:

DANGER! THIS IS NOT ART!!
THese FINGERNAILS ARE NOT A METAPHOR!!
No. They are the Longest Fingernails in the Whole World.
This TV Show is called “The Guinness Book of Records.”
These are his own real fingernails.
Each one is around four feet long.
They are ugly, brown, ridged and scaly
(imagine sheep’s horns stretched out really thin).

_Holy Jesus Christ on a rubber crutch in January!_
I say – drawing on my full literary vocabulary.

They perambulate, the quiet couple
bearing the nails like sacred relics.
A few brave hands reach out to touch them.
Others clutch at throats.
Eyes are averted.
Strong men flinch.

The couple seem used to strong reactions.
Their smiles are wise and sympathetic like doctors who proffer bad news
and wait for you to take it.

*************

Why did he grow them?

I’ll tell you now, I never learned the truth.

What follows is “mere” speculation as they say
(that “mere” the place where all we artists live).
Being Poetic, I am licensed to trace the tangle of his nails
back through his cuticles and on into his heart
to find, perhaps, some ancient discipline like watching rocks grow.

Or a nobody who found an easy claim to greatness
in the Book of Records - an unassuming man, he was, perhaps
incapable of holding his breath for long
or squeezing all his friends into a phone booth.

Then there’s the Humble Wife.
You can never figure that dynamic.
He didn’t cut his nails one week let’s say,
clippers lost down the couch.
Wife nagged him into stubbornness
“For God’s sake, husband! Cut those nails!”
Of course he wouldn’t.
Enjoyed the surprise on merchant’s faces when he paid.
Colleagues drifting in from the next department just to see him
always so nondescript till then.
Back in the real world on the telly there is documentary footage. We see the nails fly first class on an airplane. First the Quiet Man. In the next seat the fingernails, incognito in a flight bag, Finally the Humble Wife.

Later they relax in their hotel room, stretched in pajamas, the nails splayed out between them. She tells her side of it - how she wakes every hour to move the nails so he can sleep. Displays a chitinous altar - the bowl of water, borax and nail brush she scrubs with every morning “to keep the mold away.”

No. There are no children.

Sex? I don’t know.

The bathroom?

I guess he wipes with his right hand and rests the fingernails on his knee.

Out of all our questions, this one strikes me:

Given that this man’s work is unproductive though he suffers for it daily . . .
Given that he bears the weight of vision like a big dead bird . . .
Given that he lifts the veil to see only horror reflected in our faces . . .
that he proves just how crazy life gets when you just stop trimming - the way our normality can grow grotesque . . .

. . . well . . .

. . . is it Art?

—Robson, “. . . but Is It Art?”

Discussion

What the Thrush Said

O thou whose face hath felt the Winter’s wind,
Whose eye has seen the snow-clouds hung in mist,
And the black elm tops ’mong the freezing stars,
To thee the spring will be a harvest-time.
O thou, whose only book has been the light
Of supreme darkness which thou feddest on
Night after night when Phoebus was away,
To thee the Spring shall be a triple morn.
O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
And yet the Evening listens. He who saddens
At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
And he’s awake who thinks himself asleep.

—Keats, 1818

These two works, Keats’ and my own, written almost 200 years apart, have an obvious similarity: they are both memoir. As Keats (1818) tells Reynolds in the letter in which “What the Thrush Said” first appears, it attempts to capture an actual experience, as does my own poem “. . . but is it Art?” As they appear on the page, however, they could not seem more dissimilar. “. . . but is it Art?” is a sprawling example of free verse—a 1980s innovation that eschews systems of meter, rhyme, or versification in order to represent or reflect a train of thought. Of course, free verse is not randomly composed. It still uses form and structure, though these are not orderly and predictable. In fact, the poet pays great attention to such matters as rhythm and line breaks in order to achieve the effects she wants—often the imitation of a stream of consciousness or conversational address. “. . . but is it Art?” is also a performance poem—a subgenre of free verse that emerged with a concurrent movement called poetry slam. As its name suggests, performance poetry is written with the intention that it will be recited, with a large degree of dramatic emphasis, to a live audience. Rather than offering a reading, the performance poet offers an embodied and theatrical performance of the work, moving off the page in order to recite the poem from memory. For example, as I perform “. . . but is it Art?” I use gesture and facial expressions to recreate some of the scenes described (such as the perambulation of the nails and the airplane travel), or suggest, by an air of attentive listening, that the audience are asking questions of me in the final section, before I respond with the answers (“Sex? I don’t know”). In

4 “I had no idea but of the morning,” Keats tells Reynolds, “and the thrush said I was right-seeming to say . . .” The text of the poem follows.
the composition of performance poetry, the poet has some objectives that are different from the poet writing for the page. For examples, she must order and present important information clearly (since oral presentations are more ephemeral than written ones) and pay particular attention to timing and emphases.

At first glance, “What the Thrush Said” is the very antithesis of freeform performance poetry. Rather, it looks like a sonnet—the epitome of formal Elizabethan elegance. It has 14 lines, divided, in terms of their topic and purpose, into three sets of four lines (quatrains), and it ends with one final couplet. In traditional Shakespearean sonnets, the three quatrains develop an argument that is neatly concluded in the final couplet, which acts as a lock or clincher for the debate. The first four lines of “What the Thrush Said” do indeed have their own integrity, in that they comprise a complete sentence, which states that the long winter will end in a harvest. The second quatrain, also a discrete sentence, suggests that the dark night of winter will be replaced by the light morning of spring. The third quatrain moves to an admonition (“fret not after knowledge”) which it repeats, word for word, before concluding with a pair of seemingly related conundrums: anyone who worries about idleness is not really idle, and anyone who thinks he is asleep is actually awake. Rather than moving to an elegant conclusion through a series of ordered steps, then, the poem raises two allusions (night/day and winter/spring) that are never fully unpacked and ends with a pair of conundrums.

Though it is written in iambic pentameters, the poem does not rhyme, and it is probably for this reason (and perhaps also its ambiguous content) that it has remained unclassified and somewhat ignored in relation to the rest of Keats’s canon. Though unrhymed sonnets became popular and acceptable in the 1950s, “What the Thrush Said” is often omitted from selections of Keats’s work, or thrown in as miscellaneous or epistolic. Harry Buxton Forman (1883/2009) the

\[\text{Source: Sonnet, n.d.,} \] credits Auden with the first unrhymed sonnet.
early authority on and editor of Keats’s work, is one of the few to suggest that in its recursive movement, the poem attempts to imitate the song of the thrush in a “bold boyish attempt” as Forman calls it, to protest against what Keats termed “chaining our English by dull rhymes” (pp. 255–256).

My poem is far more structured than it might seem, and is, perhaps paradoxically, much more conventional, in that it is easier to classify in terms of genre. In its own time, Keats’s poem was so countercultural it actually became invisible to many scholars. In its attempt to imitate voice and represent ambiguities without solving them—the complications of life as we actually experience and perceive them—Keats’s poem is the artistic ancestor of mine, which derives from its peculiarity.

As we move to the intentions or content of the two poems, we will note other similarities, similarities that are predicted, I would argue, by their form. Keats’s poem, as we shall see in the paper that follows, was included in a letter to his brothers about negative capability—the poet’s capacity to remain in “uncertainty, Mystery, and doubt.” In straining against the conventions of its own form, it forces the reader to experience some of this uncertainty. “. . . but is it Art?” can be read as an exploration of the same topic. Its protagonist enters the living room after searching fruitlessly for inspiration. Ironically, given the direction of my argument, she has been clinging to a notion of inspiration derived from classical poetry, which she frames it as a rarefied pursuit, in which poetic output comes down from a higher ethereal plane or is divinely inspired. It is only when she reluctantly opens to the present moment—her partner’s fascination with an instance of low culture—that she is moved to write. What she writes about is “the way our reality can grow grotesque,” particularly if we “stop clipping,” or as Keats puts it, if we cease to fret after knowledge, and especially if we transcend our egos as far as this is possible. After stumbling on the stony path of art, the narrator of “. . . but is it Art?” is brought to fuller appreciation of the
moment by her partner. Keats’s thrush lets him know that the dark winter will be followed by illumination, if he pays attention and stays present.

Both poems are about the fragility of inspiration, its allusive and often illogical nature. Each gestures toward order and convention; “What the Thrush Said” does so by its visual imitation of the sonnet and “. . . but is it Art?” by its references to classical poetry. However, each ends up by celebrating mystery. We will never know why the man with long fingernails began to let them grow, but we can (and must) speculate, as we attempt to follow the trail of the senses into the interior psychic world, or as the poem puts it “trace the tangle of his nails back through his cuticles and on into his heart.” “Mere speculation” is the land that poets inhabit, as we uncover meaning through processes of association that seem chaotic and even bizarre, but actually demand close attention.

As an added bonus, “. . . but is it Art?” is, I cannot help but feel, somewhat Freudian in its imagery. The poet wonders if the fingernails have sprouted from some hidden desire, as a kind of sublimation. The fingernails evoke strong and mixed reactions, as “strong men flinch.” The eyes of the other are at once averted and riveted to the display, which seems somehow obscene. They are taboo, these nails, and must be kept hidden except when they are on display; there is something of the fetishistic at work here. Scatological and sexual questions spring to mind as we view an animal part that has been allowed to grow out of proportion and has turned monstrous, like a dirty secret.

Though Keats does not address the question of the repressed or the unconscious directly in “What the Thrush Said,” it is certainly present in others of his poems, such as “Ode to a Nightingale” and “The Eve of St. Agnes.” In this next paper, I use “What the Thrush Said” as a starting place for reflection upon the relationship between literature and psychoanalytic theory. I also continue to explore the pedagogical implications of this line of investigation. In particular, I
consider the value of screen memories as a starting point for insight—a theme that I shall take up further in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 3:

WHAT THE THRUSH SAID

O thou whose face hath felt the Winter’s wind,
Whose eye has seen the snow-clouds hung in mist,
And the black elm tops ’mong the freezing stars,
To thee the spring will be a harvest-time.
O thou, whose only book has been the light
Of supreme darkness which thou feddest on
Night after night when Phoebus was away,
To thee the Spring shall be a triple morn.
O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
And yet the Evening listens. He who saddens
At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
And he’s awake who thinks himself asleep.

—Keats, “What the Thrush Said,” 1818

Though Keats advises us to not to fret after knowledge, I do not believe that he is suggesting that knowledge is not important or that idleness is an end in itself. For Keats, idle contemplation provided a route to knowledge, and it might be said without irony that he worked hard not to fret. These are two of the many paradoxes to be encountered when we write memoir. And here is another—though such investigations have been complicated by the variety of disciplines involved (aesthetics, literary criticism, epistemological and philosophical perspectives immediately spring to mind), I bring yet another to the table—and that is psychoanalytic theory. As I bring together Keats’s notion of negative capability and Freud’s considerations of screen memories and the uncanny, I hope to reconceptualize the educational potential of writing memoir. Literature and psychoanalytic theory are old bedfellows, but with Felman (2007), I wonder if their relationship could use a little help. Felman (2007) suggests that love between the two disciplines might be reinvented if we addressed the couple’s skewed power dynamic, in which literature has been positioned as slave to the master of psychoanalysis, in that it provides a “body of language,” which the “body of knowledge” represented by psychoanalysis has
interpreted and explained (pp. 5–6). Psychoanalysis has thus been rendered the subject and
literature the object.

If we reverse this perspective (in order to consider the possibility of a more reciprocal
arrangement), matters that have escaped our notice become evident, such as the dependency of
the master upon the slave. Felman (2007) points out that Freud drew heavily upon literature for
his conceptual frameworks, designing key concepts, such as the Oedipus complex, Narcissism,
masochism and sadism, by building upon literary narratives and terminology (p. 9). She adds that
psychoanalysis draws upon literature for its method as well as its theoretical framework, since
psychoanalysis is nothing more or less than the narration, consideration, and deconstruction of
life stories. If the psychoanalytic “body of knowledge” is built upon the interpretation of
narratives, in what sense is it scientific rather than literary? This is an old debate: Freud’s 12
nominations for a Nobel in science were rejected because his methods were considered
unscientific, and a final (presumably desperate) nomination by his friend Romaine Rolland for a
Nobel in literature was also unsuccessful. The argument continues to rage (Grayling, 2002, p.
104; Kaye, 2003).

Matters become even more topsy-turvy when we consider the slave’s knowledge of the
master’s house, in this case, the conceptualization of the psyche. Author David Lodge (2002, p.
10) has suggested that the novel can be considered the richest and most comprehensive record of
human consciousness that we have at our disposal. He (Lodge, 2002, p. 63) points out (and this
is a point I shall return to) that dense rich texts such as Ulysses achieve this in large part through
their ability to render qualia,6 which offer us the opportunity to vicariously experience the lives
of others, to get inside their heads as it were—a project that is clearly both literary and
psychoanalytic, as both reader and analyst attempt to understand the subjectivity of the other.

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6 Qualia can be defined as exact and specific experiences of consciousness, such as the taste of a madeleine
cake accompanied by feelings of nostalgia, described by Proust.
Denzin (2000) points to the failure of language to serve modernist projects by representing a coherent reality *out there* while at the same time celebrating its ability to reconstruct our inner processes with great precision, including “that which is submerged and hidden” (p. 5), in other words, our unconscious, preconscious and nonconscious lives. As Lodge (2002, p. 59) points out, Freud himself was gracious in conceding this point when he acknowledged those poets and writers who discovered the unconscious before he did.

For his part, contemporary cognitive scientist George Lakoff (2008) parts company with Chomsky when he argues that language is not simply pure form to be manipulated, but rather, intimately connected with the operation and organization of the brain (p. 118). This organization is achieved by frames or narratives that have developed over centuries as a result of quotidian human activities. Thinking with Reddy, Lakoff (2008) goes on to suggest that many of these frames are metaphoric and that they operate in a way that is largely unconscious (p. 59). In other words, we use literary structures such as narrative and metaphor to construct and organize meaning as well as to represent it. Moreover, our psychic life is in turn influenced by these frames. Specifically, Lakoff (2008) argues that ideals such as those contained in the Declaration of Independence are not self-evident, but rather the product of the “arousal of empathy with those in other social groups, apparently via what we now understand as mirror neuron circuitry and associated pathways, through novels, art, and other cultural media” (p. 18). It is worth reemphasizing here that empathy—the business of imagining and understanding the experiences of others—is both a literary and psychoanalytic process. Davis et al. (2008) have pointed out

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7 For instance, “Love is a journey” and “More is up” (Lakoff, 2008, pp. 253–254).

8 Lakoff (2008) is not making an argument for biological determinism. He credits habit, choice, and culture for making the truths of the Declaration self-evident over 100 years after the Enlightenment (Lakoff, 2008, p. 118). Neural circuits are constructed and destroyed through use or neglect, a point that literary theorist Lisa Zunshine takes up in her book “Why we read fiction” (Zunshine, 2006).

9 Empathy is of course a contested notion (Hartman, 1997).
that these cultural and social norms influence our experience of the world, since “there is more communication from the brain to the sense organ than there is from the sense organ to the brain” (Davis et al., 2008, p. 22). What we think we know is impacted by what we do not see, what we saw but did not experience, and what we have seen and integrated seamlessly into consciousness. If no knowledge is innocent, then, by extension, all knowledge is implicated. Felman’s (2007) final comment upon the love affair between literature and psychoanalysis draws upon the etymology of this word to recall its earlier, now archaic, sense of being folded within. The two disciplines are folded into each other, she believes, and exist both inside and outside each other at the same time. In the same way that psychoanalysis points to the unconscious of literature, literature is the “unconscious of psychoanalysis” (Felman, 2007, p. 9). Truth claims are barely relevant to this discussion.

Almost two centuries before Keats composed “What the Thrush Said” (on February 19, 1818), René Descartes (1641/1991) had also used the idea of sleep and wakefulness to reflect upon the nature of human consciousness and specifically, to consider what we can be said to know. In his first meditation, he speculates that much of what he has hitherto considered to be certain might in fact be “not entirely certain” (Descartes, 1641/1991, Meditation 1, para. 2). He questions his everyday experiences, wondering, for instance, if he knows for sure that he is “in this place, seated by this fire, clothed in a winter dressing gown” (Descartes, 1641/1991, Meditation 1, para. 4). Famously, he realizes that this is not an absolute certainty, since “there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep” (Descartes, 1641/1991, Meditation 1, para. 5). Rather than relying upon perception (which he regards as a purely sensory experience), Descartes concludes that deductive reasoning alone can provide a certain foundation for knowledge. Even in dreams, he argues, two and three will equal five and a square will possess four sides (Descartes, 1641/1991, Meditation 1, para. 8).
At first glance, Keats’s final line (“and he’s awake who thinks himself asleep”) seems to echo Descartes’ meditation on sleep and wakefulness, but brilliantly, it actually sets it on its head by reversing his question. Keats suspects that we are most truly awake when we think ourselves to be asleep and asks what might happen if we reject the project of knowledge-seeking, or at least do not fret after it by putting it at the center of our curiosity as an end in itself. And finally, he wonders whether surrender to sensual perception might produce something that is not knowledge, exactly (or at least not commonly regarded as such), but nonetheless has great value and significance.

To begin to answer these questions and to explore the epistemological framework they reveal (and, it must be said, conceal), let us turn to a letter Keats wrote to his brother, written on 21 December 1817, just two months before the composition of “What the Thrush Said”:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean negative Capability, that which is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any reaching after fact and reason. (Keats, 2005, p. 1351)

Later in this letter, Keats expands upon the notion of negative capability when he talks of allowing the mind to be “a thoroughfare for all thoughts.” His biographer, Walter Jackson Bate (1963), gives his own definition as follows: “an imaginative openness of mind and heightened receptivity to reality in its full and diverse concreteness” (p. 18). Where Descartes seeks certainty and truth through the tight focus of deductive reasoning then, Keats actively seeks uncertainty and mystery through surrender to an array of experiences. Rather than searching for objective certainty, he revels in subjective experience.

A question hovers over this entire consideration of Cartesian and poetic epistemologies, and it is the question of the ego.

The word consciousness is too broad to help us draw any distinction between truth or knowledge on the one hand (as Descartes defines it) and the insight achieved through negative
capability, as outlined by Keats. The ego, on the other hand, is that which, according to Freud (Phillips, 2006) has the “task of self-assertion, and fulfils it with respect to the outside world by getting to know the stimuli there” (p. 2). The ego is that which mediates between the superego (or über-ich), the drives, and reality. It is that part of the mind or psyche that contains consciousness and comes closest to our everyday notion of self.¹⁰

Later in the same letter to his brother, Keats (2005) returns to his “disquisition” with Dilke, whom he describes as “a Man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his mind about everything.” Keats believes the contrary: “The only means of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up one’s mind about nothing,” he states, with some defiance. If we pay attention to the imagistic frame that Keats uses here, we see that he believes that the self is constructed through knowledge-making, and that these constructions present an obstacle to negative capability, or the ability to live in a state of uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts. Negative capability requires surrender (the “drowsy numbness” in “Ode to a Nightingale”) and yet it strengthens rather than attenuates the intellect, in that it demands close attention to the sensual specificity of the moment. In his letter, Keats opens up an epistemological alternative to deductive reasoning on the one hand, and sleep, or stupor, on the other — openness to “reality in its full and diverse concreteness,” perhaps that which Pinar (2009) might define as “worldliness.” It involves nothing less than somehow moving beyond or outside the ego by making up one’s mind about nothing, or at the very least, relaxing the ego’s grip on the reins.

Here we stumble across a new question: if we move beyond the ego, if we stop making up our minds, then to what kind of knowledge do we become receptive? This is a question that

¹⁰ However much we theorize the self, pondering its elusive and insubstantial nature, the experience of self seems inescapable. Freeman (2003, p. 118) cites Gazzaniga here: “Sure life is a fiction . . . but it’s our fiction and it feels good.”
Deborah Britzman, thinking with Freud, considers in her own investigation of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis.

Learning can be . . . imagined as convening those elusive qualities of an uncanny encounter that compose the sublime: its variations on beauty, awe, and worthiness; relations of truth and knowledge; the disruption of what disappears with the desire for self-presence; and its work of the creation and destruction of meanings. (Britzman, 2006, p. 9)

What disappears with the desire for self-presence and is then disrupted by learning? I believe that Keats has offered an answer to these questions. What will disappear are uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, destroyed by the rigid mind that we have constructed over the years. How is meaning destroyed? Lather (2007, p. 10) helps us here. The meaning destroyed is naïve realism and belief in the transparency of language, which Felman (2007, pp. 8–12) believes actually create the twin fantasies of authority and consciousness. Bate (1963) also takes up this point when he suggests that “irony deconstructs the authority of the fantasy” (p. 21).

How is meaning created? What encounters what? What are these elusive qualities that learning convenes to make this encounter possible? In what sense do these qualities “compose the sublime” and what is uncanny about our encounter with knowledge? However beautiful and compelling we find Britzman’s prose here (it is a passage I have returned to over and over), to read it is to submit oneself to the encounter she describes. For example, I have edited this paragraph four or five times, as I have repeatedly and accidentally said the opposite of what I intended. Both my own words and those of Britzman seem to move around on the page after I have read them. Here come the negation and the Freudian slip. We are in new territory—the unconscious—a land that Freud (quoted in Phillips, 2006) called the “Empire of the Illogical” (p. 23). Britzman (2006) suggests that this illogical realm is governed by the “unruly laws of primary processes: condensation, displacement, substitution, undoing, and reversals into opposites, all delightful deconstructions of symbolization” (p. 9). Perhaps this illogical realm is where we end up when we stop making up our minds.
It is beyond the scope of this discussion (and perhaps any discussion) to charter this territory. For sure, it is necessary to draw a distinction, however slippery, between nonconscious or unconscious processes and the psychoanalytic unconscious. The former, in which Freud (Philips, 2006, p. 15) included the preconscious,\(^{11}\) is of interest to those who study cognition, memory, and motor learning, since it involves understandings, knowledge, or actions that have become so embodied that they are accessed automatically. Another way of putting this might be to say that they are a particular category of processes and knowledge that we have made up our minds about—such as breathing, catching a ball, and finding the right sequence of letters on a keyboard. We can bring this kind of knowledge to the forefront of consciousness if we make a mental effort to do so. As Freud (quoted in Phillips, 2006) points out, “anything that is conscious is only conscious for a moment” (p. 14), and much of what we know runs quietly in the background until we need to draw upon it or it intrudes upon us. The drawing of such distinctions raises many questions, some of which may be answered by complexity science, which offers a useful way of thinking about intimately implicated nested systems. Here, I focus on the unconscious mind as Freud describes it—the repository of primal drives and of repressed material (Phillips, 2006, p. 15). The unconscious makes itself known only through the symptoms that it generates, such as hysteria (Freud, 1999). Any understanding of the unconscious that we might begin to formulate is achieved only through interpretation. It hardly needs to be pointed out that such interpretations are highly subjective. Many of Freud’s own interpretations were highly acculturated and hotly debated, both then and now.\(^{12}\) However, for the purposes of this particular discussion, what matters is that Freud (2006) believes that unconscious material can be

\(^{11}\) Freud (Phillips, 2006) is somewhat elusive in his discussions of the relationship between the preconscious and the unconscious. Though he states that the unconscious can be made conscious “through our efforts” (Freud, 2006, p. 15), his definition of the nature of preconscious awareness seems circular, in that the proof of its having once being preconscious is the fact of its eventual access by consciousness.

\(^{12}\) I think in particular of the debate that has surrounded Freud’s treatment of sexually abused women and children.
made conscious through our efforts, though we may have the sense that “we are often
overcoming very strong resistance” (p. 15) since the material that we have repressed, is, by
definition, painful and uncomfortable. It is to this project, the return of the repressed, that I now
turn our attention.

My dear Reynolds—

I had an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner—Let him on a
certain day read a certain page of full Poesy or distilled Prose, and let him wander upon
it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it: until it becomes stale—
But when will it do so? Never—When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect
any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-post towards all “the two-
and-thirty Palaces.” How happy is such a voyage of concentration, what delicious diligent
Indolence! (Keats, 1818)

Through the kind of coincidence that marks any investigation of the unconscious, I
happened to pick up, for another project, Adam Phillips’s (1998) book The Beast in the Nursery.
I was startled and delighted to find him citing this same letter by Keats, and as if that were not
enough, using it to shed considerable light on the enigmatic section of Britzman cited above. I
had always taken Britzman’s use of the word sublime in the second sense suggested by Merriam-
Webster: from the Latin sublimus (to look up as from under a thresh
old), meaning grand,
exalted, or elevated. I had thus read Britzman’s passage as a testimony to the grand, spiritual, and
prophetic nature of literary endeavours that Keats describes. This is a position that many artists,
myself included, might happily endorse. My experiences as practising writer, avid reader, teacher
of literature and composition to high school students and later, teacher of creating writing to
adults have all convinced me that acts of reading and writing creatively can open windows to the
sublime. Indeed, any child who has read under the bedcovers with a flashlight (as did I and many
others) knows that literature can transport us from the ordinary. Many academics and
philosophers, such as Burke (1909) have commented that when we are thus transported, “the
mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other” (Part 1, sections
3,4,7). To access the sublime, through nature or through the written word, is to be so thorough
filled with “reality in its full and diverse concreteness,” as Bate (1963) describes it, that it becomes temporarily at least, incapable of reason, of drawing those distinctions and making those judgments that compose the self.

Phillips’s (1998) book—a manifesto of the sublime—added a new dimension to my understanding. He frames sublimation in psychoanalytic terms, as the reshaping of our libidinous desires into something that we believe can satisfy us—a way to make excitement and safety compatible (Phillips, 1998, p. 34). This is not new, but what is refreshing about Phillips’s work is that, like Keats, he perceives sublimation to be a freeing from the self as we “forget ourselves in order to speak” (Phillips, 1998, p. 34). Phillips describes Keats’s letter as a “small manifesto against consciousness; in favour of what psychoanalysts might call dreamwork and Keats calls, more winningly, diligent indolence” (Phillips, 1998, p. 79). His text celebrates the energy and curiosity that result from our sublimations and impel us forward. As Phillips puts it, as we “go about our official business, an artist inside us is all the time on the lookout for material to make a dream with” (Phillips, 1998, p. 67). He posits learning as being powered by the demands of the unconscious, as students finds themselves unwitting drawn to specific bits of the subject being taught, which they will then, more or less secretly (even to themselves), transform into something “rather strange” (Phillips, 1998, p. 71). These last words must give us pause.

It seems clear that an experience of the sublime may be overwhelming, as reality floods into the psyche to explode what is known and present what us with the unknown. But in what sense might it be strange?

In his essay on the uncanny, Freud (1919) expands upon the notion of strageness, pointing out that in German the word uncanny is best translated as unheimlich, the opposite of heimlich, which references a sense of being at home or in familiar surroundings. After an exhaustive (and frankly exhausting) discussion of the various shades of meaning attributed to the
word across different languages and cultures, Freud ends up (like Keats) with a paradox. Wrapped into the meaning of *heimlich*, he concludes, is the fact that in order for us to feel at home, some matters must remain hidden. “According to [Schelling],” Freud (1919) remarks, “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (p. 5). In this sense, the *unheimlich* is a subspecies of the *heimlich*, in that our sublimations are strange precisely because they are not strange, but rather, belong to “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud, 1919, p. 1). Our experiences of the uncanny depend upon recognition as much as they do upon strangeness. Freud suggests that we may experience the uncanny when “something that we have regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality,” or when there is a strange coincidence, or repetition of a situation (Freud, 1919, pp. 11–14). A good example of this is provided by my stumbling across a fairly obscure passage of Keats only to find it popping up in Phillips’s text a day or two later (I cried out in astonishment). The uncanny hints that something powerful is at work without our knowledge, and, of course, it is. As Phillips puts it, our sublimations always point backwards to the unconscious. We have gone as far as we can, I believe, in understanding that passage from Britzman.

Keats’s letter, Phillips (1998) believes, leaves us with two questions: “What is it to take a hint? And what are the preconditions for being able to do so?” (p. 81). It is these two questions that I take up next, turning from the why to the how and from theory to pedagogy (though I will not leave the former behind). I ask these questions because I want to better understand my practice and to practice better, and because I consider the reconceptualization of the relationship between psychoanalytic and literary projects to be central to this pedagogical project, in that it provides a new way of thinking about what happens to memories when we write memoir.
Freud’s (Phillips, 2006) essay on screen memories (written in 1899) has proved useful in this enterprise. Screen memories are isolated recollections, Freud (Phillips, 2006, p. 541) suggests, but though they feel significant, their meaning is perplexing. They too are a paradox, in that on the one hand, the human psyche remembers what is important—that which has affective impact; on the other hand, we do not necessarily grasp the significance of the memory, because of resistance. They hint at something that is important, but they are not themselves that thing. As Freud puts it (rather beautifully), screen memories are valuable not because they are golden, but because “they have lain beside gold” (Phillips, 2006, p. 545). “It is a case of displacement along the plane of association by contiguity” he notes, “the replacement of what is repressed by something in its spatial or temporal vicinity” (Phillips, 2006, p. 545).

For the artist, screen memories are the markers of buried treasure—a fruitful starting point for sublimation, in that they strike a crucial balance between safety (in that the writer does not at first understand their psychic significance), and revelation (in that they can provide access to intense and hidden psychic material). As Britzman (2006) suggests, they are placeholders for missed encounters” (p. 110). Once brought to the surface, they present strands that can be traced back to the psyche in associative processes “almost like works of fiction,” as Freud (Phillips, 2006, p. 553) remarks later in the essay. Though he limits his discussion to childhood memories, and specifically those from infancy, the example Freud cites (of a patient who remembers seizing yellow flowers from a little girl) proves to be a conflation of several affective experiences, two of which concern later events from the analysand’s teens and youth. Freud’s (Phillips, 2006) much later essay, “The Magic Notepad” (originally published in 1925), also raises the notion that emotional stimuli continue to leave traces in the unconscious through adulthood, and that the unconscious is capable of reproducing them from within, “extending feelers” toward the conscious mind (Phillips, 2006, pp. 102–104). The unconscious, then, is capable of sending us
hints, and these hints are associative. Flowers become a metaphor for deflowering, and bread for a steady income.

For many years, starting well before I made any attempt to theorize my work as a teacher, I have used a writing exercise that I call “The Shimmering Moment.”¹³ I ask my students to think of five instances of a particular kind of memory—ones that have great significance, but a significance that they have never quite understood. I tell them that these memories will have a strange charge as they consider them—a kind of heat or electricity that may cause them to shimmer as they recall them. These memories, I suggest, might present themselves to consciousness from time to time, unbidden and perplexing. I reassure my students that though the memories that spring to mind might seem too slender and skimpy to write about, they must trust that they will inspire strong writing. Once they have written down personal cues for five of these memories (such as “The time the dog got away”), I have my students delete the two that least demand their attention. Then I have them delete one more, and finally, cross out one of the two remaining cues.

Of course, this part of the exercise helps the writers to identify screen memories, and as I now analyze the pedagogy involved—pedagogy which has hitherto been largely intuitive on my part—I see that it is designed to overcome resistance. I am rigid and stingy about the time allowed for this part of the process, allowing five minutes at the most. In this way, I reduce the time for conscious thought. In the same way, rather than asking students to choose the most compelling memory, I focus them instead on rejecting those that are less compelling—choices

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¹³ I cannot claim this exercise as my own invention, since I seem to remember coming across the germ of the idea at a writing convention many years ago. However, I can find no reference to it in the literature or on the Internet. In any case, I have adapted and altered it over the years and believe that the exercise I use now has little resemblance to the original. As Phillips says, we are magpies when it comes to finding and using what we need to learn.
that are much less psychically demanding. Above all, I remove any pressure on students to understand the significance of the memories they might choose.

In the next part of the exercise, I have the students write a detailed description of the landscape in which the memory is located, asking them to record it as fully as possible for 10 minutes in a continuous process of free writing, keeping the pen moving and resisting the temptation to edit by going back to read what they have done, or crossing anything out. If they become stuck or lost for words, I suggest that they continue writing nonetheless, even if it seems to be gibberish. Once these 10 minutes are up, I ask the writers to spend another 10 minutes free writing about the characters involved, interpreting this instruction broadly, in the sense that inanimate objects, such as rivers, or institutions, such as schools or cultural norms, might be viewed as characters in the drama. Again, I suggest that students see themselves as recorders, remembering and noting down specific details rather than attempting to make judgments or addressing affective material directly. Afterwards, I invite the writers to reread what they have written, then write for a further 20 minutes. This time they can write about the memory itself, using all, or none, or some, of the material they have already produced. The pedagogical techniques employed here serve to illustrate the implicated nature of the literary and the psychoanalytic project, and they are all concerned with association.

Free writing (also known as associative, stream of consciousness, or automatic writing) has a long history in literary circles. In 1997, Coleridge composed “Kubla Khan” in a dreamlike state, in one draft and without conscious reflection. The notion was also taken up by Surrealists such as Andre Breton (1896–1966), who explained automatic writing as “the true functioning of thought. The dictation of thought, in the absence of all control by reason, excluding any aesthetic or moral preoccupation” (Breton, 1934, para. 7). Though I have been unable to find any reference to Freud using writing during psychoanalysis, he was of course a proponent of free
association, encouraging his analysands to make intuitive leaps and let go of conscious reflection in order to stumble upon insights. He found that seemingly unimportant or random details, such as Dora’s thumb sucking (Freud, as quoted in Phillips, 2006, p. 472) could be followed back to their source—repressed material—and thus provide fresh psychic insight. As Britzman (2006) puts it, “Truth resides in the farthest thing from one’s mind” (p. 31).

Thus far then, the writers using the Shimmering Moment exercise have been deliberately separated from their intentions, allowing, as far as possible, unconscious processes to dictate the location and content of their recollections. At the same time, they are required to recollect the physical location and characters in which the screen memory is located. In their considerations of the operation of memory, cognitive psychologists such as Martin Conway (2007), pinpoint a certain kind of memory that they term episodic: “highly specific representations of short-term slices of experience that come to mind as a visual image and often generate emotions and moods” (p. 240). These memories are graphic, strictly bounded, and present themselves spontaneously and insistently over a long period (Conway, 2007; Gardiner, 2007). In other words, they are screen memories. As Conway points out above, episodic memories are highly specific and visual, and as Leng, Paseau and Potter (2007) point out, they can serve as starting points for the retrieval of more information about the incident, and this information is usually concrete and sensory. This is the purpose of the free writing process of the Shimmering Moment exercise, to allow the student the opportunity to pull further graphic details from their memories about their chosen scene. To explore the significance of this part of the process, I return first to the work of David Lodge and then to Keats.

An old adage in writing circles is Show. Don’t tell—an edict that attempts to address a common confusion about literary method. Many people are prompted to pick up the pen in order

14 According to Wikipedia (Free association [psychology], n.d.), free association was first used by Breuer, though I have been unable to verify this suggestion.
to chronicle their feelings about important affective events in their lives (such as the death of a loved one). Quite naturally, they believe that the way to communicate these feelings is to write about them directly. They will attempt to do so by offering statements about their emotional conditions (“I was so, so sad”), through clichéd imagery (“My heart was broken”) or the use of adjectives (“mournful” or “loving”). In both directions, both outward and inward, the results of such attempts lack gusto. As Keats (1818) put it in his letter of February 19, 1818, to Reynolds, “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us,” so the reader may be sympathetic, but he is not impressed. Though the writer’s emotional state has been recorded, the writer has learned nothing new. In order for the reader to empathize, he must be invited into the writer’s experiences, and in order for the writer to learn, she must be surprised by the work produced.

Taking up the first point, empathy on the part of a reader, Lodge (2002) points out (thinking with Levine) that qualia inhabit the gap between mind and matter, in that they represent our direct phenomenological experience of the external world. He cites The Oxford Companion to the Mind’s definition: “Examples of qualia are the smell of freshly ground coffee or the taste of pineapple; such experiences have a distinctive phenomenological character which we have all experienced but which, it seems, is very difficult to describe” (Lodge, 2002, p. 8). Lodge goes on to argue that when writers represent (re-present) qualia, they come as close as it is possible to reproducing our experiences of consciousness in the consciousness of others. This is a point Bate (1963) takes up when he writes about Hazlitt’s attempt to define gusto (a concept that Keats himself was very taken with) and the importance of appealing to all the senses in its creation (p. 8). Works by artists such as Chaucer and Titian, Hazlitt says, have gusto because they give “the very feeling of the air, coolness or moisture upon the ground” and not only do Titian’s subjects “seem to think—his bodies seem to feel” (Bate, 1963, p. 15). Later, Bate (1963) speaks of Keats’s response to this insight, as an interest in “empathic concentration of image” (p.
On his walks with Keats, Severn was astonished “at the closeness with which Keats would notice details”: “Nothing seemed to escape him, the song of a bird and the undertone of response from covert or hedge, the rustle of some animal, the changing of the green and brown lights and furtive shadows, the motions of the wind” (Severn, as quoted in Bate, 1963, p. 22). Though the students in my workshops and classes do not write as well as Keats, I have found that when they use concrete detail, their work has far more gusto.

Turning to the next point—the writer’s own sense of surprise—I suggest that “telling rather than showing” does not allow writers to speak beyond their understandings of what occurred. As Britzman (2006) puts it, writers must avoid giving themselves over to “the urge to make a story coherent by tying up loose ends too neatly, or short-circuiting ambiguity through a dependency on stereotyped language” (p. 20). In order to permit what has been repressed to return, we must become negatively capable and thus open to “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 2005). As they record the physical locations in which their screen memories occurred, the writers in the Shimmering Moment exercise are able to suspend judgment and to “relax language from the criticism of censorship and criticism and unmoor it from the entanglement of endless clarifications, justifications, projections, intellectualizations, and the rationalizations that conscious intentions call upon to keep meaning still” (Britzman, 2006, p. 29). Without even understanding why, they discover that which has lain by gold. The writing that results from the Shimmering Moment exercise is often packed with hints—telling imagery and resonant detail. As the writers read it aloud, they become emotional, though perhaps they could not say exactly why. Their auditors are able to empathize with their experience.

The next question then, is this: once this treasure has been discovered during the exercise, what happens next? Here comes another parallel between the two disciplines, and it is one that
has not been much investigated—the similarities and differences between the roles of the teacher of memoir and the analyst. There are probably many reasons that the literature is largely silent on this topic. Teachers of any kind are schooled in drawing clear distinctions between the work of the psychologist and the work of teachers, and between their students and themselves. It is a question of boundaries and training, they are told—they are not therapists. Such strictures serve important purposes. They temper the idealistic eagerness displayed by many young teachers, who wish to help students with emotional problems that hinder learning. Such amateur dabbling into students’ personal lives can indeed sometimes do more harm than good, to the students that become the object of ill-informed psychologizing, to teachers themselves who may become overly (and improperly) involved, and to other students, whose problems may be less obvious, but nonetheless deserve attention. Most of all, teachers are told that this is not their purpose in the classroom. They are engaged in the project of education, not psychotherapy, after all. But as we have hopefully established, the two disciplines are implicated. Surely it is as specious to pretend that teachers are able to brush off their private worlds at the classroom door “like so much accrued lint” (Britzman, 2006, p. 131) as it would be to suggest that psychoanalysis is not about learning?

After the screen memory is located and situated in its physical context, the analyst would invite the analysand to “Take the A Train” as Britzman (2006, p. 26) puts it, by inviting him or her to follow the train of association back to other key events and associate with content that has been discarded or repressed. Analogously, I invite writers to share their first drafts with the larger group, in order to receive my feedback and that of peers before going off once more to revise the work in the light of these new suggestions and understandings. The word that describes this part of the process is, of course, revision. It is here, I believe, that the skill of the teacher moves beyond the instrumental and becomes a kind of art, as the goal of the writer is to
pay attention to what has been seen, but not noticed. The pedagogical steps involved in the first parts of the Shimmering Moment exercise are carefully conscribed, and for this reason, any teacher with confidence and authority might be able to implement them successfully. The next step is more risky, as the teacher invites students to examine the treasures they have discovered. I believe that this process is highly similar, though not identical, to the psychoanalytic process of association. My own practice provides a relevant example.

A student wrote an innocuous piece entitled “A Day at the Lake.” It was typical of her work, which often referenced imminent danger lurking below some sort of surface. In this particular instance, she was walking by a frozen lake. She ventured out upon the ice, but though it creaked alarmingly, it did not break. Other people walked out on the ice, and once again, she was fearful, but nothing happened. Struck by the imagery she had represented, I set her another exercise to complete: “Write about what happened when the ice broke.” The next morning (it was a residential retreat), I asked the student if she had had any luck with completing the assignment. It had kept her up all night, she said. I invited her to share the piece, and the first sentence has remained with me: “I never touched the baby.” What she had recalled was an incident from her early teens when she had sexually molested two of three children she was babysitting. I could cite many more occasions on which extremely painful and profound memories were unlocked in this way. A memory of intense happiness sitting beneath a tree in the family garden led to a recollection of being berated for an imperfect report card. A memory of waiting for her father’s other shoe to drop recalled a mother’s death. Typically, writers exhibit strong emotion when they understand the significance of these perplexing recollections, bursting into tears, or reading with trembling voices. It is here, interestingly, that the parallel between the teacher of personal writing and the psychoanalyst breaks down.
Rather than comment upon the writer’s emotional condition (other than handing over Kleenex), I focus on the work. It is a condition of all my workshops, stated at their opening, that writing is our focus, and that while it is a risky business that may well cause us to become emotional, we will not be analyzing those emotions (other than to offer friendly sympathy and acknowledgement), but focusing on making the work itself stronger and more honest. Where the analyst would work through transference, inviting the analysand to reenact earlier relationships and emotions in the psychoanalytic relationship, I try, as far as possible to avoid it, by always redirecting the writers to their work. How could it be stronger? What is struggling to emerge? What would happen if you paid attention to this image, or wrote this from another point of view? In this sense, the work itself becomes the analyst. Of course, there is always risk when we tell our stories, but thus far, I have managed to focus on aesthetic, rather than personal, outcomes, though engagement in aesthetic projects can, I believe, lead to both.

The way we talk about the pedagogy involved in teaching people how to make art has suffered from the notion that it involves craft on the one hand (with its associations of practical skill) and on the other, some kind of indescribable creative process. As well, the discourse has suffered from an emphasis on individualism when it comes to artistic productions—the commonly held notion that the true artist has some innate talent that cannot be taught. “You can take undergraduates and guide them. You can tell them what works and what doesn’t. But unfortunately, you can’t teach anyone to write. It comes from God” says Robert Stone (Blumenthal, 1998). I suggest that it might be fruitful to explore the areas that lie between instrumentalism and abstraction in our considerations of literary representations of our experiences. The teacher, the writer, the analysand, and the analyst must all surrender to uncertainty in order to become lost, to “produce different knowledge” as Lather (2007) puts it, “and produce knowledge differently” (p. 13) through stumbling practices that acknowledge their
own complicity. They can never grasp the thing itself. Britzman (2006, p. xi) has emphasized the “accidental” nature of Freud’s pedagogy, which was often based upon unsuccessful cases and evolved and shifted its position throughout the course of Freud’s lengthy career. What would it look like to construct similar pedagogies in the field of memoir writing?
Interlude 4:

Short Story

In Chapter 4, “Writers-Writing-Readers-Reading,” I continue a consideration of screen memories as an important site of associative material that can be mined when writing memoir, this time using “Privet,” one of my own short stories, as data. Having considered the screen memory as a productive starting point for writing—a largely private and subjective process of association and recall, I turn next to the more public project of crafting this personal material, a process in which considerations of audience, language, and genre become more pressing. Here I present the story in its entirety. In the paper, I shall consider its composition, piece by piece, as it was written.

“Privet”

Everything is back to front at our house. All function is hidden. Behind the bungalow, like muddy shoes discarded at the door, are the vegetable plots and the fruit canes, the rainwater barrel and the compost heap, the swing and the air raid shelter. The front garden is for show. Flowers bloom obediently around a smooth lawn. A pixie fishes in eternal disappointment from his grey stone mushroom. It is a cold and clipped landscape.

Like the dog and the horse, the privet bush enjoys a unique relationship with Man, who has bent its evolution to his purposes. It seems like Privet was born to be pruned into a state of absolute regularity. Over the years, my father has trained its slender branches and tiny green leaves into such perfect squareness that it is more like a piece of furniture than anything organic. It provides a final, impenetrable barrier to the eyes of the street.

My mother is in a bad mood. I can tell by the way she cracks the eggs into the frying pan and they spit and curl into white lace. My father sits silently at the end of the table in his best thorn-proof wool suit. He sucks the end of his pencil and studies his crossword. I have worked
out for myself what a cross word is. My mother’s chair is nearest the cooker, and Michael and I face each other across the table. Our aunts and uncles say Michael has our father’s noble features—his straight nose and navy blue eyes. He has a brand new briefcase like Dad’s too, and a white shirt and a red tie and a Dr. Who pencil case.

“Go and get the tomato ketchup, Claire,” my mother says. “You’re old enough to set the table properly. Your dad likes ketchup.”

“I like ketchup too,” says Michael. “I need lots of food for my brains, because I’m going to school.”

When Michael starts school he and Dad will walk together every day, across the railway tracks to the outside world and I’ll be left behind with my mother. She’ll polish the dining room table in big, circular sweeps like she’s seen on this TV show—“Clean Your Way to Fitness.” She’ll make me hold my hands out with my thumbs stuck up while she makes a ball of her knitting wool. My hands will be tied.

I put the ketchup on the table.

“Why do our hands move Dad?”

Dad’s newspaper remains steady but his navy eyes swivel up and peer at me over his glasses.

“Because we tell them to,” he says.

“But I didn’t tell my hands anything,” I say, “and they put the ketchup down.”

“You have a thing called The Brain,” my dad tells me.

“She doesn’t,” Michael says. “She’s a girl.”

“The Brain orders your hands and your arms and your fingers and your toes to move. The Brain is like the General of the Army. He sends messages down little wires that work all the different parts of your body. It’s like a puppet on strings.”
“I’m going to learn about all this stuff at school,” Michael boasts. “I’m going to know more than you. You get to learn everything at school. I’m going to learn how to read and write.”

“I can write my name,” I tell him. “Mam showed me.”

He smiles. “Like spider’s writing,” he says. “Like a spider dipped its legs in ink and walked across the paper.”

My mother plonks plates in front of Michael and my father. She grabs the ketchup bottle and holds it under the tap to wash it.

“It’s made a stain on the cloth,” she says. “Didn’t you see it was dirty, Claire? If you asked fewer questions you might see what was under your nose’s end.”

She takes me to the front garden to say goodbye. We are stuck behind the hedge while my father and brother walk away. She takes my hand from my mouth and waves it for me.

“Wish him luck,” she says, and soon my hand waves by itself. My Brain sends a message down the wires and my teeth smile and my fingers wiggle.

“Good luck,” I call. “Good luck.”

My brother turns and smiles his smile at me.

“Wave till they reach the corner,” my mother tells me, shaking my arm to speed it up.

Wave till they’re out of sight.”

As she waves my right hand, my left hand does something of its own. The shaved privet is flat and bristly like Dad’s face on Sundays. Most of the leaves are snipped across but I want a whole one, so my hand sneaks into the inside place where the shears never go. I find a round, undamaged leaf and pluck it. It is bad to pick things in the garden and to squash them. I have something private—a secret of my very own. I roll it between my fingers and its softness comforts me.
Michael and Dad turn and wave one last time before they turn the corner. It is my last chance before we go in to wash the dishes so I quickly look down at the leaf.

It is not a leaf but a big black spider.

The spider has a fat middle part and yellow stuff is coming out. It has little white things inside, like eggs. Some of its legs have come off, and though the rest still move, I know that the spider is dead. I have killed it. I wonder why my hand did that when my brain didn’t tell it to.

Mam and Dad kill wasps together. Dad runs after them with a rolled up newspaper.

“Not on the wallpaper!” my mother cries as she runs after him with a teaspoon. “You’ll make a mark. Wait till it lands on the window.”

When the wasp lands on the window and buzzes and scrapes with its tiny feet trying to escape into the trees it can see outside, Dad bashes it and steps aside as it falls to the window sill. Mam quickly runs in with the teaspoon while it’s still stunned. She puts the handle where its head ties on and she pushes as the wasp wriggles and its stinging end curls around looking for the enemy. The head is tied on with such strong wires that she has to push and push.

“Take that!” Mam says as she crunches with the teaspoon and makes a face.

“I whispered as I throw the spider down before my mother sees it. “Take that!”

I wipe the yellow stuff off my hand onto my cardigan and I never speak of it again.

—Robson, “Privet”

Discussion

Short stories have only a few defining characteristics, and for this reason the genre has proven highly adaptive and resilient. Most obviously, they are written in prose rather than verse. They are (inevitably) written from a point of view, even when the point of view is omniscient, or when multiple points of view are adopted. They are shorter than novels or novellas, and most (though by no means all) have a narrative arc, or storyline. Though classic short story structure follows this arc through exposition, rising action, into its climax, and on into its denouement,
some short stories also (or alternatively) follow other organizing principles.\textsuperscript{15} Finally, the short story usually explores one or more themes or intentions.

The challenge of writing a short story is provided by these constraints and particularly by the need for brevity. In the contemporary short story there is only time to develop a few characters and scenes over a relatively short period of time—often the action takes place in under 20 four hours. The traditional components of scene—characters, setting, events, and dialogue—must all work hard, doing double and even triple duty in moving the narrative forward, serving the story’s intention, and creating the desired responses in the reader. Since screen memories are strictly bounded yet highly charged with associative material and thick descriptions, they serve this genre very well. However, though a writer might be successful in identifying a screen memory, we must remember that he has not stumbled upon gold, but only upon that which has lain beside it. It is in the processes of composition and revision that he will find the treasure. I return, for a moment, to Shields’s (2002) suggestion that she can “type [her] way toward becoming a conscious being” (p. 109) and to Dillard’s (1990) image of the line of words that emerges from the pen opening up a path for the writer to follow (pp. 549–550). They suggest an interesting relationship between the writing and the writer. The writing seems, at times, to be in charge, even, or to know what’s best.

In the previous paper, I consider this notion through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, suggesting that in the act of composition, the work becomes the analyst, in that helps the writer to unpack and sift through material discovered through the processes of association. Though the analogy is helpful, it is still only an analogy. Clearly, the writing does not assume any kind of personality, let alone a person with psychoanalytic skills. Though psychoanalytic theory is

\textsuperscript{15}They may be organized around journal entries, conversations, monologues, and lists, for instance, as in the well-known example of Tim O’Brien’s (2010) short story, “The Things They Carried,” organized by an ongoing list of items carried by American soldiers in Vietnam.
helpful in understanding inspiration, we need another theoretical framework, I will argue, to understand what the old adage calls the *perspiration*—those acts that make up the processes of composition and revision. Juarrero (1999) frames such a distinction between automatic or unconscious processes and the conscious actions that result from them as the difference between a wink and a blink (p. 1) and goes on to consider intentional behaviours as the product of a complex system that generates its own constraints. In the next paper, I shall argue that this becomes the case in the act of composition, as writer, text, and potential reader form an alliance, or short term relationship (Davis & Sumara, 2010, p. 6), in which hubs of memory can be effectively unpacked and crafted to reveal their treasures to both audience and author.
CHAPTER 4:

WRITERS-WRITING-READERS-READING

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject. In short, we think that one cannot write sufficiently in the name of an outside. The outside has no image, no signification, no subjectivity. The book as assemblage with the outside, against the book as image of the world. A rhizomebook, not a dichotomous, pivotal, or fascicular book.

—Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus

The relationship between writer and writing is commonly described as being symbiotic: the writer is said to be lost in her work as the writing takes over, or fictional characters speak to the author and even make demands upon her. In the same way, readers are perceived as being responsive rather than passive (Rosenblatt, 1978). They become lost in a book as the real world recedes and is replaced by the transaction between reader and text. Readers are said to identify so closely with fictional characters that they feel as if they are seeing life through their eyes. They feel as though they are really there in the fictional action, even as they carry their own experiences and interpretations into the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). In these key ways, text has been viewed as an artefact that mediates both writers-writing and readers-reading. Writer, reader, and text come together during the intimate processes of composition and consumption to form a short term relationship (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 6) or assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Here, I explore this notion further, using one of my short stories (Robson, 1996) as a limit case example of what can happen when writers write and readers read.

In an assemblage (or complex system), structures and directions arise from connections and relationships between the systems’ parts—connections that come together in various kinds of networks. At its simplest level, a network might be described as an inert combination of attached, centralized filaments such as a fishing net. The kind of connectedness between reality, representation, and subjectivity discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is clearly much more
dynamic. Rather than being connected centrally and simply (such as the strands in a fishing net), such highly connected hubs have the capacity to open up exponentially. Like the hubs in a wheel, they radiate many spokes, which in turn reach out to other hubs. This affords them tremendous exponential potential—from cities to catastrophes, the yardstick of normality no longer applies when it comes to these explosive systems (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 48).

It is often hard to know where dynamic networks such as these begin and end, and more than that, the question is often meaningless. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) draw the analogy of a puppeteer to illustrate this point. Though the puppeteer manipulates a weave (or network) of strings, these strings are tied “not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibres, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8). Though a modernist and mechanistic approach to science has schooled us to imagine that the objects and systems in our universe can be easily contained and quantified, this is not always (and some might say, not ever) the case. As one can see from the example above, networks can change, grow, disappear, or reform with the passage of time, engaging in short term relationships with their neighbours. In Deleuze and Guattari’s example, the network that is the puppeteer links herself to the network that is the puppet in order to form a new network, but the limits and boundaries of such networks depend on the perspective and interests of the observer, and where s/he draws the line. They are, in other words, “ambiguously bounded” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 6). A sociologist might consider the puppeteer’s position in social networks, such as his family, or a guild devoted to the art of puppetry. The neurologist might isolate the nerve fibres of the puppeteer as a system for study or treatment. A holistic health practitioner might consider the complex system of the puppeteer’s entire body, noticing, for instance, how the nervous system and the digestive system interact. If we take another look at Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) puppeteer, we could say that his heart is a system that is nested
within his entire circulation system, which is nested within the system that is his entire body and being.

When he is on stage, the puppeteer becomes part of a grander system, the theatrical performance itself, in which audience, lights, set, puppeteer, and puppets work together. In his autobiographical novel *A Boy’s Own Story*, Edmund White describes just such an experience, as he watches a professional marionette troupe perform Sleeping Beauty on the occasion of his third birthday:

The toe of a big brown shoe protruding from beneath the hem of the proscenium draperies kept in mind real dimensions only for a few more minutes; soon the reduced scale of the stage had engulfed me, as though I’d been precipitated through a beaker and sublimated into another substance altogether. (White, 2000, p. 63)

Art engages us profoundly. It is a rabbit hole down which we tumble into a new dimension, in which we lose track of size and escape the bounds of ego to become something or someone else.

**Writers-Writing**

The individual writer, the writer’s memory, the writing that s/he produces about that memory and ultimately the reader can be usefully regarded as an ambiguously bounded system. When the reader reads and responds to writing about an event that she experienced years before, neither reader nor writer can be said to be absent, but rather, to co-inhabit the structures of the text.

In order to illustrate this point further, I now consider my own processes in writing a short story: “Privet” (Robson, 1996). I have chosen this particular story as a limit case because it exemplifies the way in which the writing develops as a system in accordance with the constraints and logic of its own emergence, even though it is nested within and attentive to the complex system that is the writer. As writers like to say, the story almost *wrote itself*. Also, I have found that the story generates strong reader responses (including gasps of horror when it is read aloud).
As an added bonus, “Privet” is short enough to be read and understood quickly and thus may hopefully serve as a practical basis for analysis. In order to give a clear chronological account of the process of its composition, the text (which appears in full in Interlude 4) is reintroduced (without attribution) piece by piece as it was written.

**The Starting Point: Episodic Memory**

I began the writing of this story with a brief memory: I had in my hand what I thought to be a leaf and was rolling it absentmindedly between my fingers. When I looked down, I saw that it was not a leaf but a spider, which I had fatally damaged.

A cognitive psychologist describe such memories as episodic: “highly specific representations of short-term slices of experience that come to mind as a visual image and often generate emotions and moods” (Conway, 2007, p. 240). In other words, they operate as hubs that may, when activated, open out into networks of intense feeling. In this process, a visual image may act as a cue that kicks off the process of retrieval (Conway, 2007, p. 238), and often, as in this case, the image in question (for instance, my dying spider), is particularly memorable because it is graphic and striking. In his essay on screen memories, Freud (quoted in Phillips, 2006) describes such visual memories as “isolated recollections, often of questionable or perplexing significance” and has much to say (pp. 541–560) about the psychic potential of the images they generate, in which “inessential components of an experience stand in for the essential, or the replacement of what is repressed by something in its (spatial or temporal) vicinity.”

The memory of the spider presented itself to me over a period of many years, spontaneously, insistently, and seemingly without requiring any act of will on my part. Again, this is a phenomenon that is well documented in the literature on memory and retrieval (Conway, 2007, p. 240). In other words, they operate as hubs that may, when activated, open out into networks of intense feeling. In this process, a visual image may act as a cue that kicks off the process of retrieval (Conway, 2007, p. 238), and often, as in this case, the image in question (for instance, my dying spider), is particularly memorable because it is graphic and striking. In his essay on screen memories, Freud (quoted in Phillips, 2006) describes such visual memories as “isolated recollections, often of questionable or perplexing significance” and has much to say (pp. 541–560) about the psychic potential of the images they generate, in which “inessential components of an experience stand in for the essential, or the replacement of what is repressed by something in its (spatial or temporal) vicinity.”

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16 I have commented extensively on screen memories in Chapter 2.
2007; Gardiner, 2007, p. 224), particularly in the intrusive memories associated with PTSD. Indeed, the recollection presented itself as a classic flashback—a fleeting visual with an admixture of intense emotion. It was strictly bounded; only later could I retrieve any physical context, by applying what is known as generated memory (Leng et al., 2007), or a mental search. As we reach into our consciousness for the name of a painter, for instance, we might mentally visualize one of his paintings (“Girl with a Pearl Earring”), in order to step forward to the next, connected, piece of information (“Ah yes! Vermeer!”). It is a human tendency, Gower (Leng et al., 2007) suggests, to structure these memories for easier retrieval, in other words, to create dynamic networks that can be triggered by certain practices, in the case of this memory and my work with it, the writing process.

Before I wrote “Privet,” all that I could remember of the spider incident was that I was very young and that I was standing in the front garden of a bungalow that was our family home. I had a sense that my mother and I were watching my father and my brother as they stood in the street on the other side of a hedge that bounded the garden, but I could not see them in the memory. Also, there was more affective material present than the memory seemed to warrant—intense emotions that included guilt and revulsion, and an eerie admixture of something like satisfaction. I could feel these emotions without ascribing them to a cause—the death of a spider seemed inadequate in this regard. The memory of the crushed spider popped into my mind at odd moments, always accompanied by that odd emotional bundle. Unlike a PTSD flashback, it was not overly troublesome.

**Episodic Memories As Hubs of Feeling**

My thesis here is that strictly bounded episodic memories of physical events and objects serve as hubs in the dynamic network of individual memories. Other memories, feelings, and associations are connected to them and may be triggered when the memory hub is further
explored through the processes of generated memory that are triggered by creative composition such as writing. These hubs serve the purposes of writer-and-writing, especially in the process of writing autobiographically.

Citing Proust and his famous madeleine cake, Conway (2007, p. 238), as does Freud, suggests that the successful retrieval of episodic memories is often associated with the physical context in which the event itself was experienced. Once again, complexity thinking provides a useful lens through which to view the connectedness of emotion, smell, physicality, and cognition that is suggested here. Writing about intentional behaviour as complex emergence, Juarrero (1999) posits that all human experience resonates through such interconnected cognitive, sensory and affective systems. With Freeman, she believes that with all animals (including the human), “each sniff is processed and recognized within a complex context that embodies the past history of the animal’s experience with that smell as well as the animal’s current state of arousal and other internal features” (Juarrero, 1999, p. 149). Also referencing Proust, she maintains that “stories explain in virtue of their rich descriptions, which trace the multiple temporal and contextual connections woven into the very being of an event” (Juarrero, 1999, p. 243).

Far from being original, this theory of the interdependence of story, physicality, and memory has a long history. Since the first paintings of deer and forests were scratched in the walls of the caves of Chauvet 32,000 years ago, the human species has used the material world to recollect (or literally, bring back together) emotional and spiritual experiences and events. Drawing upon the ancient mnemonic tradition that began in ancient Greece and persisted well into the 17th century, Wong and Storkeson (1997) suggest that “a theory of memorability can be based upon visual structures as concept maps” (p. 237). They point to the notion of locus here—a word that comes from the Latin word for place but also, when used in the classical sense, has the
additional connotation of first knowledge or authority, and when used by mathematicians, an emergent form that arises in the assemblage of points (a hub). In the context of mnemonics, Wong and Storkeson suggest that locus be regarded as “a place easily grasped by the memory, such as a house, an intercolumnar space, a corner, an arch, or the like. Images are forms, marks, or simulacra [formae, notue, simulacra] of what we wish to remember” (Wong & Storkeson, 1997, p. 127).

According to Wong and Storkeson (1997, p. 130) then, graphic and emotionally intense memories, such as that of my crushing the spider, are nodes that are capable of exploding into important personal information, through the operations of linking mechanisms (which they define as analogy, mapability, coherence, significance, and rhetoric). We order our experiences by clustering them into a kind of condensed visual maps or images—little suitcases that can be stored in the psyche, carried through time, and opened later to reveal their (often by now surprising) contents. Such physical structuring and organization of the conceptual, as Wong and Storkeson point out, is reflected in the modern use of link-node hypertext, referred to earlier in this discussion. Novelist and memoirist Dorothy Allison (1995) draws the same parallel, in her memoir Two or Three Things I Know for Sure: “We could put you in hypertext” a young fan tells her. “Every time you touch a word, a window opens. Behind that word is another story” (Allison, 1995, pp. 90–91). In the closing section of her work, Allison describes how she uses the boy’s suggestion to search through a series of key memories as if they were hypertext. As she touches upon each one, beginning with a scrap of conversation or a visual image, it falls away to reveal what lies underneath. At the end of this process, her entire life is revealed, and she stands “at the bottom of every story [she] had ever needed to know” (Allison, 1995, p. 94).
Unpacking the Hub

In my experience with writing memoir, I have found it important to work with the integrated physicality of the memory, rather than make any attempt to theorize it, talk about its significance, or to try to remember how I felt. Novice writers make a crucial, though natural, mistake when they imagine that since the purpose of writing is to evoke feeling, they should begin by describing how they felt. There is a major problem with this approach, and that is the potential existence of the reader.

Readers-Reading

When journalling for the purpose of introspection, writers might find it useful and sufficient to record the date, time, and location of memories as they occur, with some helpful notes (perhaps guilt, revulsion, satisfaction) in order to recall the various strands of the experience. The object of writers when writing for others, however, is to communicate the experience, as entirely and as accurately as possible, to s/he who becomes, in the moment of reading, part of the assemblage or ambiguously bounded, complex, and dynamic system that is writer-text-reader.17 We have developed certain words in our language that are affective in nature. Generally speaking, these comprise adjectives and adverbs such as overjoyed, or terrified, designed to describe emotional rather than physical states (compare black or square). However, they are more successful in communicating this affective material in an abstract and cerebral way than they are at generating that mood or feeling in the reader. For example, “I was disgusted, yet strangely satisfied when I saw the crushed spider” might fall a little flatly upon the ear. The reader might understand that I felt intensely, but fail to experience that intense emotion.

17 Though, as Rosenblatt (1978, p. 140) points out, there is no such thing as a “‘correct’ reading,” particularly when it comes to open texts such as drama or poetry. I assume, with Rosenblatt (p. 132), a middle ground between so-called objectivity and the impressionist’s subjectivity, especially where creative nonfiction is concerned.
To draw once again upon the wisdom contained in common parlance, writers must show, not tell; they must take the reader there, and this they achieve through the reproduction of as many as possible of the qualia that made up the original experience (Lodge, 2002). By reproducing the many small details that comprise the experience of consciousness, writers attempt to represent (literally re-present) the event by constructing it over. As the reader engages with what Rosenblatt (1978, p. 132) describes as “the work-as-experienced” at a later date, s/he then enjoys a virtual experience of the writer’s experience of consciousness. A study (Everding, 2009) cited on Physorg.com (upcoming in Psychological Science), supports this premise. In it, Jeffrey M. Zacks, the director of the Dynamic Cognition Laboratory at Washington University in Illinois, says that “psychologists and neuroscientists are increasingly coming to the conclusion that when we read a story and really understand it, we create a mental simulation of the events described by the story” (Everding, 2009, para. 1). MRI findings in this study show that:

Details about actions and sensation are captured from the text and integrated with personal knowledge from past experiences. These data are then run through mental simulations using brain regions that closely mirror those involved when people perform, imagine, or observe similar real-world activities. (Everding, 2009, para. 3)

In other words, it would seem that the writing serves to activate the reader’s own decentralized networked memories of past experiences that closely resemble fictional events. Rosenblatt’s landmark book (1978), written well before the current swell of interest in complexity thinking, nonetheless draws extensively upon its imagery as she speaks of “the reader’s crystallizing a sense of the experience of the work as a whole, as a structure that, despite its ethereal nature, can be an object of thought” (p. 133), and of “the web of feelings, sensations, images, ideas, that [the reader] weaves between himself and the text” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 137). Rosenblatt (1978) forefronts the close reading skills of the ordinary (as opposed to the ideal) reader and the importance of the multifaceted memories, histories, and mnemonic codes we bring with us to the text (p. 144). Others have taken up the notion of the active reader. I think
here specifically of Lisa Zunshine’s (2006) work on theory of mind, in which she posits fiction as a kind of mental and emotional workout in which the reader’s efforts to read the minds of authors and the fictional characters they create provides useful exercise for our capacity to interpret others and by extension, the self.

The potentiality of the ordinary reader is present for the writer during the writer-writing process, because, as Benjamin Zander (2008) puts it, artists depend heavily upon the expectation of being well read or well viewed. It is not as if, Zander points out, Martin Luther King wrote, “I have a dream, but I’m not sure that you [the audience] are up to it.” Rather, we write with the confidence that humanity has an excellent ear and that the act of listening, or reading, is important in making artistic creations powerful.

I turn now to the process of writing “Privet,” to further illustrate and explore the processes of re-collection, re-presentation, and interpretation.

**Privet**

As Juarrero (1999) and many others (Donald, 2001; Edelman, 2004; Varela, 1999) have pointed out, our consciousness is embodied and distributed. It is the smell of the madeleine cake that brings back or re/collects the interconnected layers of experience, rather than factual information about it (such as who bought it), or a direct assault on emotional states (“I felt such joy!”). For these reasons, I first approached the spider memory by writing about the physical context, or locus, in which it occurred, to expand this hub and generate further information.

**Physical Location**

First, I composed a mental aerial snapshot of my parents’ house and its environs. Then I wrote a description of this, through a process known variously as free writing, associative writing, or stream of consciousness writing (Goldberg, 1986). When writing this way, it is important to keep the pen moving in order to bypass the conscious and more critical tendencies.
of the mind and instead, to harness its abilities to make leaps and associations. In this case, I set myself a time limit and concentrated entirely upon pulling up physical details from my long term (or autobiographic) memory about the landscape in which this memory was situated. I recorded what I could recall of the back garden—the air raid shelter, the glass conservatory and the fruit canes. I remembered the front garden less clearly—just that it had a front gate, and that we never used it much. Here is the writing that resulted. Although it has been edited since, it is quite close to the original pen-and-ink scrawl.

Everything is back to front at our house. All function is hidden. Behind the bungalow, like muddy shoes discarded at the door, are the vegetable plots and the fruit canes, the rainwater barrel and the compost heap, the swing and the air raid shelter. The front garden is for show. Flowers bloom obediently around a smooth lawn. It is a cold and clipped landscape.

As I wrote these introductory lines, the word clipped reminded me of the privet hedge that was part of that original episodic memory, and I went straight on to write this little riff, almost exactly as it appears here:\(^\text{18}\)

Like the dog and the horse, the privet bush enjoys a unique relationship with Man, who has bent its evolution to his purposes. It seems like Privet was born to be pruned into a state of absolute regularity. Over the years, my father has trained its slender branches and tiny green leaves into such perfect squareness that it is more like a piece of furniture than anything organic. It provides a final, impenetrable barrier to the eyes of the street.

Characters

Next, I embarked on another round of unpacking, this time by writing descriptions of the characters involved (my brother, mother, and father), again in a rapid and associative process.

My brother Michael emerged as an eerie simulacrum of my father:

Michael and I face each other across the table. Our aunts and uncles say Michael has our father’s noble features—his straight nose and navy blue eyes.

My mother is bossy, and my father detached.

\(^{18}\) In the interest of clarity, I have departed from APA guidelines by italicizing all excerpts from “Privet.”
My mother is in a bad mood. I can tell by the way she cracks the eggs into the frying pan and they spit and curl into white lace. My father sits silently at the end of the table in his best thorn-proof wool suit. He sucks the end of his pencil and studies his crossword.

As I read through these descriptions of the two gardens, the hedge, and the characters, it seemed that a central mood or feeling had emerged from this hub of memory without my conscious intention or understanding. It seemed as if the story itself began to tell me what it might be about—my middle class family and its overemphasis on appearance, a sense that Man, in the person of my father, attempted to subdue and control nature, and finally, my own feeling of dislocation from my family in contrast to my brother’s identification with it. Certain details of the piece are factual: my father was rather remote and my mother somewhat controlling; my mother cooked and my father did crosswords; I resented my older brother. However, as they emerged, the characters were both like and unlike themselves: my mother was angrier than she was in reality, my brother more obnoxious, and my father more distant. In a strange way, the actors in this drama seemed to have emerged already in role.

In order to understand how this might happen, we must return to complexity thinking, and specifically, to the notion of constraints.

**Constraints**

A popular misconception about dynamic networks is that they evolve entirely from inside out, in that meaning or work is generated entirely from bottom up rather than top down, and in total freedom. This is not entirely true. Though the elements or units in dynamic systems operate far from equilibrium, they do not do so in total anarchy—if they did, they would be unable to generate work or meaning; indeed, they would not be a system. All complex systems operate within constraints, which often enhance, rather than inhibit, their ability to perform. For one thing, networks are situated within physical and historic contexts, which may exert their own influences upon the networks nested within them, through external (or context free) constraints.
In the case of this memoir piece, for instance, the Writer-Writing-Reader-Reading system operates within the conventions of the English short story structure (of which, more later).

For another thing, as any network evolves, opportunities are foreclosed when one path is followed and another ignored, and thus the network itself generates constraints, which are known as context sensitive in these instances. Juarrero (1999) points to the structure of language itself as a useful example of the way in which such context sensitive constraints are generated. In written and spoken English, the letter q is often followed by the letter u and is highly unlikely to be followed by an s or a t. No one ever decided that this would be the case, but as language (an emergent dynamic system) evolved, it became the case, as the individual letters in the alphabet became entrained by the system.19 Juarrero (1999) puts it this way: “The likelihood that the next letter or sequence of letters will be thus and such does not depend solely on that letter’s or sequence’s own prior probability. It also depends on the letter or sequence of letters that preceded it” (p. 137). At certain points (known as phase changes) in the evolution of networks, their emergent organization becomes a structure for all its components, as top-down, second order constraints are generated. Another way of putting this is to say that the individual components that make up the system engage in a process of mutual entrainment, not because of a force external to the system, but because of “the spontaneous emergence of a virtual governor” (Juarrero, 1999, p. 116). These various components begin to work together, till the whole operates as a “structured structuring structure” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5).

Many artists have remarked upon the uncanny power wielded by their artistic creations. Annie Dillard (1990) for one comments upon the directive nature of emergent fiction: “When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow” (pp. 549–550). By framing

19 To understand the notion of entrainment, it is only necessary to consider an audience as it applauds and falls into a rhythm in its clapping.
writer and writing as a complex system, it becomes possible to understand this phenomenon in terms of second order constraints generated during the writing process. Once one commits anything to paper, other artistic choices are rendered less likely, if not impossible, and the emergent story begins to make its own demands. The first three or four paragraphs of “Privet” generated second order constraints that initiated a phase change. This becomes evident I think, in the narrative that follows. Taking a creative jump (or bifurcation), the narrative moves away from the inspirational memory into a fictional exploration of the issues it has generated.

“Go and get the tomato ketchup, Claire,” my mother says. “You’re old enough to set the table properly. Your dad likes ketchup. “

“I like ketchup too,” says Michael. “I need lots of food for my brains, because I’m going to school.”

When Michael starts school he and Dad will walk together every day, across the railway tracks to the outside world and I’ll be left behind with my mother.

I put the ketchup on the table.

“Why do our hands move Dad?”

Dad’s newspaper remains steady but his navy eyes swivel up and peer at me over his glasses.

“Because we tell them to,” he says.

“But I didn’t tell my hands anything,” I say, “and they put the ketchup down.”

“You have a thing called The Brain,” my dad tells me.

“She doesn’t,” Michael says. “She’s a girl.”

My mother plonks plates in front of Michael and my father. She grabs the ketchup bottle and holds it under the tap to wash it.

“It’s made a stain on the cloth,” she says. “Didn’t you see it was dirty, Claire? If you asked fewer questions you might see what was under your nose’s end.”

This incident with the ketchup bottle is, in one sense, pure invention. In another sense, it represents states of affairs that were played out frequently in my family. I was expected to do housework because I was female, and my brother was exonerated from it by reason of his
masculinity. I was often reprimanded for qualities that were considered more appropriate for a boy—qualities such as my tendency to exhibit curiosity. This power imbalance was compounded by the fact that my brother was older, and as a boy, considered more entitled to an education. Although I had no direct memory of this breakfast scene, the family dynamics it captures were played out in scenes just like it throughout my childhood.

**Metaphor**

At this stage in the process of writing “Privet,” it felt as if my consciousness, the story, and the episodic memory were operating as one. My job was not to remember what happened and then write it down, but rather, to work in a space where the unfolding memory, the desire to communicate this to a putative reader, the emergent work, and my conscious writing self operated together, informing each other as the work progressed. In this process, the writer-writing must strike a delicate balance between surrender (to nonconscious processes such as memory) and control (of the mechanics of composition). I have found that connection to the central imagery of the story is crucial to maintaining this difficult balance and to finding one’s way as a writer when one has relinquished a large degree of control to the writer-writing system. Once again, Juarrero (1999) has something to say on this score: “Unexpected analogies,” she suggests, “allow us to jump across contexts to stitch together meaning from the ‘astronomical multidimensionality of human experience’” (p. 239). In an elegant metaphor of her own (borrowed from Hayes), she likens metaphors to compasses, one leg anchored to the familiar, and the other free to float and connect with the unfamiliar (Juarrero, 1999, p. 239). In this way, as the writer-writing pays close attention to imagery as it emerges, a foot is kept in both camps—the familiar and the unfamiliar. As I composed the ketchup scene, for example, I realized that my original memory of the spider contained such a key image—the privet hedge—something to

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\(^{20}\) The etymology of the word (from the Greek verb *meta-pherein*, to transfer) suggests that something is always being carried over.
which my attention had been instantly drawn during the free writing, without my consciously knowing why.

As I contemplated this image, it opened up the intention of the story. My mother and I stood on one side of the hedge and my father and brother on the other. On one side of the hedge was the female, domestic *inside* and on the other, the male, professional *outside*. I saw that the feelings connected with the crushed spider were composed in part of the jealousy and rage generated by my brother’s freedom to join my father in intellectual and professional pursuits while I was meant to enjoy domesticity with my mother. I wondered what would happen if I were to position the business coming up—the crushed spider—within the context of my brother’s first day at school. These events must have occurred, after all, at the time that he was five or six. Accordingly, I went on to end the incident with the following exchange between Michael and myself. As it fell neatly into place, I experienced a strong sense that the story and I were on the right track.

“I’m going to learn about all this stuff at school,” Michael boasts. “I’m going to know more than you. You get to learn everything at school. I’m going to learn how to read and write.”

“I can write my name,” I tell him. “Mam showed me.”

At last it was time to write about the central incident. By now, it felt quite easy and natural.

*She takes me to the front garden to say goodbye. We are stuck behind the hedge while my father and brother walk away. She takes my hand from my mouth and waves it for me.*

“Good luck,” I call. “Good luck.”

*My brother turns and smiles his smile at me.*

“Wave till they reach the corner,” my mother tells me. “Wave till they’re out of sight.”

*As she waves my right hand, my left hand does something of its own. The shaved privet is flat and bristly. Most of the leaves are snipped across but I want a whole one, so my hand sneaks into the inside place where the shears never go. I find a round, undamaged leaf and pluck it. It is bad to pick things in the garden and to squash them. I have something*
private—a secret of my very own. I roll it between my fingers and its softness comforts me.

Michael and Dad turn and wave one last time before they turn the corner. It is my last chance before we go in to wash the dishes so I quickly look down at the leaf.

It is not a leaf but a big black spider.

The spider has a fat middle part and yellow stuff is coming out. It has little white things inside, like eggs. Some of its legs have come off, and though the rest still move, I know that the spider is dead. I have killed it.

Throughout this part of the process, I had been paying conscious attention to the second order constraints generated by the episodic memory, my conscious self, and the emerging work. Of course, external or context free constraints had also been at work in my writing, in that I wrote grammatical English that would hopefully make sense to the reader because it followed certain literary conventions. In the next part of the writing process, one such convention began to make a more insistent set of demands.

**External Constraints: Short Story Form**

External (or context-free) constraints operate, in the case of writing, through the conventions of language and literature. Central to stylistic conventions is the notion of form, defined here by the poet Anne Sexton, as cited in Paula Salvio’s (2007) recent biography:

As I have said elsewhere, a formal structure works as a kind of superego. You say to yourself, “This is an impossible form. I could not even write a sentence to fit it, much less a poem.” So you put your mind to that problem. You are inhibited because the form and therefore your unconscious can have its way. Nothing inhibits it, and it is allowed to have free rein to tell its story. I once said that form was a cage, and if you had a good strong cage, you could let some really wild animals in it. Thus, the wild animals are the content and the cage is the form. (Salvio, 2007, p. 97)

Like all artists, I have internalized the constraints offered by my specific medium over the years, so that my craft comes naturally to me. As a sculptor is familiar with stone, her medium, so I am familiar with short story form (shown in Figure 3). Since I did not need to reinvent short story structure during the writing of “Privet,” I was, at least initially, able to allow it to inhabit the classic short story form in a process that felt quite effortless. Davis and Sumara...
(2006, pp. 147–150) have commented extensively upon this phenomenon, pointing out that far from constricting our creativity or our capacity to learn, constraints can enable complex emergence.

Without paying too much attention, I had, up to this point, established a physical context and main characters (the exposition), which included a central conflict or tension that drove the story forward. Once this is achieved, something must happen to ratchet up the ante—known as *rising action*. In this case, this was provided by the rivalry that existed between my brother and me, and by my sense of dislocation within the family dynamic. I had written a convincing and dramatic climax, the killing of the spider. It is quite easy, I think, to see how I followed these constraints, which far from limiting me, provided me with great freedom.

![Figure 3. Narrative arc](image)

As I took a step back now, however, and read the story more objectively for structure and shape, I saw that it lacked denouement (also called falling action or resolution). Up to this point, I had tried not to think about how the story might end. Like most writers and artists, I have learned to trust the process—something that I now believe to be the work generated by the writer/writing system. When the writer tries to think too consciously and rationally about the direction of the work, it can be counter-productive, in that it detaches the composer from the composition and literally dismantles the hard-working network. Accordingly, I had set the question of the missing denouement on the back burner of my unconscious or nonconscious mind. For a while I continue to ignore the business of the ending, in the hope that it would
emerge organically. Instead, I played around with revisions (re-visions) to the story, now that I saw it for what it had become, working backwards and forwards with the imagery it had revealed. First, I added a fictitious stone pixie to the front garden, to emphasize the sense of rigidity and stuckness. Then I gave my brother a “brand new briefcase like Dad’s . . . and a white shirt and a red tie and a Dr. Who pencil case” to foreshadow his first day at school. As I paid attention to the things that the writing had thrown up, other memories were generated, as things I hadn’t thought about for years popped up spontaneously as I worked. For instance, I was able to add two actual memories that neatly described my sense of servitude to my mother’s domesticity:

She’ll polish the dining room table in big, circular sweeps like she’s seen on this TV. show—‘Clean Your Way to Fitness.’ She’ll make me hold my hands out with my thumbs stuck up while she makes a ball of her knitting wool. My hands will be tied.

Finally, I was rather taken with the question I asked my father (“Why do our hands move Dad?”). I decided to pay attention to this little surprise, which Dillard (1990) calls “unwrapped gifts” (p. 21). Clearly, the question speaks to human volition—important in a story about power and those unconscious acts of hostility that may emerge from repressed anger. I wondered what my father might have replied, if I had actually asked him this question, and in response to this speculation, I rapidly composed a section of new dialogue, a Cartesian riff about human action delivered by my father:

The Brain orders your hands and your arms and your fingers and your toes to move. The Brain is like the General of the Army. He sends messages down little wires that work all the different parts of your body. It’s like a puppet on strings.

Later in the story I was able to pick up on the puppet imagery by having my mother take hold of my arm and shake it for me as my brother and father left for school: “Wish him luck,” she says, and soon my hand waves by itself. My Brain sends a message down the wires and my teeth smile and my fingers wiggle.” After I have accidentally crushed the spider, I later suggest that when it comes to human behaviour, there are no accidents, thus subverting my father’s naïve
insistence that we are always in control: “I wonder why my hand did that when my brain didn’t tell it to.” I must emphasize here that though this all might sound rather clever, I was not operating in a consciously intellectual mode as I made these revisions.

In any event, I reread the whole story with some satisfaction. It felt integrated. I liked the way it had emerged. But I still didn’t have an ending.

**Nonconscious Processes**

Another puzzle . . . arises with respect to the necessity of retrieval mode for retrieval to occur. Do we have to turn attention actively toward the past in order to become open to the possibility of remembering? . . . Tulving (2002) has argued that retrieval mode is essentially one aspect of a larger system designed for mental time travel, or chronoesthesia. (McDermott, 2007, p. 229)

For about a week, I experienced the discomfort known as writer’s block, a condition that can be best described, I think, as the knowledge and feeling that something is waiting to emerge through the writer-writing system, but that this something is inaccessible to the writer. Sometimes it is best to ignore this feeling, as one does a name that temporarily eludes one’s memory. “Just ignore it,” people tell you. “It will pop into your head later.” Again, Freud has had much to say on this score (Phillips, 2006, pp. 391, 327, 396). Sometimes it is best to sit at one’s desk and write whatever comes along, in the hope that the writer-writing will stumble across it. Initially, I attempted the latter solution.

Time after time, I read through the story as it stood. I tinkered with the wording, tidied up the grammar, and made small adjustments, in the knowledge that it helps to become immersed in the material, to become part of the system.²¹ I waited for my fingers to know what this ending might be. I set off on several false starts, because experience has taught me that sometimes I just need to doodle as it were, for things to become clear, that even though I did not consciously

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²¹ A typical writer’s trick is to work through small revisions to become in tune with the work, and then jump from what is known to what is unknown, the blank pages where one will write what’s next.
know what to write, a memory, image, or narrative would reveal itself if I didn’t try too hard. But each time I tried, the writing felt wrong and forced.

As I went to bed on the fifth or sixth day, I was no further forward. It had become extremely painful, as if I had become part of a system that was irreparably pushing forward and irreparably stuck (there is a reason that writing is compared with giving birth). In desperation, I resorted to another writer’s trick, by handing the problem over to my unconscious. As I got into bed, I literally ordered it my unconscious to produce a suitable denouement for the story. “Over to you!” I told it. “Get to work!”

That night I had a brief, but vivid dream in which my parents (both long deceased) were hunting down wasps in the living room of our family home. My father chased after them with a newspaper, while my mother directed him with various urgent commands. This was an event that had occurred so often in our family that it was unremarkable. When I woke, I almost discounted the dream memory, but recalling my injunction to my unconscious, I paid attention. With a start, I realized that the dream offered symbolism that was consistent with my unfinished story. Both memories employed insects, and in both cases, their slaughter. In each case, something was attempting to escape from a cruel domestic interior to a more natural and free exterior. Here was an opportunity to stitch together the imagery by identifying me with the wasp, and by extension, with the very spider that I had killed. I reached for a pen, and wrote the following words, almost exactly as they appear here.

*Mam and Dad kill wasps together. Dad runs after them with a rolled up newspaper.*

“And *Not on the wallpaper!* my mother cries as she runs after him with a teaspoon. “You’ll make a mark. Wait till it lands on the window.”

*When the wasp lands on the window and buzzes and scrapes with its tiny feet trying to escape into the trees it can see outside, Dad bashes it and steps aside as it falls to the window sill. Mam quickly runs in with the teaspoon while it’s still stunned. She puts the handle where its head ties on and she pushes as the wasp wriggles and its stinging end curls around looking for the enemy. The head is tied on with such strong wires that she has to push and push.*
“Take that!” Mam says as she crunches with the teaspoon and makes a face.

Hopefully, the reader will have noticed how this writing picks up on several of the key elements of the work in progress. My father is once again engaged in a battle to control the natural world. This time, however, the battle is conducted through an act of open and naked aggression in which my mother ably assists him. My parents have become coconspirators in a tidy assassination—as my mother severs the wires that allow the wasp to retain control of its own existence, it looks for the enemy, harking back to the army image my father employs earlier in the story. She simultaneously experiences great satisfaction and is horrified as she crushes the insect. The killing of the wasp is oddly perfect as an ending—a strange non sequitur that somehow offers a chilling insight into my parents’ ability to coordinate ruthless power.

Britzman (2006) warns that the unconscious rules through “its own unruly laws of primary processes: condensation, displacement, substitution, undoing, and reversals into opposites, all delightful deconstructions of symbolization” (p. 9). She goes on to describe these unconscious processes as an “aesthetic undertaking” through which “the world is transformed, conviction is made, affect is given free reign, and new realities are created” (Britzman, 2006, p. 9). Clearly, the unconscious had done its work on this occasion. With the addition of one more line, the circle, and the story, became complete, as I showed how I became complicit in my family’s concealed aggression.

“Take that!” I whisper as I throw the spider down before my mother sees it. “Take that!”

I wipe the yellow stuff off my hand onto my cardigan and I never speak of it again.

At the end of a somewhat gruelling process, the many levels of experience that were packed away in the hub of my little episodic memory lay revealed, and revealing. I understood why the memory had never left me—it represented my initiation into womanhood, the very second in which I learned how women deal with rage in our society: indirectly and without speaking.
Conclusion

A writer is chatting to a brain surgeon at a party. “Oh, you’re a writer!” the surgeon says to him. “I’m thinking of learning how to write when I retire.”

“Funny that you should mention that,” replies the writer, “because I’m thinking of becoming a brain surgeon!” (Anecdotal)

With Juarrero (1999), I believe that literature can be highly effect in revealing the complexity of human experience: “The interlevel tacking of the hermeneutic ‘circle,’” she writes, “reproduces the self-organization of complex dynamical processes” (p. 22). In this discussion, however, I have attempted to demonstrate that the reverse is also true. Human systems such as sensation, memory, emotion, and cognition operate (both consciously and unconsciously) to generate compelling stories as we re-collect and re-present the experiences that have gathered in the hubs and loci of our life memories. The process that writers follow in this endeavour has typically been shrouded in mystery, even mystique. For example, as a practising memoir writer, I have noticed that many of those who do not write either trivialize creative writing (as does the brain surgeon in the story cited above), or reify it by regarding it as the outcome of a special giftedness or talent. The lens of complexity thinking, in my view at least, offers useful middle ground by positioning the recollection and representation of life stories as being as complex, simple, and connected as all human processes. Once again, Rosenblatt (1978) comes at this question from a different direction, as she demands “greater respect for the common reader” (p. 140). The common writer also deserves respect.

Complexity thinking suggests a special relationship between writer, text, and reader, which, once defined, becomes much easier to discuss, and of course, to explore through artistic pedagogies. The reader-reading system is both the outcome of the writing process and a necessary precursor to it, in that writer-writing operates within the constraints set by the expectation of being read. When memoir is written with what Rosenblatt (1978) calls the ordinary reader in mind the result is “a re-experiencing, a re-enacting of the work-as-evoked” (p.
134) for both writer and reader. In the acts of writer-writing and reader-reading there is, at least for the duration, an intimate connection between writer and reader, as they operate as a temporary and ambiguously bounded complex dynamic system together with a text that in one sense exists outside both, and in another, creates them.
Interlude 5:

Antinarrative

As an antinarrative, the following piece, “Heath Rain Wind Birds” (Robson, 2009b) exposes the conventional expectations of the reader. In this way, it serves as a useful introduction to the next, and final, paper, which considers the role of genre as it influences acts of literary composition and of teaching. However much we try to create something new, we perceive and think in the forms we have come to expect. It serves us, therefore, to consider traditional forms, the cultural norms, and structures that we inhabit. In the next chapter, I reflect upon the notion of teacher-as-artist and upon my own work with the Quirk-e collective, in order to consider pedagogical genres in the enterprise of teaching memoir in a public context and to once more address my second research question: How can writing memoir be theorized and understood as an educational event?

“Heath Rain Wind Birds”

“I look up to see the things seen by that ‘she’ who a moment ago was ‘I’.”

—Emanuel, “In Praise of Malice”

Sully Baxter

OK. So what do you want to know about Sully Baxter?

I’d like to tell you that he has a history, this Sully.

But don’t we all?

As a species, we are a little overwhelming. Don’t you feel that? And don’t you sometimes wish you just had some different words? Perhaps more interesting ones?

And this pen. I want it to move along more quickly. For a so-called “Easy Glide,” it feels quite leaden, especially when these revisions come at me at the speed of light. A pen’s just not doing it for me. I’d prefer something brutal and quick—one of those energy sabres from Star Wars.

Maybe we should just call this whole thing off.
The pen, by the way, was just a conceit. I don’t use a pen to write. Of course, you knew that. A clever reader like you saw right through that one. This story (or “experimental fiction” or “l’écriture” or “creative nonfiction,” or whatever we’re calling it) is computer generated, like everything else these days. Having said that, I can only type with five fingers, so there’s still a measure of truth in the analogy. My typing is very slow. Like the pen.

But getting back to Sully, what I meant to say (instead of merely saying that Sully has a history), what I should have said, will say now, is that Sully’s history assumes importance, given what is to follow. Pass Sully on the street and you wouldn’t give the man a second glance. Put him in this story here and (ha!) suddenly, we’re curious!

It’s about context.

**Context**

OK. Here’s some context.

It’s a classic heath scene. That’s where Sully’s story begins. Think dark purple sky. Think a whole big bunch of moons and stars.

Sometimes Nature comes up with the impossible.

I really need to say that. It’s vital, and besides, I like the sound of it. It would make a great subheading.

**Sometimes Nature Comes Up With the Impossible**

Well, perhaps it was vital to say that two seconds ago, and if it wasn’t, well, I’m sorry. It’s too late. The cat’s out of the bag. Though in this instant, I’m thinking that I should just let it go.

Because it’s all impossible—you know? Take these words (“Go on, take them!”). “Heath” “Pen” “Hand” “Life.” We expect them to divide the world up between them! If they can’t describe something, well, “Excuse me,” we tell it, “You don’t exist, whatever you are.” But aren’t we taking ourselves just a little too seriously? Aren’t we asking these poor little words to do more than they’re capable of? They’re just scribbly black lines, like cartoon characters, or else a noise we make by forcing air through our larynxes in convoluted ways.

“Pah!” “Poppycock!” Is this the best we can do in terms of communication? What have we been doing? It’s the 21st century for goodness sake and we don’t even have telepathy? Now that would be communication! You’d know everything there was to know about Sully by now, and it would all be TRUE.

Of course, some of you will be muttering away about how I’ve ignored all kinds of alternative cutting edge artistic options such as film, and dance and installations. So what do I have to say about that, you might be asking? Here’s what I say. I say, “Screw you and your installations.”
Why do I say that? Because I can. Exactly my point.

**A Thousand Years of Culture Can’t Be Wrong**

Here’s the stumbling block though. Shakespeare and the classics. You can’t get really get around something like Macbeth, can you? That stuff’s soaked right into our archetypal consciousness and all the perfumes in Arabia aren’t going to clean it off.

I was optimistic about the monkeys for a while, working away at their hundreds of typewriters. But they hadn’t a hope really, had they? I think we all knew that. I feel bad that we exploited them like that, and no doubt gave them carpal tunnel syndrome, not to mention writer’s block. Even if they’d managed to come up with a halfway decent sonnet, there were still Chaucer and Austen and all the rest of them waiting around in the wings. You can’t really argue with a thousand years of culture.

So let’s go with that. Work with me here. You know this stuff. Fill in the blanks. It was a classic heath scene. Think Lear. Think Heathcliff. There were dark shrubs of some kind—heather maybe. Rain. Wind. I don’t really have to invent it. It’s been done. Read Hardy, for God’s sake—*Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Why try to top that?

So there we are (and here we are).

It’s a classic heath scene just like *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. But Tess isn’t in it. Tess is not standing on a mound like some great nipple (though no one ever says this in so many words, I always think of it). She’s not there because Hardy has bumped her off, presumably as some kind of warning to uppity women.

And I could get into that with you. I could, but I’m not about to. This has become complicated enough and that’s a different story. I see where you’re trying to take me, but I’m not tagging along.

One thing at a time. It says that right here in the *Fiction Writers’ Rulebook* which I happen to have open on my desk. The *Rulebook* says, and I quote, “a compelling story has focus.”

**Focus**

OK. There’s the heath. Rain. Wind. Birds. Crows probably, or whatever the hell else flies around up there in bloody England. They’re black, they’re ominous, and they flap. That’s all that earns them a place in this story. They could be bats for all I care. I don’t feel obliged to them any further. Yes, alright, they have their stories too. They’ve experienced trauma—difficult emergences from extra tough eggshells. They’ve had narrow escapes. They’ve been buffeted. They’re wet.

Jesus! Let them write their damned memoirs if they want! I have to impose some measure of control. It’s my story and I’ll do what the hell I like. I’ll cause them to simultaneously combust if I want to and to hell with the politically correct and the conservationists. I’m taking charge here.

So. Back to Sully Baxter.
As you already know, Sully has a history, and that history is the one that has assumed importance.

Well . . .

Perhaps it might be more accurate to say that though we trust that his history will assume importance, it has yet to do so. You have faith that it will, because here he is, in this story. He was right there in the very first line, remember? When I asked you what I could tell you about him, and you knew (I hope) that that was only a convention, because there you were blundering on your own heath as I scratched (or pecked) away at this.

I’ll never ever know you though I am somewhat tired of your expectations.

But we can do this. Hang on.

FOCUS


Sully Baxter and his accumulated history, which he carries on his shoulder in a big burlap sack.

Let’s move the narrative along.

“Sully stumbles. It’s dark, and he’s silhouetted against the purple sky. He looks like a scarecrow.” (In fact, the whole scene is like one of those cheap cardboard friezes you’d buy for Halloween—spiky and stereotypical.)

I hope you’re happy now. Really. I hope you got what you wanted.


What’s that you say? You were looking for a more strenuous literary workout? You were hoping for material for your thesis on Experimental Fiction: the Agony of Angst? You were hoping to learn the ABC of MFA: Authentic Voice? Back story? Compelling scene?

Aren’t we done with those? For God’s sake!

Sully had one foot in the past and the other in the future. Beneath him, the present opened like a chasm. Satori. Gestalt. Samadhi. Enlightenment.

The Human Condition.

—Robson, “Heath Rain Wind Birds”

Discussion

I wrote “Heath Rain Wind Birds” (Robson, 2009b) as my own response to a simple exercise I had set for a group of writers at a weekend retreat. I had piled a table with random
objects and invited each of them to pick something to use as inspiration. After everyone else had chosen, I picked up, at random, a Halloween frieze depicting a man surrounded by bats and used it as a starting point for this piece, which I wrote in a single sitting. I will break into my own narrative here to remind the reader that the narrator of “Heath Rain Wind Birds” is herself a fiction. Generally speaking, I am not as testy or as obsessively cerebral as is this narrator (or at least so I would like to think). Though I did indeed write the story, it does not represent me. Perhaps it is truer to say that the me that it represents is a small aspect of me—the me that I was when I wrote it.

“Heath Wind Rain Birds” (Robson, 2009b) can be read as an antinarrative commentary on prose conventions. As it is defined by the International Society for the Study of Narrative (Antinarrative, 2008), antinarrative challenges the very notion of narrative itself. It is highly self-conscious in that it frequently draws attention to its own narrative practices and techniques in order to remind the reader that the text has been artificially constructed. Rather than inviting the reader to make believe in the illusory world conjured up by a compelling story, the writer of antinarrative invites the reader to peek behind the scenes at its machinery. “Heath Rain Wind Birds,” for example, confronts and challenges the reader’s expectation that Sully Baxter will be someone important just because he is introduced early in the story. It goes on to frustrate the reader’s hopes that he or she will hear more about Sully, or that something dramatic will occur. It pokes fun at the propensity of readers for drama and angst, seeming to mock them for demanding predictable literary techniques such as pathetic fallacy—the stormy heaths and ominous birds that have inhabited our stories since Aeschylus. Though the narrator accepts that “a thousand years of culture can’t be wrong” and admits that you “can’t really get around something like Macbeth,” she seems weary and annoyed by the reader’s passive acceptance of literary norms.
As I have suggested in the last paper, “Writer/writing/reader/reading,” the process of composition is a complex process in which the story, the writer, and the prospective or potential reader form a short term relationship. The products of such alliances can be surprising, even to the writer herself. The feeling that I had when I was composing “Heath Rain Wind Birds” (Robson, 2009b) was that someone else was writing it. Even more spookily (it is a Halloween story after all), as I read it now, I see that it foreshadows this dissertation, in that it is a meditation on the efficacy of language as a way to think about and to represent ourselves and our world. It questions the ability of language to represent our experiences accurately in a world that is constantly reforming itself, and in which our perception is at once limited and proscribed by the genres we have been able to invent. As I reread the story in the context of this study, I realize that I located it with a core text from this dissertation, opening with an epigraph from Lyn Emanuel’s (1992) reflections about revision, the very chapter that I cite in the Introduction to this dissertation. And yet the story was written several years before I had any notion of entering the doctoral program. Though the narrator longs for a more fluid means of communication, perhaps the greatest irony of the piece is that it is extremely fluid, in that it accurately captures an intellectual preoccupation of which I was largely unaware at the time of writing. In the act of writing, one sometimes wonders who is writing whom.
CHAPTER 5:
PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

Art, like the curriculum, is in the process of becoming and recreating in each situation.
—Slattery, *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era*

The Quirk-ès have a project.

After five years of working with me in this arts-engaged community group, the members of the Queer Imaging & Riting Kollective for Elders have a chance to go public, to get an anthology of writing published and disseminated to libraries across Canada. The idea came from Wayson Choy (a well-known memoirist who is our mentor), and he has even donated a little seed money to get us started. Inspired by his act of faith, I’ve secured extra grant money and spoken with a senior editor at Arsenal Pulp Press. The editor is interested, but wonders if everyone can get their writing up to the rigorous standard required by a commercial press. I tell my group that this will be a challenge and go on to lay out some central questions that I think we will need to address: When we’ve written about an experience, what comes next? What is the difference between a journal entry and a story? How do we start the process of revision? How can we help each other by offering critique? I have covered this material before, but now there is a fresh incentive to learn.

Everyone wants to be in the anthology. Everyone wants to learn how. So they pay close attention to me today as they sit around folding tables with their coffees and snacks. Douglas cups his hand around his ear and leans forward to hear me over the din of the high school kids screaming in the stairwell of the senior center. He’s not the only one who’s rather deaf, so I’m careful to scan for incomprehension. As I glance around at these lined and weathered faces, I feel

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22 From BC Council for the Arts.

23 A mainstream commercial press located in Vancouver.
fortunate to be who I am and where I am in this particular moment—a teacher who has found her
genre as a public pedagogue. It still amazes me that Quirk-e is such a public project.

Since I have used this adjective three times already, I should attempt its definition.

**The Public**

The word *public* is variously defined in dictionaries, but most of them suggest that
something that is public might be publically funded, open, and accessible to the public, act in the
service of community, and meet in a public place. Quirk-e serves as an example, since it is
funded by federal and provincial\(^\text{24}\) money, managed by a government agency\(^\text{25}\), partnered with
two nonprofits\(^\text{26}\), open to any member of the public who identifies as old and queer, and
convenes in a community center.\(^\text{27}\) This venue is significant, since the presence of older LGBT
people has typically been ignored in many community spaces (Brotman et al., 2003, p. 91). Also,
the members of Quirk-e have become a cultural force in their Eastside community and beyond it
as they seek to address stereotyping by demonstrating the variety and range of their experiences.
They have T-shirts, a website, a Ning, and a YouTube presence. They’ve staged 28 public
performances in their five years together, self-published five collections of their writings, and
shown their work in a juried exhibition in Vancouver’s public library. As writer-in-residence, I
am mandated to produce and direct two shows a year—one for the general public, and one for
our local community.

This level of institutional acceptance would have been unthinkable back when I fled the
teaching profession in 1989 to escape Thatcher’s systematic deform of the British school system

\(^{24}\) Our funders include Canada Council, BC Council for the Arts, SmartFund, and Vancouver Coastal
Health.

\(^{25}\) The Vancouver Parks Board.

\(^{26}\) QMunity and Britannia Community Center.

\(^{27}\) Britannia Senior Center.
Robson, 2010), to live as an out lesbian, and to learn how to write memoir.\textsuperscript{28} Thatcher’s government did its best to banish gay and lesbian voices from public discourses,\textsuperscript{29} including educational conversations, so it’s hard to imagine it funding or sanctioning a group of old queers. But the project of education has evolved between then and the time of writing (2010). As Wright (2000, pp. 5–6) and Giroux (2005) have noted, many educators have moved in the same direction as I, from the traditional K–12 classroom to public spaces beyond it, such as museums, art galleries, grassroots and nonschool organizations such as Quirk-e. It is as if, Pinar (2010) notes (with a degree of irony) school deform has expelled pedagogy from schools to the “safe haven” of the world, in which we can teach (p. xv). My public haven has its dangers and adversities—low pay and the constant threat of budget cuts come to mind—but it has many advantages. As Pinar implies, I can set my own curriculum. My students are here because they want to be. The group is sustainable—almost every one of its founding members still attends. As a stable group coalesced around common goals, we have thus become a community. Our goals are political as well as educational, social, and artistic. Warner (2002, p. 413) draws a distinction between the public (a kind of abstract social totality) and various publics, which are temporary convened by specific address. The members of Quirk-e have created their own local publics, but always with an eye to the greater prize. By getting their work published and into libraries, they hope to expand public (or general) opinion about the state of being old and queer.

As I have noted elsewhere (Robson et al., 2010), heteronormative discourses have made many people who identify as LGBT feel excluded and different, to varying degrees. As the members of Quirk-e write their stories, I believe, with Schubert (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010, pp. 10–20), that they are hoping to access some of those qualities and attributes that have

\textsuperscript{28} See Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{29} See footnote 2.
been somewhat overlooked in the modern school curriculum—especially values and critical awareness of the normalizing structures we inhabit. Though Foucault (2001) questions the ability of any speaker to step outside his or her culture to find uncomplicated truth, he also highlights the importance of parrhesia, or fearless truth-telling, which he framed as a social duty. And as Oliver (2001) suggests, oppression and domination can “undermine and destroy subjectivity” (p. 17). By the same token, speaking out can strengthen and repair it (Felman & Laub, 1992). Indeed autobiographical parrhesia has generated testimonial literature that has been crucial to the considerations of human rights tribunals and commissions in such places as Chile and Argentina.

Cvetkovich (2003) has applied this notion of public testimony to the experiences of gays and lesbians in everyday situations. Building on Laura Brown’s (1995) formulation of insidious trauma, she notes that people who are queer experience slights and rejections on a daily basis—injuries that occur at the very intersection of the personal and the political, the private and the public. Personal writing such as ours, then, can make oppression visible and complicate normative discourses. As Warner (2002, p. 424) notes, the expansive nature of public address serves to broaden the scope of venues in which queer voices are heard. In this sense, Quirk-e has created its own publics, those people who turn out on a regular basis to events, visit our website, or buy our anthologies. Some of them have told me how much they are looking forward to joining the group when they are older, or how encouraging it to see us performing in well-known public spaces. As well as educating the public by sharing private experiences then, the collective is creating and expanding its own publics and creating an important counterpublic in the hope that “people will recognize themselves in its address” (Warner, 2002, p. 424). The very fact that a group of people have chosen to identify as old and queer is important information for some.

Representation is especially important for LGBT seniors because they are at once over and underdetermined by popular culture (Sumara, 2007, p. 44). Queer identifications are packed
with interpretive options that are rarely presented with any degree of subtlety in public discourse, which tends to focus our attention on uncomplicated stereotypes (such as *gay men have great taste*). Aging and age are similarly under- and misrepresented in a Western society that seems to be searching for eternal youthfulness, as any evening’s television viewing will demonstrate (Macdonald & Rich, 1983). Advertisers rarely show old people using their products, for instance, unless they are targeting older people specifically, in which case old and older models are portrayed as universally heterosexual and as serene, cheerful caregivers, retirees, and grandparents rather than single or gay, outspoken, activist or professional. Meanwhile, television and film capitalize on stereotypes of aging, such as grumpiness, conservatism, and deafness.

**The Private**

Though the word *public* is defined in terms of funding, location, and accessibility, the word *private* is generally defined purely in opposition to its antonym, as dictionaries tell us that the private is that which is not publically known. And yet, the relationship between them is permeable, and they are interdependent. Without the private, publics could not exist, since any form of public address (including teaching) begins with private experience, as does any form of thinking (Britzman, 2006, p. 66).

Arendt (1958) directs us to a closer consideration of the word’s etymology, pointing out that *private* (from the Latin *privatus*—bereaved or set apart from) suggests privation. As we look back even further, it also suggests a certain eccentricity (*privatus* is from *privus*—single or peculiar). Many members of Quirk-e inhabit these conditions, since they are often set apart from their families and their family homes. Also, the related word *queer* (strange, odd, or singular), once used as a pejorative, has been reclaimed in the gay and lesbian community in order to express defiance, embrace perversity, and build cosexual community in the face of differences among various sexual minorities and gender identifications (Epstein, 2002). The group’s name,
Quirk-e, celebrates these doubled interpretations of what it might mean to be private—at once dangerous and eccentric. It reflects the defiant pride expressed by many members of the group—not just in their queerness, but in the cranky, unpredictable cunning that they like to associate with old age.

Some commentators (Britzman, 2006; Brown, 1995; Cvetkovich, 2003; Felman & Laub, 1992; Freud, quoted in Phillips, 2006; Pitt & Britzman, 2003), especially those writing from the field of psychoanalytic theory, suggest that what is private may lie hidden even from the subject who reflects. Some experiences, such as trauma, can be unspeakable, and as gay and lesbian people, it is likely that many of the members of Quirk-e have suffered from more than their fair share of oppression and estrangement (Love, 2007). Marked by forgetting and disassociation, such difficult experiences—even everyday slights and rejections—sometimes seem to leave no record at all (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). Yet they are never really forgotten, but work in various underground ways to unsettle meaning as their force returns (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 758).

This raises another question—how might such private material be recovered, if at all? How can we access that which we know, but do not know that we know? In this case, how can the members of Quirk-e turn what is private into forms of public address, or, put another way, engage in poetic world making (Warner, 2002, p. 422)?

Making the Private Public

Through Artistic Practices and Public Pedagogy

Such aesthetic endeavours are not new. Citing Habermas, Shakespearean scholar Paul Yachnin (2010) believes that “the subjectivity of the privatized individual was related from the very start to publicity” and that the two are “conjoined in literature” (Yachnin, 2010, para.1). His five year study of the impact of Shakespeare’s plays led him to conclude that they not only had wide public appeal but actually created the modern public. Before Shakespeare, only wealthy or
powerful individuals were known as *public* figures, but the act of sitting together and listening to controversial issues being discussed and unpicked served to “expand forms of public expression, feeling, identity, self-representation, influence, and action for people usually excluded from public life” (Yachnin, 2010, para. 2). As Catholics and Protestants sat side by side, for instance, they were bound together in increasingly complex ways by the debates and conversations that unrolled before them, and thus the public structure was reshaped and enlarged.

But what pedagogies can I design to serve this important literary project? The Quirke-s still wait to hear what I will say next. Their pens are poised.

**Teacher As Artist**

Building upon the work of Dewey (1910/2010, p. 220), who cites the old adage that teaching is an art and the true teacher is an artist, Eisner (2002) contrasts two educational models. The first is the formalist vision of schooling that is based on identifying and achieving narrowly defined aims. This school of teaching can be traced back to the early work of Tyler (1949) and continues to dominate pedagogies and curriculum in Europe and the United States (Bobbitt, 2004; Pinar, 2004). Citing Read (1944), Eisner compares it with an alternative vision of schooling that frames both learning and teaching as a form of art. Artists, he suggests (and by extension, the teacher-as-artist) are adept at experiencing qualitative relationships that emerge in the work, in order to judge and modify them. They are flexibly purposeful, “capitalizing on the emergent features appearing within a field of relationships” and not “rigidly attached to predefined aims when the possibility of better ones emerge” (Eisner, 2002, “Artistically rooted forms of intelligence, ” 2, para. 2). They see that form and content are often inextricable—“one of the lessons,” Eisner suggests, “that the arts teach most profoundly” (Eisner, 2002, “Form and content is most often inextricable,” 3, para. 1). Eisner suggests that artists understand that not everything knowable can be articulated in propositional form and asks whether it is really the
case that “what we cannot assert we cannot know” (Eisner, 2002, “Not everything knowable can be articulated in propositional form,” 4, para 1). Elsewhere, Eisner (1996) points to the ability of art to attune to and capture subjective material. When teachers act like artists, he says, they look to their medium in the belief that first we design our curriculum then our curriculum designs us. “The flute makes certain qualities possible that the bass fiddle will never produce, and vice versa,” he points out, as he asks: “Where are the parallels when we teach and when students learn in the social studies, in the sciences, in the language arts?” (Eisner, 1996, Section 5, “Looking to the Medium”).

This is the question that I take up next, in order to see if something can be learned about pedagogy as it applies to the processes of writing memoir.

**How to Write a Short Story**

A casual internet search on “How to write a short story” provided me with 10 pages of websites, books, and popular articles on the topic, most of which broke down the elements of a short story in a task analysis approach to teaching people how to write. Many, if not most, of the tasks outlined speak to the stylistic requirements of genre, which can be defined as a category of artistic endeavour having a particular form, content, technique. For the purposes of the upcoming anthology, most of the Quirk-es will be writing short stories about their experiences. The defining characteristics of the short story genre are that they are composed in prose and will inevitably adopt a point of view. They will be shorter than a novel or novella. They will also have some kind of organizing structure, most typically a narrative arc which moves through exposition and rising action to a climax and eventual denouement. Finally, the short story will have one or more purposes, intentions, or themes.

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30 Memoir is a subgenre of autobiography. Whereas autobiography is factual, historical and covers an entire life, memoir employs the techniques of fiction to deal with more affective material in a given focus (such as the family). Memoir can be written as poetry, short story, full length manuscript, or even as a play.
The stylistic constraints offered by the genre of the short story generate certain technical demands, and these are duly noted in much of the advice typically offered to novice writers. Jennifer Stewart (2009) at Write 101.com provides a good example:

Every piece of writing must have a message or thread of meaning running through it, and this theme is the skeleton or framework on which you hang your plot, characters, setting etc. As you write, make sure that every word is related to this theme. (“Short story theme,” para. 1)

She goes on to advise students to limit the time span, and the number of characters, to provide an interesting setting, and to make good use of dialogue. “Vivid imagery,” she notes, “also draws the reader in” (Stewart, 2009, “Vivid imagery for your short story,” para. 1). What Stewart is talking about here are the byproducts of genre.

At first glance, it would seem appropriate to draw the attention of those writing short stories to such technical demands. It seems as sensible as, say, breaking down the various components of a forehand drive in Physical Education and then drilling students in their sequenced execution. Yet even in the field of concrete movement and activity, some physical educators (Griffin & Butler, 2005) suggest that formal approaches remove skills from their contexts and intentions. They argue that though students taught this way may learn these skills, they find it impossible to transfer them to real life situations. Instrumental approaches to the direct transmission of content may also render it dull and lifeless (Davis et al., 2008, p. 95), a tendency that is demonstrated by Stewart’s own, perhaps unconscious, choice of imagery. It is telling that she refers to theme as a skeleton upon which the plot, characters and setting hang (like so much laundry on bones plucked clean of meat). If I were her writing teacher, I would encourage her to attend to her emergent imagery in order to understand the underlying intention of her work, rather than to stick it in as a decorative afterthought, as she seems to suggest.
**Genre**

There are other dangers inherent in technical or formal approaches to teaching people how to write memoir (though they might be useful if one’s purpose were to write genre fiction).\(^{31}\) Contemporary genre theorists (Devitt, 1993) point out that rather than being fixed, genres often evolve to reflect the forces that act upon them, including stylistic fashions, culture, and the constant attempts of artists to extend, subvert, and expand their possibilities. Nor are genres discrete, rather they are merged and blended by contemporary writers, who combine magical realism and descriptive fiction, for instance, or prose and poetry. Though it does give form to what has lain private and unseen, genre is only one part of the equation. If it were not, genres would be as immutable as early genre theorists, such as Aristotle and Plato, suggested.

What I am suggesting here is that the act of composition, in any medium including teaching, is a complex process in which the artist, the art itself as it *talks back* to the artist, the genre in which the art emerges (and this may change as the work progresses), and the potential audience for the art form a temporary relationship for the duration of the act. In Chapter 4, I used complexity theory to theorize this relationship, arguing that all these elements form a complex, dynamic system for the duration of composition. This allows me to better understand some of the pedagogical strategies I have found successful, such as the use of imagery, the processes of revision, and the identification of key screen memories.

**Public Pedagogy As a Teaching Genre**

Davis and Sumara (2006, p. 91) have written quite extensively about teaching as a similarly complex process, as they frame curriculum structures, classroom collectivity and subjective understanding as nested levels within learning systems. If teaching can be framed as an art and all art is expressed through genre (albeit experimental, antinarrative, or blended), then

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\(^{31}\) Examples of genre fiction include romance novels and murder and detective mysteries, all of which follow a predictable pattern.
it seems to follow that teaching must also find appropriate genres, and that these may vary (as they do in artistic composition) according to the current intentions of the teacher in the teaching moment, the interests and situations of the students, and the intention of the course. If we use Tyler’s (1949) rationale, we might impose genre from the outset by designing structured lesson plans that delineate outcomes, methods, and assessment. Again, this kind of teaching (the genre fiction of the educational realm) has its place. However, when it comes to the deep, complex, personal learning that arrives with writing memoir, what new genres must be created by teacher-as-artist? Form arises not from content, but with it, as the public arises with the private when the private finds expression, surprising everyone in the process of revelation.

First, however, there is the private, so it is here that I begin an investigation of my own search for genres, as a public pedagogue.

**Pedagogy 1: Locating the Private**

I have already asked each of the Quirke-s to identify some especially powerful moments among their many life experiences. These have been variously called “screen memories” (Freud, as quoted in Phillips, 2006, pp. 541–560), “episodic memories” (Conway, 2007) and “spots of time” (Wordsworth, 1850/1926), and I have discussed them in detail in Chapters 3 and 4. In order to locate these hubs of memory, I have the Quirk-es construct a life map on which they chart key events and turning points in their lives, together with the cultural and physical locations in which they occurred and the characters involved. Next, I have them choose one event that seems especially compelling.

In my experience, it is not always, and perhaps not often, the most overtly emotional incidents that provide the most successful memoir, but rather, those somewhat tangential events that have an eerie or uncanny charge. It is to incidents like these—unexamined moments that

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32 Few of us would advocate a discovery or constructivist approach to teaching students how to change a tire. In this situation, a directive, teacher-centred genre seems more appropriate.
present themselves insistently to consciousness—that I direct their attention. As Britzman (2006) has said the literary can represent “what else we mean and what has been missed” (p. 17)—those private matters that are difficult to put into words. In the next part of this exercise, I have my students locate the memories they have chosen in a second sense of that word, by reconstructing, their locations, in order to unpack as many details as they can of setting, characters, and cultural bookmarks (such as popular songs and fashions, and historical events).

When these details are re/collected from the networks of association, significance is unearthed and what has been repressed may return. Freud (in Phillips, 2006) argues that these highly evocative screen memories may not be themselves be golden, but when they assert themselves in memory, it is often because they have “lain beside gold” (p. 545). I interpret his imagery thusly: because of repression and resistance, the inessential components of an experience (such as emergent imagery or physical details) may have come to stand in for the essential. In analysis, and (as I argue in Chapters 3 and 4) in the process of writing memoir, the learner can follow such images and details along the trails of their associations in order to find out more about what happened. With Freud, I encourage students not to worry too much about sticking too closely to the factual truth of what happened as we recall it, since as Freud (in Phillips, 2006) suggests, “such things are very often constructed unconsciously, almost like works of fiction” (p. 553).

In this first step, then, my pedagogical genre emerges directly from intention to generate teaching structures that are highly directive, in the same way that inspiration finds form in creative compositions. Though this may seem paradoxical, in that we are dealing with unconscious and often chaotic material, I believe that it is not. As Davis and his colleagues point out (Davis et al., 2008, p. 193), tight constraints set by teachers can liberate students by affording freedom to act spontaneously within them. Since my intention is to help my students locate that
which has lain private, even from the authors themselves, I focus attention within, distracting
them from any consideration of putative public outcomes. To this end, I set tight limits on the
time available for writing, and ban editing and self-censorship by requiring students to keep their
pens moving, rather than go back and cross out. I do everything I can to help them to ignore the
technical demands of writing, encouraging them to simply record the circumstances of these key
locations, to let go of judgment, to stop worrying about outcomes, to forget how much they want
to be published in the anthology.

**Pedagogy 2: Considering Intention**

Once these first drafts are completed, it is time for the authors to re-see (re-vise) them in
order to look at what they have written with new eyes. To become first audience for our work
and wash away “the film of habit and dust collected over time so that it is seen anew” (Grumet,
1988, p. 81) can be difficult, as the eye glances over the writing, and the writer tries to make the
story coherent by “tying up loose ends too neatly, or short-circuiting ambiguity through a
dependence on stereotyped language” (Britzman, 2006, p. 20). The writer must therefore engage
in a different kind of activity. Rather than the associative processes of discovering the affective
force of a memory, he must ruthlessly examine and analyze its content. This new intention
generates a different pedagogical genre.

In my private teaching capacity, as a writing coach or teacher of small groups of students,
I take the role of expert in this next activity, sitting with authors one-on-one or in small groups in
order to read first drafts and draw attention to emergent imagery, or intentions that are struggling
to emerge. I have developed what those in my profession call *an eye*—a highly tuned ability to
discern what the writer is aiming for and make effective suggestions as to how her fledgling
work might be strengthened. In the public project of Quirk-e, however, new pedagogical genres
have been generated by the collective’s emergent needs.
Quirk-e’s Evolution from Private to Public

Quirk-e began as a classic writing group—a collection of individuals, rather than a community or collective. As outlined above, this required teaching genres that I knew quite well from the time I had spent in high school classrooms. I was the expert working one-on-one with individuals who regarded themselves as novices. Our first outcome was a galleried show of individual works. I served as gate keeper and editor, working through one-on-one critique. Though radical in theme, “Transformations” occupied a genre that can be viewed in public libraries and school entrance halls across the world—a display of student work linked by theme, but interpreted in various ways.

Even during this first year of work together, however, a new intention emerged as we began to think through the implications of our shared identifications as older queers. What did this mean? What was queer writing anyway? We began to formulate a range of responses to these questions, zeroing in on experiences that might help us answer them. The shift was so gradual that we hardly noticed it until two or three members who did not enjoy this more political turn expressed their dissatisfaction and eventually left the group (somewhat acrimoniously). The group, one might say, had revised itself.

As form followed content, the group was reinvented, and as its teacher, I found myself on entirely new ground. As we considered topics such as race, class, and queer history, I realized that many of the collective were better informed than I. As a queer senior myself, I had my own perspectives, but it became increasingly difficult to separate these out from suggestions made by individuals in the group. Indeed, it didn’t seem to matter. Without too much conscious decision, we had made a shift in genre. Rather than an expert working purely one-on-one, I also became a group facilitator. A prime focus in the second year was the group, not as a collection of various
individuals, but as the dynamic system it had become. In this second year, we composed a mission statement and came up with our name.

Eisner (2002, “Artistically rooted forms of intelligence,” 2, para. 2) identifies one of the stylistic qualities of teacher as artist as the ability to pay attention to emergent features in the “field of relationships” offered by his students. In my case, I adapted my pedagogical genres to these more collective, public processes and outcomes. Rather than the anthology of individual writings that I had originally planned for in Year 2, we staged a flamboyant theatrical show (“Outspoken”) that wove individual work together with cocreated choral pieces about being old and queer. Our artistic focus thus moved from private and internal transformations to public and collective acts of speaking out. At the same time, though “Outspoken” offered the members of the group an important opportunity to explore their commonalities, it was important for us to retain and represent our differences. For instance, some pieces expressed the joys of being old, and some the fears and complications that age can bring. One person wrote a piece expressing the belief that identifying in terms of her age had no personal relevance for her. In this way, rather than coalescing behind a set of purely political goals (to raise the visibility and establish the worthiness of older queers, for instance), we continued to use memoir to unpick the nuances and subtleties of our identifications. Our mission statement describes us as “an unruly choir” about the business of producing “strong, honest art” and creating “a community of artists who might support, challenge, and encourage each other in creative process, and make the diverse experiences of old and ageing queers visible in our community” (from the Quirk-e mission statement, personal communication, 2006).

In the next two years, I continued to move away from the front of the classroom—a position that MacLure (2003) suggests “serves as an enduring symbol of social control” (pp. 13–14), but that is, of course, inherent in the very meaning of the word pedagogy (from the Latin to
Lave and Wenger (discussed in Smith, 2003) among others, have questioned this notion that students learn only from the teacher, pointing to the social nature of most human beings to suggest that we learn best in communities that have been created over time in the pursuit of shared enterprises. Situated and collaborative learning has been taken up in a variety of educational settings, and in particular, in projects which forefront social justice and liberation, such as those described in the *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* (Sandlin et al., 2010). What is perhaps lacking in these discussions, however, is close analysis of the pedagogical structures (or genres) that might be generated by this turn, and it is to this question that I turn next.

**Public Pedagogy**

The various projects discussed and presented in the *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* (Sandlin et al., 2010) are well theorized, but arguably point to a dislocation between theory and practice, which Petrina (2004) variously describes as “what should be learned” and “how it should be organized for teaching” (p. 1). Mimi Luse (2010) supports his argument as it applies to the enterprise of public art. Her (limited) experience of “anti-institutions of pedagogy” in New York City led Luse to conclude that students remained unclear about what they were actually meant to be doing. “Caught up in the promises of theory,” she concluded, “perhaps concrete social contribution is too much to demand from the eternally unpragmatic field of art” (Luse, 2010). Though I strongly disagree with Luse’s conclusion, I believe she makes an important point. In the art of teaching, as in the art of writing, intention is realized through the structures offered by genre. Though these genres are fluid and dynamic, they can be productively discussed, even though they cannot be fixed and used as instruments.

What, then, are the genres available to the public pedagogue?
Collective Biography

As I considered this question in the fifth year of Quirk-e’s work together, I came across a well-theorized genre that I believed would be a good fit for the collective’s work. Collective Biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) is not new. Richard Butt and others (Butt, 1983; Butt et al., 1992) have discussed the model’s potential to contribute to learning in their work with teachers. What attracted me to Davies and Gannon’s text (which does not reference Butt) was its clear delineation of pedagogical strategies designed to build upon and strengthen the process of groups as they used autobiographical writing to explore cultural contexts and identifications.

In Davies and Gannon’s (2006) work, first drafts of autobiographical writing around the theme of girlhood were produced and then subjected to poststructural critique, in which the objective was to emancipate the writer from habitual modes of thinking. The authors paid close attention to “embodied detail” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 12) in ways that resonated with my own practices and with similar faith that such details might bring “a new and unexpected view of what happened to light” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 12). The methods they employed included close questioning of the writer by the peers in her group about her precise lived experience of the moment about which she was writing; examinations and discussions of “gaps and silences” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 175) in the work (that which has not yet been acknowledged or spoken); interpretations of the work’s contributions to ongoing cultural discourses (in this case, about girlhood), and finally, challenges around clichés, stereotypes, and places of avoidance. In this way, private stories were seen as reflective of the public and political contexts in which all experiences occur. Lived experiences became a starting point for closer understanding of the cultures that influence subjectivity, and vice versa. As I stepped further back from the genre of teacher-as-expert, it seemed that the members of Quirk-e might find collective biography an appropriate and empowering genre for their work together.
The Quirk-e Collective Biography (CB) project (conducted in Year 5) was indeed successful in several ways. Some of the groups became more self-determining, organizing their own field trips, choosing their own themes, and using different media in a range of creative responses. Almost all the themes chosen marked an important move from private to public: the theme of *Be-Coming* became a site for considerations of coming out, identity formation, and normative notions of beauty. Reflections about *Piercing* included body piercing, tattooing, and current moves by some national governments to eradicate gays and lesbians by executing them. One group produced a Collective Biography called “The Bridge Generation,” which explored commonalities and differences of their journeys through a period of history in which gays moved from having no legal rights to civil rights. In fact, this latter topic has provided the organizing principle for our current anthology project. Some of the groups worked together effectively (for instance by negotiating ongoing absences with an online blog) and constructed consistent processes to organize discussions.

At the same time, there were other developments that I found less thrilling. A small caucus of four people, who identified as *hard core* writers, wanted nothing to do with staying to themes, but rather, steadfastly wrote about whatever they chose and then critiqued their work in traditional terms of craft. I was surprised by an emergent level of discord, something that we had not experienced since Year 1. The Quirk-es who *just wanted to write* locked horns with the other four members of their group, who wished to collaborate on a collective biography. Part of the issue was content (collective biography vs. individual writing) and part was form (the way in

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33 Field trips included a bus trip through the local community.

34 The outcomes included a PowerPoint presentation, a short choral reading, an iMovie, and a short play.

35 Though they were quick to point out that hate crimes in Canada are on the rise, and civil rights are still denied to LGBT individuals in many countries.

36 Davies and Gannon draw upon many of the techniques of the 1960s and 1970s feminist model of consciousness-raising.
which critique should be conducted). The *just-want-to-writers* were in favour of rigorous and uncompromising attention to craft, a trend that their CB colleagues found stressful, intimidating, and dismissive of more emotional, subjective, and political factors. When the conflict became irresolvable (even after I had facilitated a two hour discernment process), I dictated a separation of the warring factions—a suggestion that everyone had resisted until I outright demanded it, at which point they were all grateful that I had taken the lead. Another group found it difficult to remember or implement its decisions, and a third was highly productive under the tacit leadership of one of its members, but later rebelled against her as being too bossy.

Throughout the year, I found myself constantly revising my role as teacher, handing over control and then taking it back. This issue was raised in the end of year evaluations. The members of Quirk-e were almost unanimous in their stated desires for “more teaching about writing,” “more leadership from Claire,” and “more direction” (Quirk-e, participant feedback, personal communication, 2009). I was quite surprised—a condition, of course that that is not unfamiliar or unwanted in the teacher-artist’s classroom. The experiment had produced some valuable outcomes, both in terms of public education and the education of the group, but I had anticipated that the members of Quirk-e would enjoy a less teacher-centered approach far more than their evaluations suggested that they actually had. I had also believed that they would rise more successfully to the challenges they presented. Clearly it was time for some reflection.

How had I been so blindsided? I was reminded of that section of *Novel Education* called *Monsters in Literature* (Britzman, 2006, pp. 107–122). Considering the fragments of self that return when the teacher makes a curriculum (Britzman, 2006, p. 113), Britzman suggests that our teaching is affected by the unresolved experiences of our own schooling. As we design

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37 These include a conference presentation in 2011.
curriculum, then, we fall prey to fantasies and monsters created by our own experiences of education (Britzman, 2006, p. 109). I am, of course, no exception.

I have some contradictory feelings about education. On the one hand, I was (and am) a privileged and successful student who loved education both for its own sake and as a way to escape my mother’s lot, which I regarded as domestic drudgery. My mother, who’d left school at 14, never had a job outside the house and never read a book in all the time I knew her. At the same time, I was enraged and am still somewhat bitter about the sexism and classism that was rampant in the education system back then (and lingers still). I loved and admired my mother and believed that she would have felt more fulfilled if she’d been better educated, but the British education system was skewed in favour of boys and men, and my father seemed happy to have a housewife.38 Our school careers advisor recommended that girls become bank tellers or secretaries and offered information about no other options. Girls were dissuaded from taking science. I fought my way to university and was the only girl in my year to go. In this way, my successes have been complicated by feelings of anger. At the same time, I have felt that education was an act of betrayal to the ones I left behind—my mother, and, I came to realize, some of the members of Quirk-e, especially those whose lives and education have been interrupted by sexual violence, depression, and rejections. I reject the myths of natural talent that ignore such factors (Sullivan, 1994), and yet I believe that pigheaded independence can take one a long way. I came to see that these unresolved issues had made me both believe and disbelieve in the usefulness and necessity of education. By the same token, I wished to serve as teacher to the Quirk-es, while at the same time I nurtured a secret hope that teaching might not ultimately be necessary. I had depended upon collaborative biography as a magic bullet that would slay the

38 The entrance test at Manwood’s actively discriminated against girls, on the basis that boys would “catch up” later in their educational careers.
monsters of own education, trusting that once I had found appropriate pedagogical genre, my students might be free of me.

On reflection, this is not an entirely unrealistic aim. Many members of the group have worked with me now for five years, they are all adult, and most are well educated. It is thus entirely necessary for me to hope that some of them will become as confident and proficient as I, if not more so. However, the group acquires new students every year, and without a structured system of mentoring (something to be considered in future years), the time had not come for this shift in power.

**Pedagogy 3**

Our project is still public, but I have faced up to my responsibilities as its teacher. The members of the group have done the work of locating important sites of memory. Now I must do my part by educating them about the shapes that readers have come to expect—some rising action, a climax, a denouement—these cannot be escaped (a situation that I explore in Interlude 5). This kind of technical content can best be delivered by transmission, so I decided to make a short presentation on narrative structures, complete with graph, quotations, and examples.

I am back at the front of the class.

Still, I believed that information must be implemented in context, so after the presentation, I had them discuss, in groups, a well-constructed story by Karen Bender (1997). They did well at this task, identifying two parallel narratives and noting how they intersect so that first one, then the other, achieves its climax. At the end of the session, two or three Quirk-es came up to tell me how much they’d learned. The four *hard core* writers were particularly excited. The next day, one of them sent me the following email:

Claire, I had to rush out to be at work for a meeting, at which no one has shown up yet! I was thinking as you spoke today of how different this year seems compared to last year. I feel like I am learning so much more. I like the intimacy of smaller groups compared to
the large group, but your delivery of information makes me feel that I will be a much better writer. (Personal communication, 1 December 2010)

I was, of course, flattered by this positive feedback and, if I am honest, energized by my time as knowledgeable expert. It is, after all, gratifying to see one’s students pay close attention, take notes, and nod in appreciation of one’s wisdom. At the same time, I was disappointed that last year’s experiment with collectivity had not met with more success. I was just a little sad.

**Pedagogy 4**

At some point, if we are artists, the private may become public, and this process can be frightening. As repressed material returns in analysis, there is resistance and anxiety (Freud, in Phillips, 2006, p. 118), which is often redirected towards the analyst in the process of transference (Phillips, p. 119). Indeed, as I have argued (in Chapter 3), the process of critique operates in ways that are quite similar to those of analysis as it uses interpretation to help the writer follow associations back to that which has lain hidden. The process of peer critique can feel like an equally risky business, but it can also provide a range of feedback (rather than only the teacher’s), thus providing a stepping stone to wider publicity. The next step, then, was to consider how my students might seek each other’s help through peer critique, a process that once again decentralizes the teacher.

I suggested that we use a sacrifice piece on which to try out our new found understanding of narrative arc, adapting the idea of a sacrifice poem (read as an opening in poetry slam competitions) to this situation. Accordingly, I presented them with a short piece of prose written by an anonymous novice writer from another country. I hoped that my students might practice the techniques of critique without running the risk of hurting anyone’s feelings. Specifically, I asked the members of the group to see if they could figure out the intention of the piece and make suggestions as to how it might be structured and thus better realized.
Normally, when someone’s work is being discussed, the conversation is quite measured as people select their words with care and attention to the writer’s sensibilities. On this occasion, it was so animated that I could hardly wait to see what they had to say about the story. However, when we reconvened, I was again surprised.

Some groups had completed the assignment in the way I had suggested and expected, by trying to discern the shape and intention of the piece and strengthen it with helpful, respectful critique. Quite a number, however, had become angry with, and scornful of, its writer. One person suggested that the writer might be “told to go and read a book on grammar,” another that she should “go off and write up a story board.” Others said that they found it hard to say anything positive about her story. I was dismayed at these reactions, which did not represent the kind of feedback that is conducive to collective learning. However, rather than addressing my concerns head on, I remained as neutral as I could as I asked the group what genre they believed the piece fell into. It seemed that no one had given this much thought. I invited them to describe the form and style of the piece, and elicited the suggestions that it had a simple plot, few characters, simple language, and was didactic in intention. “What would happen, then, if you viewed it as a parable?” I asked.

Ellsworth (2005) describes a certain look on the face of the student who is caught in a moment of learning—”the look that teachers and parents work for and value” (p. 15). She theorizes that the look is the result of a happy confluence of circumstances, a combination of emotional, physical, and cognitive situations that serve as a “pedagogical hinge” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 37). Pedagogy, she suggests, is a force with its own “logics, materials, forms, and processes aimed at reforming what we think we know,” and a pedagogical pivot serves to engage the learner in an act of performance in which both inside and outside are disrupted and refigured and the private me encounters the outside not me (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 37). I believe this moment
served as a pedagogical hinge for several members of the collective. As they digested my question, their faces assumed the look. With that look came relief, and with relief came greater kindness. Though it is impossible to know what every single person in the room was thinking, the change of mood was almost palpable. Faces brightened, hands were raised, and helpful suggestions were offered as to how the fledgling story might be strengthened. As I interpret this, their sense of having become experts, possessed of specialized knowledge, had been instantly subverted by the realization that they did not, after all, know what they thought they had known. Indeed, they understood that to be teachers, they needed to know more and to be in a different kind of relationship with each other—to find out more about the different kinds of genre available to writers, and to be better advocates for the work.

Towards the end of the session, someone raised a hand, with a look of confusion, and asked the following question: “You’ve said that we have to pay attention to the imagery and the intention of the work. We have to locate it in a precise context by writing all the details. We have to think about point of view. Now we have to think about genre! How can we possibly pay attention to all these things at once?” This is the question that has provided the pedagogical hinge for this paper.

**Conclusion**

As the work progresses, both in teaching and in art, we cannot ignore genre, and we cannot abdicate responsibility. In both cases, our ambitions, anxieties, and desires will both drive and subvert the learning/teaching project if they remain unexamined. As I work at the edge of my students’ incompetence (Eisner, 2002, “Flexible purposing,” para. 4), I am also working at the edge of my own. Ends shift and plans change as that which is private becomes public, and its force unsettles what we have known and held as truth. If the teacher is qualitatively intelligent enough to notice these new articulations, he will not get it right exactly, but at least continue to
pursue surprise in processes of revision. If the writer pays close attention to the writing, its meaning will emerge.

Will the members of Quirk-e all be published? Will I find a middle ground between didacticism and too much freedom, form and content? We still don’t know, and we are all somewhat chastened. None of this is proving as easy as we had hoped. Hopefully, our work together will prevent us from resting in the easy and the simple. The best that we can do is to continually revise our genres as meaning explodes them.

The best that we can do is pay attention to everything at once.
CONCLUSION

This precocious role I took in the world was possible only because the world seemed so unreal, the stage transected by lights, its fourth wall missing in order to afford a view to thronged but shadowy spectators.

—White, A Boy’s Own Story

A group of naturalists was trying to show Annie Dillard (1990, pp. 24–25) a bullfrog, but even when they pointed right at it, she couldn’t see it. “What colour am I looking for?” she shouted. “Green,” they replied, so she looked for a large green frog. When the bullfrog finally appeared (of course, it had been there all the time), she realized “what painters are up against.” The bullfrog was not large, but huge, and not just green but “the colour of wet hickory bark.” Dillard concluded that is only when we disregard the “naturally obvious” and look for the “artificially obvious” that we can discover the new. As I interpret this, she suggests that artists must pay close attention to the specificity of what they see, opening to perceptions that may seem unnatural at first, because they exist outside the frameworks and framings that they have come to expect. In much the same way, education might be described as the continual expansion of that which lies within the grasp of our perception. “The look” that Ellsworth (2005, p. 61) describes on the face of the learner appears when he has crossed between his inner and outer realities, and this transition always comes as a surprise. I argue here that when we write memoir, the projects of education and art intersect, as we pay this different kind of attention.

I place great trust in metaphors, which have often pointed me, like signposts, in new and appropriate intellectual directions. An image that has popped up from time to time in this text is that of the marionette or puppet show, and as I reflect upon the broad conclusions that I might draw from the last years of research, it seems meaningful. Freud (1919) might have called it uncanny, in that it might indicate matters at once unfamiliar and strange. For these reasons, I have decided to conclude by practising what I preach. In an act of faith, I hope follow the line of
my pen as I write closely about the metaphor of the marionette show in the faith that meaning will be carried over, even though I do not yet know exactly that might be at this time of writing.

In White’s (2000) novel, a little raised stage is set at the end of the room (p. 63). As the play begins, the boy is engulfed by its reduced scale, as though “sublimated into another substance.” He is transported to a world where things devolve “with the logic of art, not life” (White, 2000, p. 63). As I reread his words, I note, with a start, the use of the word sublimation, and the suggestion of a new kind of logic. Phillips (1998) would call these hints or signals from the “unconscious radar for affinities” (p. 82) that lies at the heart of creativity. We are back in the Empire of the Illogical.

At the heart of inspiration lies a desire to speak, and this desire always points backwards like an arrow to the unconscious. Understanding is knocking on the door and waits to be admitted. This situation occurs because the surprising perceptions we open to in acts of learning do not just involve the exterior world, but our own interiority and physicality. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 8) have also represented this situation by using the image of the puppet show. They believe that rhizomatic texts operate across different dimensions (such as reader and author, inside and outside) since they are part of a multiplicity that changes in nature as it expands its connections. Juarrero (1999, p. 243) puts it another way: as our experiences resonate through our cognitive, sensory, and affective systems, temporal and contextual connections are “woven into the very being of an event.” When we write about these events, we are invariably attempting to represent memories and desires that are both embodied and disembodied, conscious and unconscious, as well as our thoughts and volitions. It is for this reason, I believe, that I sense the significance of White’s use of the image of the marionettes before I understand it—my rational, analytic mind is only part of what I bring to this investigation. As Phillips (1998) puts it, “You don’t have to do very much to get things done as long as you don’t need to
know what you are doing” (p. 80). All I need to know here is that the image of the marionette show has “lain by gold.”

It is with this faith that I return to my two research questions—the first as follows:

How can the processes of writing memoir change our perceptions of the past?

White (2000, p. 70) talks of the puppet show as a room in which the fourth wall is removed in order to admit the gaze of “thronged but shadowy spectators.” To my mind, this stands as an apt analogy for memoir. When we write about our lives, we open them up to an audience, most of whom we will never meet and which views them as spectacle. The presence of others, even if they are only imagined, can change our perspectives of what we remember and how we see things. An anonymous editor (Ramirez, 1998) had this to say about Duchamp’s famous urinal (offered unsuccessfully to the Society of Artists 1917 exhibition in New York):

“He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object” (Fountain [Duchamp], n.d., “Origin,” para. 3). As they become differently positioned in this way, as art, it is possible to see our lives differently, much as when one sees oneself unexpectedly in the reflection of an oddly placed mirror.

Self-consciousness is a human condition, as Swift points out in the quotation that opened this dissertation. Arguably, some of us, like White (2000), have greater capacity for self-observation than others and discover it early in life. The child protagonist in White’s autobiographical novel, for instance, experiences the stories he invents as being far more substantial and rewarding than his actual experiences. He constantly makes up scenes, such as that of being admired and consoled by the priest he visits to talk about his parents’ divorce, even though in actuality, he is not particularly sad, but rather looking forward to getting rid of his difficult father. This ability to take a critical step backwards to become first audience of a show
in which we are the actors may manifest itself to varying degrees but is not limited to the young, or to professional writers, nor does it only occur in schools. As White (2000, p. 64) listens to his parents discuss their pending separation, for instance, they too behave like actors conscious of their roles. “Everything about the conference seemed dramatic,” he recalls, as they took turns to give declamatory speeches in unfamiliar locutions: “If she is the one you really want, then far be it from me to stand in the way of your happiness, yet if I might speak in my own behalf . . . .”

The members of the Owls research group were particularly interested in this section of White’s novel and suggested that most of us often slip into the mindsets of the other. Even as we walk down the street, or enter a room, they suggested, we may “see someone staring at us,” or become aware of “how others are not receiving us” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, March 27, 2009). This takes us to the second research question investigated in this text:

How can writing memoir be theorized and understood as an educational event?

My thesis here is that the processes of writing about our lives can help to focus self-awareness as it encourages critical distance from our lives, the kind of distance that is one of the objectives of currere. If self-consciousness is a human condition, perhaps memoir is its most extreme form, as we see ourselves from a distance through that missing fourth wall. As one of our participants put it, writing about herself gave a shape to her life that she “never thought about when [she] was living it” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, March 27, 2009). In the process of writing Love in Good Time (Robson, 2003), I reframed relationships. As Bridget wrote “White Handle Knives” (see Chapter 2), she began to reconceptualize her beliefs about home and exile. As Gayle (see Chapter 1) tried to represent her transition from male to female, she realized that it was more gradual and perhaps less absolute than she had believed.

All dynamic systems have structure, though they operate far from equilibrium. In the same way that emergent narrative finds genre, human societies develop cultures—constructions
that are artificial rather than natural, so much so that we do not even know what natural might be when it comes to the human condition. In White’s (2000) narrative, his parents’ stilted, formal language speaks to both class and social history, as the mother behaves and speaks like an early Hollywood heroine, both romantic and martyred (a role that she cannot maintain over the long haul). In “Privet” (see Chapter 3) I use the image of the puppet to investigate the gendered culture in which I felt trapped and disempowered. As Foucault (2001, p. 183) and others have pointed out, it is hard (if not impossible) to escape these structures in order to think differently, but as he also points out, parrhesia, or fearless speech, can influence our relationship to truth. In this way, writing memoir can be used as a means of social investigation and political criticism.

As White (2000, pp. 123–137) attempts to act like his heterosexual peers, figuring out how to dress and behave, or goes through the motions of a date with Helen Paper, it is difficult not to believe that these acts of disjuncture heightened, or in part inspired, his acute self-awareness. Hoffman (Aciman, 1999, p. 50) takes up this very point in her considerations of exile: “Being deframed, so to speak, from everything familiar, makes for a certain fertile detachment and gives one new ways of observing and seeing.” This work was taken up by the Quirk-e collective in their collective biography project. As they considered the normative structures in which they grew up and which they continue to inhabit, they were able to create, at least on some occasions, more robust, nuanced, and satisfying narratives and to situate them more firmly situated in social contexts. These archives of resistance can complicate the cultural stereotypes that surround old and older queers, and create important counterpublics.

A distinction must be made, however, between narratives that merely reinscribe the past and narratives that trouble it. When he met with the women in Owls at the end of our project, White remarked that “good writing is constantly pulling you up short. It’s always destabilizing the reader. It’s always making you look at things again” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, July17,
He was careful to emphasize the connection between writing well and the fresh vision that leads to new insight. It is a crucial distinction. Journaling or first-draft writing is sometimes cathartic and may be educational, as it serves to serving to jog our memories, get things off our chests, and leave an examinable record of events. For these reasons, it is used as a productive adjunct to other pedagogical strategies. But this is not what White is talking about here.

What does it mean to write well? I have suggested that it is to take the reader there, to show not tell, to re-collect the specific details or qualia of the experience and re-present them for the reader. The first step is to locate meaningful episodic memories—uncanny encounters that possess a special kind of emotional charge. The second is to reconstruct these in an embodied way, staying clear of emotional exposition and focusing instead on the specific and material - physical and social locations, what was seen, said, and done. A promising first draft is just the start of this complex process. As the work develops, and begins to make its own demands, the writer begins to unpack the hub of memory and follow its trails of association back to the source of his inspiration. This latter is the work of revision. When writers engage in it successfully, readers are able to climb inside the text to see through the eyes of the protagonist and feel what she might have felt. For the writer herself, what has lain hidden may suddenly come into view.

Like psychoanalysis, this work is often hampered by obstacles: learning difficulties, depression, illness, insufficient commitment, different levels of commitment, and confusion about outcomes. Above all, the forces of resistance may make us feel like we are working through a fog. Even after six years of working with me on a weekly basis, the members of Quirk-e often struggle to see things from another point of view. They avoid writing about memories that are difficult, or they simply don’t remember them in enough detail to know where to begin. As Freud (Phillips, 2006, p. 35) suggests, such resistance to learning exhausts and debilitates us so much that we would often prefer to bear our hard fates with “uncomplaining
resignation” than examine them closely, thus missing out on the pain and joy that lie implicated in our various experiences. A few of the collective have not written much, or not written much that satisfies them. However much they struggle to revise them, their stories remain literal and expository, documenting rather investigating their histories. For one or two, the bullfrog remains stubbornly large and frustratingly green.

For the teacher too, resistance is an issue, as secret desires unfurl into the narratives of our pedagogy. As I reexamine my own relationship to teaching, I recall that time when I was considering a career and believed that the one profession I would not be joining was teaching (I would never sell out like my father!) —a negation that has dogged me ever since. Though I escaped the instrumental curriculum imposed by Thatcher in the 1980s, it was only to bump into a new one in the act of writing memoir. My work with Quirk-e has led to a similar flight and return, as I continue to step forward and back, experimenting with stumbling pedagogies, making it up as I go along, developing new writing practices and reinventing genre, trying to find a balance between content and form, students and curriculum, challenge and security, public and private. In this project, the most difficult and defended students have been my best teachers, as they help me to remove that fourth wall and take a long, hard look at my teaching practices.

When all is said and done, the members of Quirk-e sign up year after year and many have made slow but gradual progress, as have I. As we respond and react moment by moment to our environments, we are, as Juarrero (1999, p. 213) puts it, complex systems moving through multidimensional probability landscapes. Though we may be too preoccupied or too defended to note minor psychic shifts at the time of their occurrence, we may become more aware of them later through narrative explanation (Juarrero, 1999, p. 217). For one or two, the bullfrog suddenly hops into sight after years of frustrating invisibility. Just recently, one participant—a
retired physics teacher with a self-confessed addiction to literal exposition—produced a deft piece of writing that became a model for the rest of her group.

I hoped that in the act of making art, the members of the collective would learn to pay attention to its structures in order to move beyond and yet within them. What I had forgotten is that the educator has a role to play in bringing forth what is within—the very definition of educare. Though genre is inescapable when we wish to make the private public, it is not our salvation. There is content to be presented. A story is not a play and a play is not a poem. In the cases of writing and teaching, our ambitions, anxieties, and desires will both drive and subvert the learning/teaching project, especially when they are unexamined. In each case, we have no choice but to remain aware of many things at once—awareness of intention, openness to the recollected moment, understanding of point of view, sensitivity to what can be seen and what is hidden. These are situations that will get us lost as Lather (2007) puts it, and in a sense, we will remain lost—a situation that has confounded those (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007, p. 129) who try to quantify good teaching process or define great art.

If teaching is an art, there is no place to rest and say the work is done. I look forward, therefore, to the next part of my journey as a writer, a teacher, and a student of these two related arts. As I consider what lies next in my research, I am drawn to further consideration of the pedagogies of writing. In this study, I have theorized the processes of writing and begun to consider how they can be taught and learned, but I still have many questions. Contemporary educators frame learning and teaching as complex events and knowledge as something to be constructed in situated and social settings, rather than as a pre-packaged diet to be ingested by individuals in isolation. What are the implications of this situation for those of us who teach writing? How is the work of individual writers supported and challenged when it occurs within groups? How far can we formulate good pedagogical practice in such contexts? My current
research has convinced me that in the act of writing we engage in processes that are subtle and complex, but can nevertheless be examined and discussed. Literary talent is neither mysterious nor is it innate, and I have argued that it can be learned within structured and appropriate pedagogical genres. How far might the tacit knowledge and established genres of experienced and expert teachers of writing be similarly examined and articulated? I do not believe that the complex art of teaching can, or should, be reductively instrumentalized, but neither do I believe that it should be regarded as a mystery. What might happen if teachers of writing in the public school system, in teacher education, and in community settings were encouraged to examine their teaching and writing practices and the stories of their own educational journeys? How might this benefit and improve their teaching and how might their conclusions and insights be represented in a way that might benefit and improve the teaching of others? In the next phase of my research, I shall take up these questions.
References


Robson, C. (2009a). *Can you see me now I’m gone?* [Unpublished manuscript]. Vancouver, BC.


APPENDIX

The Exile’s Return

Th’an’am an Dhia! but there it is –
The dawn on the hills of Ireland,
God’s angels lifting the night’s black veil
From the fair sweet face of my sireland

Oh! Ireland isn’t it grand you look,
Like a bride in her fresh adorning,
And with all the pent-up love of my heart
I bid you the top of the morning.

This one brief hour pays lavishly back,
For many a year of mourning,
I’d almost venture another flight,
There is so much joy in returning,

Watching out for the hallowed shore,
All other attraction scorning,
Oh: Ireland don’t you hear me shout,
I bid you the top of the morning.

Ho, Ho, upon Glen’s shelving strand,
The surges are wildly beating,
And Kerry is pushing her headlands out,
To give us a kindly greeting,

Now to the shore the sea birds fly,
On pinions that know no drooping,
Now out from the shore with welcome gaze,
A million of eaves come trooping.

Oh! Fairly, generous Irish land,
So Loyal, so fair, so loving,
No wonder the wandering Celt should think,
And dream of you in his roving,

The Alien shore may have gems and gold,
And sorrow may ne’er have gloomed it.
But the heart will sigh for its native shore,
Where the love-light first illumined it.

And doesn’t old Cobh look charming there,
Watching the wild waves motion,
Resting her back against the hill.
And the tips of her toes in the ocean,
I wonder I don’t hear the Shandon bells,
But maybe their chiming is over,
For it’s many a year since I began,
The life of a western rover.

For thirty years “A chuisle mochroi,”
Those hills I now feast my eyes on,
Ne’er met my vision save at night,
In memory’s dim horizon,

Even so, ’twas grand and fair they seemed,
In the landscape spread before me,
But dreams are dreams, and I would awake
To find American skies still o’er me.

And often in Texan plain,
When the day and the chase was over,
My heart would fly o’er the weary ways,
And around the coastline hover,

And my prayers would arise that some future date,
All danger, doubting and scorning,
I might help to win for my native land
The light of young liberty’s morning

Now fuller and turner the coastline shows
Was there ever a scene more splendid!
I feel the breath of the Munster breeze,
Oh! Thank God my exile is ended,

Old scenes, old songs, old friends again
There’s the vale, there’s the cot I was born in
Oh! Ireland from my heart of hearts
I bid you the “top o’ the morning”

—John Locke, 1847–1889