PAST BUOY LINES:
AN ARTS-BASED INQUIRY INTO LIVING AND KNOWING GIFTEDNESS

by

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I articulate an approach to knowing and living giftedness based in arts-based educational inquiry practices (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2009). This work represents aspects of a four-year inquiry based in poetic and narrative writing (Leggo, 2005; 2008), during which I facilitated community development projects with radically early entrants to university (adolescents who entered university at 14 or 15). Here I expand upon methodological approaches to research in the field of Gifted Education and challenge categorical definitions of giftedness. Through a series of artful inquiries, including poetry, narrative, autobiography, biography, literary analysis, digital storytelling and field research, I model intrinsically relational, emotional and situated ways of relating to gifts as a researcher and educator. Woven through these inquiries are the themes of poetry, polyphony, fluidity and freedom. These are explored as aesthetic practices underlying an arts-based understanding of giftedness.
Preface

The digital stories in Section I, “An arts-based articulation of giftedness: Digital storytelling with early-entrants to university,” are included with permission of the digital story authors as follows: Story 1: Audrey Jun, *Unnamed Piece*; Story 2: Michael Li, *Amor Fati*; Story 3: Name Withheld, *Reflections*. These digital stories are included as Accompanying Material (DVD). Please see Appendix A for the Letter of Permission. Ethics for the study was reviewed and approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Please see Appendix C for the Certificate of Approval.


A version of “Fragile as it was” in Section III, “Flowers, frogs and pinecones: Stories about the sharing (or not) of gifts,” appeared as Richardson. P. (2007). Fragile as it was. *English Practice: Journal of the BC Teachers of English Language Association, 48* (2), 28-29.


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Dedication

For Djun,

who listens to my dreams,

with love.
Introduction

It is a basic premise of the field of Gifted Education that one’s inner-gifts can be identified, defined, observed, measured, enhanced, protected, manipulated or otherwise acted upon in meaningful, significant, and helpful ways. To do this we use various psychological tests or assessment strategies so as to better describe and manage aspects of ability, intelligence, talent or creativity. In this way, one’s gifts can even be quantified and understood in relation to established population norms and averages. One can be seen as more or less gifted; one can be gifted at the 88th, 95th or 99th percentile. This technical approach to understanding giftedness leads easily to categorical definitions. If through a process of testing or assessment individuals meet particular test scores or criteria they are deemed part of the gifted category. School psychologists train for several years to make clear assessments based on the tools at hand. But at the basis of most of these approaches is the hope for a “yes or no”, “in or out” binary. You are gifted, or you are not. A program coordinator designing a gifted program seeks a reliable and valid test to help determine who can be included in the program; a parent whose child is reading well above grade level has the child assessed so they may be eligible for their district’s challenge program. An adult who has always struggled to fit in and make meaning seeks a psychological assessment and discovers they test in the gifted IQ range, and this provides a new frame for understanding their experiences. Most textbooks on Gifted Education, including the most current, begin with issues of definition and identification (how do we know who is gifted; what kinds of giftedness are there?), and then moves into various practical considerations across other categories and contexts (gifted adults; gifted girls; gifted with disabilities; gifted children at
home; gifted students in the regular classroom, etc...). How we meet the needs of diverse gifted learners is the perennial question, and standards for programming, curriculum and practice have evolved. Once identified, one’s inner-gifts are seen as the valuable property of the individual as well as a natural resource, and it behooves one to make use of their gifts in order to be successful and do some good in the world. These understandings form the bedrock, parameters and raison d’être of the field of Gifted Education itself. This is what we do.

Or, what we are supposed to do.

But what if we could understand and nurture giftedness, come to know and relate to inner-gifts, in ways that did not depend on measurement? What would be left? How can we conceive of research into giftedness in terms that do not replicate a categorical binary approach?

**The Making of Glass**

It was into a categorical understanding of giftedness that I was initiated in the third grade. The initiation took place via a series of three mysterious tests. One day, a stranger arrived to administer the first test to my whole class. It was mostly a series of unrelated questions. Vocabulary, numbers, shapes. I was used to doing what I was told, so I wrote my answers as best I could and thought not much more about it. As this was school, we often

1 I hope that those whose work does not readily fit this mould will forgive my cursory overview, as I am making generalizations here about the mainstream of the field.

2 As this is a true story any resemblance to a fairy-tale wherein three tests or trials is the standard for transformation is purely coincidental and beyond my control.
wrote numbers and letters onto lined paper, so this was not so different. The stranger left with our responses never to be seen again.

Months went by, I forgot about the test. One day, I was called, along with a few other children from my class, to meet with another stranger. This time we met one-by-one in a small room off the school’s main office. This is where kids went when they had in-school detentions. I had never been in this room before. This stranger had a series of small tasks she wanted me to do and she timed me. Some of these involved patterns and moving blocks around. She explained what she wanted me to attempt and I did what I thought she wanted. It took a while but then it was over and I went back to class. I had no idea this test was related to the first test months prior.

More time passed. One day, I was summoned again. Perhaps a letter had gone home by then because something cued me to be more aware. This time I met with a man in the nurse’s office. I had been in this room once before when I had been vaccinated. This man was kind and seemed to like me right away. Strangers at the school were often nicer than my everyday teachers, I thought. We sat at a small table at the foot of the cot. He asked me a series of trivia questions. This test was more like an interview.

I remember only one of these questions:

*How is glass made?*

I pondered this for a long time because somewhere in my brain I knew I had the answer. It seemed too strange though so I didn’t want to say it. Flashes of a Saturday morning cartoon kept running through my mind. Batman is running in the desert and he encounters a Sphinx. Batman must answer a riddle if he wants to pass; if he gets it wrong the Sphinx will eat him.
If you don’t know the answer we can go onto the next one...

The man waited while I hummed and fidgeted.

The Sphinx’s riddle had to do with sand and what it could become.

*Um, maybe sand?*

The man really liked that answer and was curious to know how I knew such a thing.

As it turned out, this third test was the decisive one. Before this test, I was a regular girl.

After the test, I was a gifted girl. Things would change for me after that.

~

I remembered this question about glass long after the test was over. Beating the Sphinx and becoming gifted were entwined in my mind. Or, rather, I gleaned through a synchronicity of memory (the cartoon riddle) and current experience (being tested) that becoming gifted occurred through *a process akin to* Batman outwitting the Sphinx. By answering the stranger’s riddles correctly I was, like Batman, able to “pass”. My spontaneous apprehension of the underlying process at play went undetected amidst the innumerable subtest quotients though. This awareness emerged from the realm of mythopoetics, or what James Hillman (1975) refers to as the *poetic basis of mind*.

Of course, I didn’t have words for this as an eight-year old; it just was. Like Mad-Eye Moody in the Harry Potter stories, I had one normal eye that looked forward and another that went sideways and spun about seeing through everyday guises. A poet’s eye.

**Arts-Based (Gifted?) Educational Research**

Some scholars are now becoming less interested in identifying gifted children and more interested in enabling gifts where they see them (Borland, 2003; Matthews & Foster, 2009) or in recognizing extra-cognitive capacities (Shavinina & Ferrari, 2004), such as
“feelings (e.g., feelings of beauty), temperament, and institutional and cultural factors” (p. 3); and creating “smart contexts” (Barab & Plucker, 2002) that nurture diverse intelligences. The scholarship of giftedness, which focuses on notions of advanced human development, potential and creativity and at its best advocates for sensitivity and excellence in learning environments, has much to contribute to a broader educational community, but not, I believe, if it continues to identify as the steward of categorical and exclusive conceptions of giftedness. I believe we are in a period marked by the disintegration of these categorical and exclusive notions, in favour of holistic, diverse, inclusive and culturally aware understandings of human development and cognition. Kincheloe (2001), speaking of a post-modern conception of knowledge and research, says,

> We can no longer accept the status of an object of inquiry as a thing-in-itself. Any social, cultural, psychological, or pedagogical object of inquiry is inseparable from its context, the language used to describe it, its historical situatedness in a larger ongoing process, and the socially and culturally constructed interpretations of its meaning(s) as an entity in the world. (p. 682)

We need forms of inquiry in Gifted Education that reflect and catalyze this epistemological awareness and this is where I position my work.

This dissertation represents aspects of a four-year inquiry process in which I engaged artfully and poetically with giftedness—as an experience, a cultural phenomenon and an educational premise—and with what it means to research giftedness. My writing and arts-

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3 I know many would disagree. I know this because I surveyed scholars in the field to ask what they think and feel about “alternative ways” of researching giftedness, and I got quite the wide range of responses. I write about this research in the second part of this collection. I will come back to this later.
based inquiry practices were catalyzed through my experiences facilitating a three-year community development process amongst a group of adolescents who were radically early-entrants to university (i.e., began university at age 14 or 15). The research on acceleration and early-entrance to university (see Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004) presents a view of academic acceleration that is quite positive as well as quite positivistic, and which does little to critique or contextualize practices of accelerated learning vis-à-vis larger economic and social forces, nor reflect the diversity of experiences such as I was witnessing beneath the surface of these high achievers’ veneer. I attributed homogeneity in research methodology as one of the factors supporting this homogeneous view of acceleration. The methodological approaches amassed around a center point and thus lacked the breadth, depth and complexity I would hope to encounter in a body of research seeking to represent a set of human experiences. It struck me as ironic that the same drives that are attributed to giftedness in a categorical definition–breadth of knowledge, depth of passion and love of complexity–seemed to not characterize the corpus of research itself. As much as research seeks to reflect an educational phenomenon or experience, it is a two-way street, in that research also constitutes how the subject may be known, interpreted or understood. And so in this case the techno-rational conceptions of knowing that suffuse the research also shape what it means to be gifted, and how gifts may be expressed. My work here thus seeks to both interrogate and to expand the epistemological/methodological palette currently dominating research in the field of gifted education.

I talk about this at more length in Part II, entitled: Past Buoy Lines: Exploring Metaphors, Boundaries, and Poetic Possibilities in Giftedness Research.

This is not at all to disparage any single piece of research but to name what I see as the accumulative effect of the whole within a particular research culture.
As an adult who was identified gifted as a child, I experienced the disconnect between the expected narrow stance of the researcher and the supposed ways of the “researched” sharply as I sought to make sense of the literature on the one hand, and learn, grow and develop as a researcher on the other. In retrospect, I can see that my own processes as a sense-maker did not fit with the community’s expectations for how to make knowledge. This propelled me into a several year struggle of determining if I could “know myself” and share my “gifts” as an educator and researcher in my field of choice—Gifted Education. This dissertation in part emerged from an effort to make sense of this paradox. Romanyshyn (2007) speaks of research as a vocation and as a journey of transformation, and says,

What the knower comes to know changes who the knower is. It is an alchemical process in which one knows only insofar as one lets oneself be known, a process that is an Orphic dismemberment of the researcher by the work that had called him or her into its service. (p. 117)

Therefore, the second catalyst for my thinking was my desire to understand how my own knowledge of being an exceptional learner shapes my current practices as a researcher and educator. Drawing on Henri Corbin, Romanyshyn (2007) continues, “we can know things because someone has told us of them. And we can know things because we have experienced them directly. But there is another level of gnosis, which Henri Corbin describes as knowing something by becoming it” (p. 117).

I did not wish to become what the research culture seemed to require. I wished to make more space for my emotions and neglected stories of being identified gifted, as I knew these were motivating me in powerful ways. I found that there was little discussion of how
educators with exceptional learning experiences made sense of themselves and their practices as educators-researchers.

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Arts-based educational research, or the use of artistic practices to inquire into, represent and transform lived experiences of teaching and learning, broadly conceived, as well as in terms of school practices, emerged in the 1990s through the work of Eliot Eisner (e.g. Eisner, 1981; 1991; 1993; 1995; 1997) and Thomas Barone (e.g. Barone, 2006; Eisner & Barone, 1997). Arts-based inquiry methodologies have since then developed through the efforts of a diverse community of scholar-practitioners across disciplinary (education, nursing, sociology, anthropology, business, psychology, sport, women’s studies), artistic (visual arts, music, dance, literary arts, theater) and national boundaries (see for examples, Knowles & Cole, 2008). A range of terms including art-based research (McNiff, 2008), arts-based research (Finley, 2003; 2008), arts-informed research (Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004), arts-based educational research (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008), and a/r/tography (artist/researcher/teacher research) (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008) signal variations in this larger movement to use artistic skills, dispositions, traditions and forms as an approach to knowing our world. Haywood Rolling Jr. (2010) says, “Arts-based research becomes arts-based educational research, a tool for developing educational programs, when it addresses the problem of shaping curriculum” (p. 104). Through the use of arts-based inquiry practices I give rise to non-categorical and non-technical conceptions of giftedness that are intrinsically relational, situated and emotional ways of knowing. Further, this artistic process and practice surfaces my experience as a researcher as I make sense of my own ongoing experiences of learning and knowing within my field. “A/r/tography is steeped in the practices of artist-educators committed to
ongoing living inquiry and it is this inquiry that draws forth the identity of a researcher” (Irwin and Springgay, 2008, p. xxv).

**How to Read This Text: Values, Themes and Structure**

_Why an exegesis (not a thesis)._ An arts-based inquiry forms a different relationship to research questions and method than a traditional research process. Traditionally, research begins with a question or questions and then determines an appropriate method for answering the questions within a relative degree of certainty. While more questions may emerge along the way, a researcher writes a thesis to ascertain, argue or prove a central hypothesis, conjecture or proposition, while acknowledging gaps in their certainty and further work that needs to be done. Within an arts-based conception of research, the practice of art making itself shapes the nature and direction of the inquiry. Through engaging in art making, the inquirer-poet unearths questions and surfaces connections, which make visible aspects of their experiences of meaning making. In these terms, research is perceived, say Irwin and Sprinngay (2008), “as a disposition for knowledge creation” (p. xxiii). And, there is “an evolution of questions within the living inquiry processes of the practitioner” (p. xxiii). As an arts-based inquirer I am not separate from the subject, the questions or the inquiry process. I am immersed within the inquiry and my gestures or practices (writing, thinking, conversing, teaching etc….) shape my path.

And, of course this path in turn shapes my practices, and this reflexive interplay or dance creates a complex of meaning. My form or expression creates and expresses my shifting relationships and position in the world. My work as an arts-based inquirer is to artfully represent aspects or moments of this ongoing process. Irwin and Springgay (2008) say,
A/r/tography is a living practice, a life creating experience examining our personal, political and/or professional living. It uses a fluid orientation within [...] contiguous relationships…. Its rigour comes from its continuous reflective and reflexive stance to engagement, analysis and learning. (p. xxix)

Within this conception of an evolving, living research, an exegesis is more appropriate than a thesis (Springgay & Irwin, 2008). An exegesis is “a critical explanation or interpretation of a text” (New Oxford American) and serves as a bridge or guide to others, to invite them into the artful process and to help them to better make sense of or read the product. With this in mind, I will elucidate key values, themes and structures that underpin this arts-based dissertation.

Values.

A focus on the experiential. Here I explore and share some of my learning accrued through an ongoing artful inquiry process into the experience of knowing and living giftedness. This work is about experiences of relating to giftedness within self and others (in community, in classrooms, in cultural artifacts and forms), and about experiences of researching and writing about giftedness. My research is not a sophisticated triangulation wherein I locate and hold firm a determined meaning of giftedness, so as to better identify, train or serve it; nor do I articulate a set of strategies for developing a gifted education program. Rather this is a continual effort to reflect a state of connection—show an experience of connection—with gifts across specific contexts. This approximates the art and practice of relating to gifts in the classroom, the workplace and within oneself, attending to the condition of the inner-spark that motivates learning and incites passion (Robinson, 2009). I use the litmus test of artistic honesty as a gauge for authentic connection.
**A focus on the particular.** I live in British Columbia by the Pacific Ocean, near the shade of immense firs and ancient mountains, on land belonging to the Coast Salish peoples. I do not pretend to know what educators amidst the skyscrapers and subways of Toronto or the cornfields and tornadoes of Topeka should do. ⁶ This is not a text that strives to make generalizations. There is a tradition of those kinds of educational research texts, and many of them have, of course, been written. Our notions of giftedness in schools emerged from scientific and medical-model research texts. We have now become imbalanced in our drive for standardization, measurement, generalizable knowledge and objective certainty. Gifts are idiosyncratic and they do not thrive or respond under this type of scrutiny and evaluative drive. Here I seek to inhabit a poetic process at the heart of living giftedness and relating to the gifts of others. I believe that the intimate conversation is one of the best mediums and models for learning. Join me as I visit Einstein’s kitchen and chat with his wife.

**A focus on literary qualities and form.** This dissertation is organized as a *literary anthology* consisting of six parts, which will be outlined below under **Structure**. The word *anthology*, from the Greek, originally meant “flower-gathering.” *Anthos* means ‘flower,’ and *–logia* means ‘collection’, which is from *legein* meaning ‘gather’ (*legein* is also, through the French, where we get *lecture* or reading). For the Greeks, an anthology was a collection of the “flowers” of verse. (“anthology,” in Harper, 2001-2010). This dissertation is then a collected offering. In seeking new ways of thinking about and relating to giftedness, I borrow literary (poetic and narrative) forms to communicate and represent this process. I intersperse stories, poetry, digital stories and literary analysis with descriptions of field research and expository prose. Literary forms and practices have their own recognizable traditions and

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⁶ Rhetorical flourish aside, I would hope they engage in their own situated and artful inquiries, of course.
tropes (e.g. metaphor, plot, symbols, word play). As readers of a research text we may be in a different terrain than initially expected, but not an entirely unfamiliar landscape after all. As an artful text that attends to the literary experience, its logic unfolds as much through layers and resonances, complexities and synchronicities, as through a linear progression of thought.

**Themes: poetry, polyphony, fluidity and freedom.**

Through engaging artfully with experiences of giftedness and issues of inquiry into giftedness, four themes emerged: *poetry, polyphony, fluidity and freedom*. I understand these as aesthetic conditions or dynamics that underlie my ability to know, live and relate to giftedness in artful terms. These suffuse the work as a whole, and characterize the creative choices at play. These themes are developed and explored more completely in the course of the dissertation as befitting each inquiry, but I will introduce them each in turn now.

**Poetry.** Poetry is in fact more than a single theme; it is an underlying ethic and dream of the whole dissertation and it relates to and even in parts subsumes the other themes of polyphony, fluidity and freedom. I turn to poetry and poetic inquiry (Leggo, 2008; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshina, 2009) in order to attend to the idiosyncratic and exceptional as common experiences. Poetry is a discursive strategy, a means to connect with self and others, and an emotional form of communication.

As a discursive strategy, poetry is a deeply reflexive act. Through close attention to language use and rhetorical strategies we hold up a mirror to our own deeper meanings and motivations, and expose the ways in which we “read” the world. The field of gifted education has suffered from a lack of reflexivity. Its knowledge traditions have not valued this mode of relating to research or practice. I believe this reflexive attention to language is essential for a
field that is interested in applying labels (language) to humans in such a profound and formative way.

Lewis Hyde says that “the gifted state is an erotic state: in it we are sensible of, and participate in, the underlying unity of things” (p. 212). Sharing gifts brings us into a state of connection and poetry is also a way to signal a state of connection. Metaphors, for example, serve as bridges between seemingly disparate objects or states. In this way, the material world is translated into finer sentiments.

Theory and research on the inner-experience and emotional aspects of giftedness emphasize heightened sensitivities, unusual mental processing and “over-excitabilities” produced through “asynchronous development” (Piechowski, 2002; Silverman, 1997; 2009). Being consistently “out of sync” with one’s learning environment and within one’s self is believed to produce complex perspectives, emotional intensity, and greater potential for alienation and risk. Poetry, as with art in general, creates a space for understanding, communicating and relating through emotional resonances. It nurtures our ability to make empathetic connections with others and develop new perspectives, which are fundamental qualities of being in relationship with others.

**Polyphony.** Drawing on the work of poet and linguist Robert Bringhurst (2007) and inspired by the musical thinking of Glenn Gould, I claim polyphony—many sounds in coexistence—as a political and pedagogical strategy, for through experiencing polyphony as a form, we can better attend to our own polyphonic natures and our multiple, dancing subjectivities, and we are better able to recognize, value and nurture diversity as a way of being in community. Polyphony enables independent voices to exist in equitable and ethical arrangements, meaning that distinctive entities are part of something bigger than they are
capable of alone but none are subsumed, dominated or obliterated by the other. Experiencing and attending to the polyphony in the world, as well as creating polyphonic arrangements of our own, makes us more able to think democratically and non-hierarchically and gives us a compelling aesthetic model for full-inclusion as an educational practice. Robert Bringhurst (2007) says of polyphony,

Forms, and therefore meanings, are achieved through the conjunction of other forms and meanings. That principle is basic to biology, chemistry, physics and the history of art. In polyphonic structures, the conjunction is nondestructive. The component forms and meanings survive within and beside and beneath and on top of the meanings and forms their conjunction creates. (p. 59)

Polyphony is a way of relating with diversity and sensitivity at its core. In working with the words and poetry of young people in my own research, I respond polyphonically in order to both respect their intentions as well as accompany them in their knowing journeys. As a teacher-researcher, I am aware that my authority (or my enthusiasm, helpfulness, etc…) can easily obliterate another’s emerging experience. It can infringe, and so, in order to invite quieter voices and perspectives into the conversation, I make space through polyphonic accompaniment. Polyphony provides opportunities for unusual resonances, dissonances, associations and layered connections. It thus invites complex ways of understanding and representing as relationships form, shift and glide in subtle and nuanced ways.

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7 Much work on how to differentiate instruction to meet diverse learning needs within classrooms has been done, most of it grounded in cognitive and behavioural assessment practices. I would see awareness of polyphony as an aesthetic quality of an equitable learning environment. Differentiation of instruction could be one way to attune to and value the polyphony in the room.
**Fluidity.** Much research into human cognition and ability describes its fluid and situated nature (Bakhtin, 1981; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Ability and intelligence are embodied and relational phenomena arising out of sets of changing conditions. While most definitions of giftedness still present categorical and fixed understandings of cognition, some researchers interested in giftedness place as primary the situated nature of ability (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Borland, 2003; Hymer, 2009; John-Steiner, 1997). Hymer (2009), for example, says,

> I see [giftedness] not so much as a reified ‘thing’ as we have objectified
> ‘intelligence’ or ‘giftedness’ in the twentieth century, but rather a limpid
> process-state, fluid and changeable, and simultaneously both a value in and of
> itself, and a relational outcome. (p. 301)

Giftedness as a “process-state” means “it” arises out of sets of relationships within particular socio-historical contexts. Instead of “gifted” as a fixed entity or measurable category one should be seen as *gifting* or participating in a *gift-process or a gift-context*—an open system, which is fluid, interactive and context aware.

The many metaphors that shape our knowledge practices (field of inquiry, line of an argument, on the edge of a discovery...) both emerge from our experiences of the world as well as recursively condition our possibilities for how we engage. Water as a metaphor opens up increased possibilities for imagining, knowing and being with regards to educational research. The medium invites play and new ways not easily possible in a field. We can re-orient ourselves and take new perspectives more easily. When we are fluid we move smoothly from one position to the next.
Thus, a sense of fluidity is present in this work both in terms of how giftedness is conceptualized, as well as in the invitation for the field to become more fluid-like. In its sense of fluidity—moving from poem, to story, to research data, to prose—this dissertation is a text dreaming of the field becoming an ocean.

**Freedom.** A view of cognition and ability as fixed and isolated processes creates environments where intelligence, ability and creativity are valued as objects or commodities to be controlled, rather than gifts to be freely shared. In learning contexts predicated on this view, the success of the individual is measured mainly in terms of capital (grades, awards or accolades) and this is more important than the quality of learning or human relationships (Bourdieu, 1983; McDermott, 2006). In such a context, the label “gifted” is equated with possessing greater amounts of capital in a system of ever-looming scarcity.

According to Hyde (1979/2007), though, both material gifts and inner-gifts by definition must be *free* (i.e., not valued or scrutinized in terms of capital), or else they lose their social function, which is the ability to create relationships and bonds between people. Hyde, says “It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two-people, while the sale of commodity leaves no necessary connection” (p. 72). It is only through free exchange, use and circulation, then, that gifts create social cohesion, and it is this *context of freedom* that enables a gift’s liveliness.

In terms of this dissertation, artful intentions and practices nurtured the conditions of freedom through which inner-gifts—inspiration, poetic apprehensions, etc.—could be accessed and communicated. I now share this work in the spirit of a *gift* as I feel that in terms
and connection was accomplished.\(^8\)

**Structure: parts, pieces and flow.**

This dissertation consists of six sections or parts, each representing a distinct inquiry. There are 14 pieces in total comprised therein. At the beginning of each section, I provide an introduction in which I discuss the inquiry’s role and intention in relation to the larger collection and some of the thinking and literature that inspired its development. In Part I and Part II, I address big picture issues in the field, including research involving participants and epistemological concerns. Part III to Part VI are devoted to examples of smaller scale poetic and narrative inquiries, which are autobiographical and biographical in nature. Below I provide an outline of the content and progression of Parts I through VI with a poetic synopsis for the pieces therein.

**Part I. Digital Storytelling with Early-Entrants to University: An Arts-Based Inquiry into Accelerated Learning.** I begin with an arts-based inquiry involving digital storytelling by young people who were radically early-entrants to university. This research project served as culmination for a three-year community development process that I facilitated with this group. The use of a creative medium within a safe relational context supported the development of intimate, poetic and rarely heard narratives about advanced adolescent development within a university setting. Through a series of three portraits—each involving a

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\(^8\) I feel that embedded in my understanding and wish here are a number of issues that are beyond the power and scope of this dissertation, such as how this work will in fact be evaluated and the role of the exam. I do not wish to present a naïve view of this process. Yet, imagine if this dissertation was offered as a gift and a degree offered as a gift in exchange, and how this would shift the nature of the context for this work and create new possibilities and connections.
story, an interview dialogue with commentary, a digital story created by the participant, and a poetic rendering—we meet:

i
Claire:
who comes alive
when she learns
to see in a new way.

ii
Benjamin:
who finds a philosophy
of love.

iii
Rose:
who walks her way between
relating and becoming.

Part II. Past buoy lines: Exploring metaphors, boundaries and poetic possibilities in giftedness research. This is a poetic essay in which I consider how metaphors about knowledge, and our embodied experience of these metaphors, create limits as well as possibilities in how we relate to our subject, giftedness. In an effort to create a new metaphoric/knowledge tradition, I swim past buoy lines towards “poetic aphorisms.” These aphorisms, or words of wisdom and warning, emerged from responses to a questionnaire in
which I asked a range of scholars in the field of gifted education to share their understandings, hopes and fears of “alternative forms” of research.

iv.

Thus, we swim past buoy lines, and re-orient to our subject – giftedness.

Part III. Frogs, Flowers and Pinecones: Stories about the Sharing (or not) of Gifts.

This third part contains three pieces, each a story in which I contemplate the sharing and development—or not—of gifts in various context. I preface the entire section with a discussion of Lewis Hyde’s (1997/2007) thesis on the fundamental role of gifts as unifying agents in society. Hyde maintains there are important parallels between how material-gifts (say, a birthday present) and inner-gifts (inspiration or talent) should be treated, in that both kinds need to given freely and not be subjected to too much analytic scrutiny or else they lose their “esemplastic ability” (p. 201). With the help of Hyde’s analysis, I yoke the state of being gifted to the process of relating to show they are indivisible. One’s gift only has meaning within a relational context; all depends on how it is given and received. The first piece is an extended metaphor with discussion, and the other two stories are autobiographical—the poetry of everyday life.

v.

Gifts grow up when given the right kind
of attention.

vi.

A gift ill-received
severs connection
and thus meaning.

vi.

Through autobiography,
memories of being
labeled gifted persist.

Part IV. Five ways of looking at genius: Life with attendant spirits. With the understanding that we share and develop gifts within a socio-historical context replete with images, stories and legends, in Part IV I engage in a series of five brief literary analyses in which I explore ways genius can be viewed and read. I do this with an eye on myself as a reader-writer-researcher, caught in the process of sense making.

vii.

Georgia O’Keefe:
controls the image of
her creativity.

viii.

Helene Cixous:
female genius flung
by Derrida out
of the common vernacular.

ix.

Mary Shelley:
knows a creation can
destroy its creator.

x.

Amadeus:
dies victim of his excitable nature and the jealousy of another.

xi.

Chris Riley:
the teacher desires what he has.

Part V. ‘A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering ( Musical) Genius’: Imagining Glenn Gould. In this series of poems I trace my desire to know and relate to Canadian musician-icon, Glenn Gould, who was known for being eccentric and wary of contact with others. I use two documentaries and a screenplay about Gould as source material.

xii.

Then, Glenn Gould
shows us polyphony
as a way of being
gifted.

**Part VI. Mileva & Albert: A poetic biography.** Here I explore the love, marriage, heartbreak and breakdown of Mileva Marie and her relationship with her husband, Albert Einstein. I seek through a poetic rendering of love letters and biographical details to reinsert the relational and emotional back into the history of advanced scientific development.

xiii.
In the Einsteins’
love story, poetry
creates history.

In total, this dissertation is an arts-based inquiry into ways of knowing and living giftedness, in which I reflect my experiences as a researcher-educator grappling with various meanings and experiences of giftedness. In this way, I hope giftedness is enlivened and reconnected to processes of situated sense making. Through poetry, polyphony, fluidity and freedom I seek to create aesthetic conditions wherein giftedness can be known and experienced in artful terms. This is a collection of narrative and poetic inquiries wherein I invite you into lively conversation with giftedness—as a concept, lived experience, cultural phenomenon and field of study.
Part I:

Digital Storytelling with Early-Entrants to University:

an Arts-Based Inquiry into Accelerated Learning

Prologue I: Claire

Claire and Pamela walk across the library quad.

“You seem more…” Pamela looks at the young woman she has known for three years and searches for a word.

“Alive?” Claire chuckles.

“Alive? Interesting word. I was going to say happier. More connected with what is going on around you.”

They stop in front of the library. Students stream in and out through glass doors.

“I realize now how depressed I was for a long time.”

“Wow.” Pamela shakes her head. I suspected this, she thought. Why didn’t I say something?

“I didn’t have a single friend. My entire first year of university I had no friends. I was only fourteen.” Claire looks away.

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This is a creative reconstruction and not a precise re-enactment. This is the first in a series of memories about the digital story creators based on my experience with them in years prior to this digital story project. I see these distant points made visible as the swirling backdrop to the project at hand. Close your eyes and imagine Vincent Van Gough’s painting, “The Starry Night.”

All names are pseudonyms. All participants signed Consent Forms as required by my university’s ethics review board. The Consent Form can be found in Appendix B.
“So, how did you get through it?” Pamela hears a new concern in her voice, as if she was just now realizing Claire’s situation. Maybe she is just realizing it on some level.

“I don’t know.” Claire shrugs.

Pamela opens the door and they make their way into the library.

**Prologue II: Enriched Relationships**

Claire and I are sitting knees-to-knees in the research lab with my laptop open on the table between us. She is already talking about her digital story even though the recorder isn’t on; she is enthused because she hadn’t seen it in months and coming back to it she was surprised how much has changed for her even since she made it. As she will later say:

I am the kind of person who is always evolving.

And she is. Even as we speak. Especially as we speak.

This research encounter benefits from several years of prior conversations. I have by now known Claire for four years. She was an original member of the Peer Mentorship Project for early-entrants I organized from 2005-2008. After a six session training intensive, we met as part of a group for monthly conversations for close to three years. And in 2007, along with a group of other adolescent girls who were early entrants to university at the time (including Rose who you will meet later), Claire helped organize The Calliope Conference. This was a daylong conference I spearheaded at our university for girls ages 13-17 from around the region who were interested in the creative arts. The planning for the event took place over nine months with decisions being made by a committee of five girls who were early entrants, myself and another graduate student\(^\text{11}\) in my department who volunteered her time as well. So, Claire and I have developed some familiarity. While a few people drifted away from the

\(^{11}\) Krista Fogel, M.A.
groups over the years, she stayed involved for the duration. It is fair to say our relationship and the projects we shared ran like a thin but durable thread through much of her undergraduate experience. Even though this Digital Storytelling project was not conceived as a culminating activity for the Peer Mentorship project or for the Calliope Conference, those who elected to participate and completed their stories had all been members of one, the other, or both, and so this digital story project has served as a form of closure to these other projects. While these stories, interviews and responses can stand on their own for readers and viewers, they were a final piece of a larger whole for myself and for the young people who participated.

It is important to know that I did not conduct any formal research with Claire or any of the other students prior to this digital story inquiry. Neither the Calliope Conference nor the Peer Mentorship Project was conceived as a research project, per se. While we engaged in informal inquiry—explored our experiences of living with awareness, of relationships and of creativity—within group settings, I sought to nurture knowing self and others as a means of community development and connection, not as a means of data collection. These projects were counter-cultural in that they provided marked alternatives to the impersonal and demanding learning environments in which these adolescents found themselves, and for myself as a graduate student within a research intensive, competitive university system I did something rather unusual, which even at the time I questioned – I did not collect any data about the project participants throughout the course of the Peer Mentorship or the Calliope Project. I do not believe that with these young people in this setting I could have done both to

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12 I am grateful for the guidance and participation of Dr. Avraham Cohen in developing this group process.

13 I did ask for ongoing feedback from group members to inform the group process.
good effect, as the goals of observation, collecting and reporting, even through the most sensitive and participatory means, would have interfered with the emerging connections. I feel this goes to the heart of working with young people who are already highly tested and observed in our school systems. I had no desire to contribute to or replicate aspects of that experience.

**Introduction**

In this section I explore digital storytelling as a narrative and poetic means of participatory data-collection and potent inter/personal sense-making with three adolescents identified as academically gifted. I focus on how this “bricolage” form supports imaginative views of individual development for young people who are early entrants to university and thus helps restore stories of advanced learning and development to their dialogical bases. I start with a discussion of the context of early-entrance to university and then turn to an exploration of arts-based inquiry and digital story telling as responses. Woven through this exposition of context and method though is the notion that “being gifted” is by definition an

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14 A digital story is a short film-like narrative, which combines images, words and sounds through the use of digital photography, voice narration, music and written text. Typically, stories are about three to five minutes long, told in the first-person (other points-of-view may be possible) and focus on personally meaningful events in an evocative way. Digital storytelling has gained popularity in educational, research and community development settings (Hull & Katz, 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Lambert, 2002). As narratives focused on an individual’s experiences, digital storytelling is an excellent way to personalize learning (Howell & Howell, 2003), share experiences with others, as well as nurture autobiographical reflection and ethical development.
inherently relational and poetic phenomenon and that through poetic ways of knowing we restore the practice of being gifted to a more connected and mutual social function. In this way, I articulate how an arts-based inquiry forms a pedagogy of giftedness itself.

This is an alternative to more conventional, categorical and discrete approaches to defining giftedness as found in research of accelerated learners (see for example, Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004). It is the implications and praxis of these more categorical definitions I struggled with and against in my life and work. In the midst of the commonplace languages and terms of school achievement and psychology I felt both exposed yet absent; knowledgeable yet foolish; able yet disconnected. I felt a longing for a way to give words to this ambivalence, to make this disconnect matter. It is from this discomfort, this friction in my own mind-soul, that this digital storytelling approach to inquiry emerged. I followed my discomfort towards greater creative possibilities. Wolgemuth and Donohue’s (2006) “inquiry of discomfort” has meaning here. They say: “the aim of an inquiry of discomfort is to identify and promote an intentional and conscious shift from dualistic, categorical, and entrenched positionality to a more ambiguous engagement with social reality” (p. 1024).

In attending to my own discomfort and my in/ability to function comfortably in expected terms I was propelled, despite more rational intentions, into an artful and poetic inquiry. And even then, as I sought to control the process, to decide I would “understand and show the hidden nature of giftedness,” or “the inner-experience of exceptionality,” I learned of the power of the inarticulate and the pleasure of the ordinary, and fell into a way of knowing which finds the exceptional in everything, a way of knowing which does not recapitulate the separation of special from average, able from un-able. I experienced something of what Canadian poet Roo Borson knows:
To grow abject so quickly in the absence of beauty: a lonely malady, difficult to prove or explain. But to happen upon Beethoven on the radio, or to wander out for a cheap cappuccino in a student café – paneled, miraculously, with carved French oak—and it’s back: the speck of genius that lurks in every living being, and animates the inanimate. (Borson, 1995, p. 124)

I turned to poetry to open portals into a “rebellious subjectivity” (Marcuse, 1964), a dimension of experience particular to individuals positioned on the fringes of a system, which facilitates critical stances. And, giftedness—a state on the margins, fixed, defined, categorical and inert—began to transform into a radically inclusive and democratic proposition at the heart of our connection to the world.


doe a deer almost grown,
prone on the shoulder, body thick, eyes fixed.

What do you do when you see a dead doe on the road?

While a piano pulses from the radio,
Partita in B minor by Bach,

and clouds rest in the arms of evergreens
with ghost-like lingering,

and even oily exhaust from the old Tempo
in front, rises into oblivion.

Race up concrete hills in the rain,
two stairs for daily exercise.

Press down tangled hair with quick palms,
to meet student-teachers.

Arrive breathless but say: Slow down on the road,
watch the edge of the forest,

pay attention to the doe emerging,
the live one.

Claire, Benjamin and Rose, the young people you will meet in the following study, have been with me through much of my graduate studies. My time with them and other young people who were early-entrants to university formed the backdrop and catalyst for much of the creative work I have done in this time. I am immensely grateful for their willingness to engage in complicated and animated conversations about their lives and their understandings of growing and learning.
Dear Admissions Committee,

It is with mixed feelings that I recommend George/ Claire/ Soo/ Laura/ Grace/ Benjamin/ Fei/ Sabrina/ David/ Angela for admission to your Faculty of Medicine/Law. George/ Claire/ Soo/ Laura/ Grace/ Benjamin/ Fei/ Sabrina/ David/ Angela are volunteers for a peer mentorship project for early-entrants to university, which I coordinate, and I have known them for three years. While I am certain they would make an exemplary student in your Faculty, and know they possess outstanding character traits, which would be assets to the profession, I am somewhat startled by the fact that all of these students, with such wide ranging possibilities, are all choosing The Same Path. Now don’t get me wrong. You could do no better than to accept George/ Claire/ Soo/ Laura/ Grace/ Benjamin/ Fei/ Sabrina/ David/ Angela into your program. As their transcripts/ LSAT/MCAT scores/ volunteer records/ personal essays attest, they are remarkable young people who would be a pleasure to work with and teach.

There is an issue though I cannot get around. George/ Claire/ Soo/ Laura/ Grace/ Benjamin/ Fei/ Sabrina/ David/ Angela are at an age (16-19) where they would typically be considering a first university degree. As it stands, because they started university at an early age, they are now aiming for professional programs and making decisions about adult identities and life directions that feel to them like permanent ones. I have no doubt that some students know from a very early age what direction they are headed in. For students such as
those I would have no misgivings. I do not think this is the case here. In this instance we have very high achieving young people who have made it through school with great success, who feel they are now obliged to take the next step into a narrow range of high status, well paid careers. My concern is that with their busy lives they have not had time to consider who they are and where they would like to be. I suspect that this lack of time and space to figure oneself out is an integral part of accelerated learning.

Margaret Atwood (2006) wrote this about acceleration:

Walking was not fast enough, so we ran. Running was not fast enough, so we galloped. Galloping was not fast enough, so we sailed. Sailing was not fast enough, so we rolled merrily along on long metal tracks. Long metal tracks were not fast enough, so we drove. Driving was not fast enough, so we flew. Flying isn’t fast enough, not fast enough for us. We want to get there faster. Get where? Wherever we are not. But a human soul can only go as fast as a man can walk they used to say. In that case, where are all the souls? Left behind. They wander here and there, slowly, dim lights flickering in the marshes at night, looking for us. But they’re not nearly fast enough, not for us, we’re way ahead of them, they’ll never catch up. That’s why we can go so fast: our souls don’t weigh us down. (pp. 125-126)

A few months ago I had dinner with eight of these students. One who had just turned 19 ordered a glass of wine and we started to talk about “becoming an adult.” As the conversation progressed I asked if they were looking forward to “adulthood.” Without exception all of them said: “No way.” I was surprised at how quick and sure they were in their response. I asked “why not?” and each said: “Too much stress already. Who needs more?” They are right. Kathleen Stewart (2005) says of the ubiquitous stress of contemporary life:

It was the lingua franca of the day. If you had it, you were onto something, part of the speeding force of things-in-the-making. But it could puncture you too. Leaving you
alone during times of exhaustion, claustrophobia, resentment, and ambient fear. (p. 1035)

I have worked to create opportunities for these students to explore their thoughts and feelings about themselves, school and relationships. I seek in gentle ways to weigh them down a bit. They have been open to this process, hungry for it at times, but even after three years I feel we have just gotten started. This is partly because we meet intermittently, partly because these questions become most relevant at times like these, when a crossroad appears, when new questions about identity arise. They seem to just now be at the perfect age to start exploring these questions. But as most of them have already committed to a professional path there is disconnect between what they think/feel and what they will do. Most of them will be graduating soon and on their way.

By many measures these are highly successful young people yet they are balking at the thought of becoming adults. I watch them as they fly forward, full of the knowledge of their own fear. It is no wonder they are sticking close to the pack. I worry about them, not in the near future when they are still in school, but in five or six years, when they are landed in that career. Other than academic success what has prepared them for life? Many of them could benefit from support and guidance as they transition into this next phase. I would wish them success predicated on a sense of hopefulness and excitement about their futures. I am not at all sure this is the case as it stands.

Sincerely,

Pamela Richardson
Counter-Culture: Awareness and Relationships

On a warm Saturday afternoon in March a small group convenes in Pamela’s living room. They meet once a month to talk about experiences of radically early-entrance to university. Grace is holding the floor. George has the sniffles. Fei contributes her one comment, as per usual. Claire was an hour late because she just woke up. Pamela is a graduate student in Special Education, Avraham is a psychotherapist and also a graduate student in Education, and the rest of the group are teenagers who are undergraduates.

“Laura was telling me that there was this girl in her Bio class who skipped a grade and started university at seventeen, and so she told the TA she was younger than everyone and so shouldn’t be marked as hard—” Grace says.

“Oh yeah, ha ha,” Claire laughs like she’s heard this one before.

“—and Laura was thinking, ‘Well, wait a minute, I skipped three grades but do you see me saying anything?’” Grace chuckles as she conveys Laura’s story.

George nods. “Oh yeah, I know people who skipped one grade and they’re always like ‘I skipped a grade.’ I was in line at the bookstore and this girl was telling me that she’s eighteen in second year and I’m like, ‘oh really? Wow!’ I’m not saying anything because she doesn’t know I’m sixteen and I don’t want her to feel bad.”

Fei looks at Pamela as she speaks. “In one of my classes they did an ice-breaker activity where we lined up in a row with the youngest at one end and the oldest at the other. These two girls were saying that they were going to be the youngest but then I was like ‘uh maybe not.’ They were like ‘how old are you?’ and I had to tell them I was fourteen.”

“So, why if you skip one grade do you talk about it but if you skip more than one grade you keep it a secret?” Pamela asks. The group falls silent, a few people shrug. Pamela
looks at the young people around her and then out the window at the pink blossoms on the cherry tree. *Most teenagers would be anywhere but here on a nice Saturday,* she thinks. *Maybe next time we should do something more fun for them.*

**Understanding Advanced Development as Relational and Fluid**

Identities are “situated” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By changing the contexts, relationships, and practices that typically inform learning during the high school years, early entrants to university alter what it means to be an “adolescent” and construct identities distinct from their high school or university peers. Much research into human cognition emphasizes its situated, embodied and relational nature (Bakhtin, 1981; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). The sum is that cognition – thus intelligence, ability and learning – are not solely inside the head, but are enacted and constituted through social and cultural practices.

Some researchers interested in giftedness and talented development do support the relational and non-categorical view of ability (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Borland, 2003; Hymer, 2009; John-Steiner, 1997). Hymer, for example, said,

> I see [giftedness] not so much as a reified ‘thing’ as we have objectified ‘intelligence’ or ‘giftedness’ in the twentieth century, but rather a limpid process-state, fluid and changeable, and simultaneously both a value in and of itself, and a relational outcome. (p. 301)

And, Borland (2003) said,

> I am advocating that we dispense with the concept of giftedness – and such attendant things as definitions, identification procedures, and, for the most
part, pull-out programs—and focus instead on the goal of differentiating curriculum and instruction for all the diverse students in our schools. (p. 118)

Most often, though, cognition, thus intelligence, is still positioned beneath the skin and between the ears of the child (Mehan, 1993) and treated as an individual accomplishment. A view of cognition as an isolated process nourishes environments where exceptional intelligence, ability and creativity are valued as commodities to be controlled rather than gifts to be freely shared, and the success of the individual, which is measured in terms of capital (in this case grades, awards or accolades), matters more than the quality of learning and human relationships (Bourdieu, 1983; McDermott, 2006). In this way, rather than being a boon the label “gifted” may render an educational and human journey surprisingly perilous.

**How to fall back into giftedness.**

The view of giftedness as “process-state” (Hymer, 2009) and such situated and fluid conceptions of ability signal a shift occurring in certain quarters of gifted education and I situate my own work within this movement. I wish to propose this definition of giftedness: one experiences a state of giftedness only in so much as they may share and develop their inner-gifts through a process in which relationships are engendered. The circulating of the inner gift creates social bonds when gifts are regarded as gifts and not commodities. I believe this gifted “process-state,” as Hymer (2009) accurately, usefully, but not so beautifully calls it, is held in trust, available to us in the practice of what Leggo (2005) calls “living poetically.” Seeking a definition for “living poetically” is maybe like asking a firefighter to write out instructions for how to put a fire out while your house is burning down in front of you. Leggo (2008) says, though, “Poetry is a way of knowing, being and becoming” (p. 168).
And, “the poet-researcher seeks to live attentively in the moment, to know the momentousness of each moment, to seek to enter lived experiences with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings” (p. 168).

Knowing poetically, like the sharing of a gift, is knowledge of how to stand in a state of connection, or stand as connection. While Hyde (1979/2007) says poets sense the “underlying unity of things” (p. 212), I want to make a finer point. I am not concerned with an immutable reality or wholeness “out there” and how sensitivity to this reality is maybe the gifted-poetic state, as this still seems rarified to me. Instead, I would like to suggest that poetry as a practice enables one to create and draw others into an experience or feeling of unity. Regardless of whether it is a sense of wholeness felt prior or not, poetry, like the sharing of a gift, creates the channel through which Eros flows into the world through language and relationship. This is how an underlying unity is created. Poets live things into a state of unity through poetic acts.

Metaphors, which are conceptual bridges between dissimilar objects and states, represent well this state of connection. Metaphors are, well, metaphors for this state of connection. Metaphors are a fundamental activity of language, human cognition and a building block of experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Speaking from the field of cognitive poetics, Verdonk (2005) says:

Metaphor, metonymy and other figures are no longer seen as an embellishment of language to create a particular stylistic effect, resulting from a process of objective thinking of an independent mind; rather they are seen as a reflection of how people construe their knowledge and experience of the world around them. (p. 236)
It is knowledge of how to connect one being or object to another in such a way that the circuit hums with life—with the energy of Eros or what the Greeks called Zoë. Poets map this ontological position in such a way that others can locate this place. In this way poetry is a pedagogy of giftedness and we are hardwired for giftedness through our basic poetic function of mind. You can fall into giftedness as an actuary or a taxicab driver or as a parent of triplets so long as you love the world into a bigger and more connected version of itself through dancing in tune with being.

**Arts-based inquiry as pedagogy of giftedness.**

Recent calls from within the field of research on giftedness appeal for more diverse methodologies, specifically ones that do not overly determine or limit participants’ responses—methodologies that capture creative and unique ways of experiencing reality (Cross, Coleman & Stewart, 2003; Porath & Richardson, 2009; Shavinina & Ferrari, 2004). Theory and research on the inner-experience and emotional aspects of giftedness emphasize heightened sensitivities, unusual mental processing and “over-excitabilities” produced through “asynchronous development” (Aslop, 2003; Jackson & Frankfourth Moyle, 2009). Being consistently “out of sync” with one’s learning environment and within one’s self is believed to produce complex perspectives, emotional intensity, and greater potential for alienation and risk (Piechowski, 2002; Silverman, 1997, 2009). Cross et al. (2003), speaking as researchers within the field, say that gifted education is “far behind other fields of endeavor in terms of research philosophies and approaches” (p. 201) and the use of “alternative forms of inquiry” (p. 202). Traditional research methodologies may have worked to circumscribe and limit participant research responses (Cross et al., 2003). Hillman (1983/2005) maintains, “The plurality of worlds, psychologically, refers to the plurality of
perspectives that determine our subjectivity. The many eyes that see through ours” (p. 77). As an approach that embraces varied perspectives, intense emotions, complexity and has a poetic pulse as its heart, arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Cole & Knowles, 2008; Finley, 2003, 2008; Haywood Rollings Jr., 2010; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; McNiff, 2008; Piantanida, McMahon & Garman, 2003; Seigesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis & Grauer, 2006) is optimal for understanding experiences of asynchronous development, for restoring diversity to our understanding of giftedness and for enabling learners identified as gifted to understand themselves in new and transformed ways. Irwin (2004) says:

Art is the visual reorganization of experience that renders complex the apparently simple or simplifies the apparently complex. Research is the enhancement of meaning revealed through ongoing interpretations of complex relationships that are continually created, recreated, and transformed. (p. 31)

Seigesmund and Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) link arts-based inquiry to an ability to enrich one’s experiential store, which is a term from semiotic theory referring to our bank of pre-analytic sensory impressions. “Inquiry is not limited to coding the experiential store into meaning. A goal of inquiry can be building the experiential store itself” (p. 232). A field of study, no less than an individual mind, needs nourishment in order broaden the palette with which it colours reality. This is a fundamental task for any field that seeks to grow, evolve and engage with its own complexity, especially a field that has suffered from an over-narrowing of the terms of knowing all the while claiming to define and promote giftedness and creativity. The excessive study of that which cannot be experienced or expressed becomes a soulless, formalist exercise.
Through the use of artistic practices, exploration of form and mining of artistic traditions (literary, performance, visual, musical) arts-based inquiry reveals and builds understandings about the complexities of human relationships and experiences. McNiff (2008) defines art(s)-based research as

…the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (p. 29)

The essence of the distinction between arts-informed and arts-based according to Di Mello (2007) rests on where art enters the research process. Arts-informed research brings art to bear on already collected data. Art enters the process to shape the presentation of the research data. Arts-based research is where art making is part, or all, of the data collection. Jiménez (2006) says: “I understand images as symbolic forms of knowledge and identity that are forged in different human cultures in order to structure spaces of meaning, and which circulate through distinct expressive ways, or “languages” (p. 392). About the type of knowledge that images excel at conveying, Weber (2008) says:

An image can be a multilayered theoretical statement simultaneously positing even contradictory propositions for us to consider, pointing to the fuzziness of logic and the complex or even paradoxical nature or particular human experiences. It is the ability of the image to convey multiple messages, to pose questions, and to point to both abstract and concrete thoughts in so economical a fashion that makes image-based media highly appropriate for the communication of knowledge. (p. 43)
In this way digital stories, which bring together images, words and sound in service of constructing a poetic narrative, provide excellent means of helping individuals better understand their worlds and themselves through the fertility and plurality of their imaginations. The artistic process is “at the beginning or basis” of the research and participants craft and convey their experiences and knowledge through the use of available creative tools and practices.

**Digital storytelling and poetic response.**

In the following pieces, I respond to the digital stories through poetically reconstructing their images, text and music. I begin each section with a brief fictionalized scene pulled from memory in order to connect the digital story and response to my relationship with the author and the discussion of the context of our relationship. Then I describe the story in brief and introduce the story in the author’s own words. Lastly, I offer poetic responses to the images in the digital story supported by keywords and concepts culled from the interview. As I sought to understand the stories within the context of the authors’ analysis, as shared in our interview, I selected a few key themes and words from each interview to help inform the poetic process. On the left hand side of the page is my own poetic rendering and on the right hand side of the page is the corresponding text associated with the digital story.

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15 This section should not be read independently of viewing the digital stories (available as Accompanying Materials, DVD). The digital stories in and of themselves serve as examples of art-based inquiry and I believe with a few comments on the process and context of their making they could stand on their own. What I offer here is a space for an analysis of the stories in the participants’ own words and a sense of the relational context, which supported the artful stories and their interpretations. As gifts need to keep circulating in order to accrue in value, letting their stories serve as inert “data” towards my own gain would nullify the point and hope of the creative effort. This section of poetic reconstructions serves as an accompaniment and response to their work and is a gift given in response to their own.
with the same images as written by the story’s author. Overall, I seek a polyphonic interplay that accentuates the digital-stories’ central themes in a manner that expresses their movement and message as film-like narratives. Speaking of film as a form of educational research, Woo (2008) says, “Validity is established less by the dispassionate dissection of methods and data than by the emotional resonances (or its absence) of the story and characters for audiences” (p. 325). As the digital stories involved music, and this sonic experience is mostly lost in translation to the page, I attend carefully to the lyrical possibilities of the language. Nielsen (2008) says, “The specific, concrete, sensory, and often intimate language of poetry and narrative marks those genres as lyrical” (p. 95). And drawing on poet Jan Zwicky, Nielsen adds, “Lyric language allows us to hear the music of the other” (p. 95).

Claire’s Story

**Interviewing Claire.**

We begin with Claire whom we met at the beginning of the chapter. Claire entered university at age 14. Her digital story tells of how she overcame depression and isolation to find social connection, and how she created an identity beyond grades and school-based tasks. While she talked to no one at the time about her depression, Claire took Psychology classes, studied herself and her experience and learned ways to improve her situation. Now she talks frankly about the experience. She says,

> How I got out of it was just changing my self-perception and I think a lot of it had to do with my [accelerated high school experience], so much of my self-identity was within schools, and grades and marks. So just changing that, and just changing how I valued myself, and finding other passions and other ways to identify myself was really important.
And,

*I think it was just more defining my character in terms of relationships with people and not closing myself off.*

A central theme of the story is how she changed her perceptions of self and life and thus her experiences; how she went from observing the world around her with a critical, despairing eye, to looking inward and observing the quality of her own vision. As you will see, Claire’s story evokes some of Kristeva’s (1989) words about depression. Kristeva says, “Within depression, if my existence is on the verge of collapsing its lack of meaning is not tragic – it appears obvious to me, glaring and inescapable” (p. 3). And, “absent from other people’s meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naive happiness, I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression” (p. 4).

For Claire, the process of healing involved realizing that the power to make meaning resided in her. In our interview, Claire says:

*I started taking control of my life and not letting the outside variables determine how I felt but realizing what I honoured and what I expected out of life and the people around me and sort of taking that and being more proactive and just making the changes. I can’t believe I am going to say this but it’s like that Gandhi quote, be the change you want to see in the world, and so even if the world is crappy and you are like “I can’t believe it’s like this” and “what is my life,” you know? You have to be the impetus, cause it’s not going to be done for you.*

She created a “ladder of self-examination” to climb out of her depression and gain a new perspective on her life.
You can’t just think facts are facts, you have to sort of pull it... weave it all together in a way that makes sense to you, like the trees instead of the forest.

Key words and themes I drew from Claire’s story and interview are: eyes, vision, living, created, organic, connection. Claire’s original digital story including music is attached as accompanying material (DVD). I recommend viewing her digital story then coming back to the poem below.

**Changing mind, finding life.**

I

The city is dark. Dwellings like masses graphite, glint only where the edges meet.

I watch from my window. No one knows I am here.

I don’t sleep anymore. I don’t dream anymore.

The morning sky glows with ignored desire.

This grey space unfazed by the muted sun.

Being depressed doesn’t mean you are:

- constantly sad,
- constantly angry at The World,
- constantly in a state of confusion.

In fact, everything seems exceptionally clear

I close my eyes to see myself think.
SO OBVIOUS.

The less you know about X
the more unwavering you are in thinking
you know what X stands for.

Burnt crimson on white,
my mind, a scalpel.

And you keep looking for, but
cannot find where
X marks the spot.

II

Beneath an endless sky
as far as my eye can see
they grow in straight lines
a farmer’s plot

Young and shortsighted I became
the worst kind of cynic
from knowing nothing to
believing nothing.

See how all birds face
one direction.
Each unique yet they
act the same.

I saw the pigeonholes the world had created.

I didn’t believe in taxonomies because

I thought I didn’t fit in any of them.

I watch you watching me,
hidden behind my lenses
unseen.

III

I was happy to dull
my senses.

I didn’t know it but I was:

Hearing but not listening,

Talking but not speaking,

Seeing but not watching

False friend, figurine,
figure it out.

Plastic monkey see
with empty eyes.

It isn’t surprising I would
stumble and fall,

But it’s easier
Only from the depths, could I see the orb above.  
A full moon in a cloudless sky  
and to my right a ladder,  
so I could climb.  

To bring myself closer  
to an understanding.  

(Or… a conclusion)  

A change is needed, desperately.  
The change to be, it must be me.  
So here I sit sipping tea,  
to find sweet Clara’s recipe,  
(warm yeast rise in my own time)  
for real meaning study me
sweet life being meaning read,
sweet yeast baking in the bread.

I should have looked within
to work on my vision,
to see how I saw,
to listen to how I heard

I could have looked within
to work on my vision,
to see how I saw,
to listen to how I heard

I will look within
to work on my vision,
to see how I saw,
to listen to how I heard

I discovered
the greening of life.
I walk to the forest.
to climb an elm
bent by the wind,
and find a small nest
of sparrow eggs.
My insight—such
a quiet creature.

And I said to myself… how funny….
How anticlimactic epiphanies are.

This morning I dreamt
the sun was a heart,
and we each saw it
from our own window.
As friends.
Benjamin’s Story

The Peer Mentorship Project.

Pamela looks at the relaxed, smiling young man across the group from her and wonders: “How did that tiger from a few weeks ago turn into such a pussy-cat?”

She had met with each potential volunteer individually prior to starting the peer-mentorship group. Each had been enthusiastic, curious, polite, willing to participate… except for Benjamin. He was angry and met with her to tell her so. Benjamin saw the project as an extension of his high school experience, which he did not enjoy, and he did not appreciate her intrusion on his university life. To his credit he did warn her in an email prior to meeting with her. The school coordinator had warned her, too. “You could ask Benjamin to participate. He is definitely brilliant and highly respected by his peers. He does tend towards cynical though.”

Despite his misgivings, Benjamin opted into the project and Pamela braced herself, expecting him to be the vocal critic of the group. But the opposite occurred. As soon as the group started, he retracted his claws and transformed from an irate critic into an insightful, supportive participant. He emerged as a leader in the group. Soon, Pamela could not imagine Benjamin not being involved. Four years after their initial meeting with the project drawing to a close, Benjamin sent a follow-up email to that very first one, apologizing for his first email before the project started. Pamela had completely forgotten about the original email and their initial encounter.

Inter-viewing Benjamin.

Benjamin started university at 17, which is older than the age of the rest of his cohort who were on average 15. Although he was older and not a “radical” early entrant (just an
earlyEntrant), he identified with the rest of the group as he had attended the same accelerated
high school program and graduated at the same time; this was his peer group and like them
he had been identified as academically gifted. Benjamin also participated in the peer-
mentorship project and he stayed all the way through from the beginning to the end. In the
last year, he had taken on coordinating the meetings for the group. Knowing he wanted to go
to Medical School and having an interest in Psychiatry, Benjamin pursued a degree in
Biopsychology. Interestingly, he also took a couple of electives in German Literature and
Philosophy…

~

I couldn’t help it. When I saw Benjamin’s story I had a moment of panic.

It’s not a story. There isn’t a narrative arc. It is just …

Well, too late now. We will just take it slide by slide.

Benjamin’s piece, entitled: Amor Fati, meaning “Love of one’s fate,” is an
explanation of his philosophy of life. Amor Fati is a Neitzschian concept which refers to the
need to accept whatever happens in your life, good and bad, with the understanding that both
make you who you are and are part of a larger cosmic purpose or destiny. Originally he had
wanted to do a piece on self-determinism and civil liberties, as these are important to him,
but through the creative process his idea transformed and this is what emerged. He decided
on the title at the end, after the piece was completed. What do you do when you feel life has
no meaning? Benjamin’s answer and the philosophy he lived by is that one should not look
for a meaning because life is enough as it is. To put an additional layer on top of life, to seek
causal explanations for why things happened, to ascribe value beyond the experience itself, is
not useful or fundamentally ethical.
There’s no bad things that happen to you, there’s just things that are different and they’re all things that happen to you and you should love them and embrace them equally and yeah, I like that idea because life’s sort of... once again it takes away fault, it takes away good and evil and it combines it into just one thing.

And,

Kind of a Jung idea that we have a common soul or a common network and, how can you have good and evil when everyone is all connected you have to have both, you have to have everything, and like embodiment of everything in you, and Amor Fati is just saying that you should embrace all these things because they’re all equal.

It isn’t that he doesn’t believe in causality but the origins are so complex and intricate and it doesn’t improve your life to ask why or assign fault.

Benjamin: If you knew everything that happened say when it all began, in theory you should be able to know exactly what happens to everyone and everything because there’s equations that tell you this molecule is going to go to this place and do this thing and if you track all the molecules in the universe in theory, you’d say in a billion years from now this woman who looks exactly like you is going to become a teacher and learn about gifted students and so you know...

Pamela: So you can trace origins...

Benjamin: I like that idea, it is very much sort of a master plan sort of idea but if you just think of it from a more philosophical perspective, the idea that when the universe began you already existed, you didn’t know you existed, but in the information, or
in all those atoms there was you and there was everyone else and it’s already there.

Pamela: Wow.

Benjamin: Yeah.

Pamela: So, do you think we are just groups of molecules that have conglomerated through some scientific process and that can basically explain us?

Benjamin: I think that scientifically that would be true but I don’t think that should diminish what we should think about people or humans….

In his view, life simply is, and that is already amazing enough. There doesn’t need to be something more to our existence than the fact that we already do exist, but at the same time our existing is pretty special already, so it’s not like oh we exist but it’s no big deal. Love your fate, why not, he says at the end of the digital story.

It follows then, maybe, that as narratives are meaning-making structures his story does not have a narrative, per se. It is what it is, a poetic exposition of an underlying structure of his belief system. In working poetically with Benjamin’s piece I focused on the exact image and on the evocative use of colour. Benjamin’s original digital story including music is attached as accompanying material (DVD). I recommend viewing his digital story then coming back to the poem below.

Amor fati.

handwritten philosophie
temple spire, narrow boat
carries three figures
to sea.

In philosophy, it is called determinism
In religion, it is called predestination
Most people call it fatalism

compost soil, the camera’s shutter,
a quarter note,
the colour of this word

a stop light, a cinnamon candy,
this bloody paper cut, my worn
copy of Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

I call it a world
without

WHY

In a world without why
People exist
I simply am.
You just are.
No more.
No less

A young woman at a pool hall,
is laughing.
A boy lays his cheek on the sidewalk
alone
Two horses with their heads together
form a heart

We laugh
We cry
We love
The angry-eyed alley cat coils his torso
The bridge is a band of gold stretched beneath a silver moon
A collapsed iron skeleton in the post-atomic rubble
compost soil, the camera’s shutter,
a quarter note,
the colour of this word
In a world without why
a stop light, a cinnamon candy,
this bloody paper cut, my worn copy of Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
no reasons
no motives
no causes
just nothing
In a world without why you are simultaneously and instantaneously the embodiment of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and deceit.
Amor fati.
Why
not.
Rose’s Story

The Calliope conference.

“I was thinking about the day of the conference when all the girls and artists are there,” Rose says.

The others are getting up and clearing their plates and cups from the table, so Rose leans towards Pamela to make herself heard.

“Hmm,” Pamela nods.

“And, I thought I could do something on Math and Art maybe,” Rose says.

“Sure. Like what?” Pamela says.

“Well, I could talk about fractals. The Mandelbrot set.”

“That’d be great. Could you do something at lunch maybe?”

“I could do a poster type thing.”

“And, talk to the group about it for a few minutes, and then hang it up on the wall so the girls can see it?”

“Yes. I could do that.”

“Wonderful, Rose. That’d be a great contribution.”

“Okay.” Rose smiles.

Inter-viewing Rose.

The Adams sisters: Rose and Heidi. Both went through the same accelerated high school a year apart; both entered university at age 15; both completed a degree in Computer Engineering and Mathematics; and both shared a bedroom until Heidi, the eldest, left at age
20 for a Ph.D. program in the US. Both grew up in a family that supported them as girls to develop technical interests. Rose says of becoming an engineer,

*A lot of it was influenced by my dad who was a software engineer and he’s fostered that type of environment in the family since we were young, he taught us how to do Java programming when we were like nine or ten like it was this incredible concept, how to get a computer to do what you want and... so I guess from there it started building and it developed.*

Rose, a year after Heidi, will now leave home for graduate school, too. As the younger of the duo, Rose was always perceived as following in Heidi’s footsteps. Both are quiet, smart, focused. Both are about the same height, build, only a year apart in age. Rose says about her relationship with her sister,

*It’s the first thing that comes to mind when I think about my relationship with the world, so it’s probably the closest relationship that I have to anyone else in the world so... it’s my sister then my parents then someone else.*

They are very close. Yet, they are quite different in many ways. They just come across as quite distinct people with very different … energy the one from the other. How do two people share a bedroom their entire lives and go through identical university degrees and yet end up so different?

Rose would say Heidi is the more outgoing one. I do not find this difference at all marked but I know why Rose would bring it up. It is the reason Heidi was recommended to the peer mentorship project initially, and Rose was not. In my experience, I don’t find Rose overly shy though. She is soft-spoken, genuine and earnest. Rose joined the Peer Mentor project towards the end of the process and was very active in organizing the Calliope
Conference. Heidi, who had participated in the Peer Mentorship project since its inception, left for her graduate program at the beginning of that year, so it was as if Heidi had passed the baton to Rose. By the end of the year Rose would opt to go to a Ph.D. program in the US as well. She was accepted into the same program as her sister but decided on a similar program at a school on the exact opposite side of the country. She says,

*I think it is important that we find our own paths. Because we’re not always going to be together… um… and (long pause)... this is, this is good too, because we’ll always have that relationship but we’ll also have our own thing.*

It is maybe not a surprise then that Rose’s digital story is called: Reflections.

Reflections (def): 1-the throwing back by a body or surface of light, heat, or sound without absorbing it. 2- Mathematics, the conceptual operation of inverting a system or event with respect to a plane, each element being transferred perpendicularly through the plane to a point the same distance the other side of it. 3- serious thought or consideration.

In her digital story Rose explores the concept of identity and all the aspects that currently make up her own identity as she lives it. She focuses on those aspects that make her fairly unique, such as being a younger sister, a female in engineering, and an early-entrant to university and what those mean to her. It is also an exploration though of what an “identity” is and the interplay between her identity and her “true self” as she develops. She says,

Rose: *There was this short story, it was an allegory I think, that we read sometime ago, I don’t know if you know it, there’s this cave and there’s a man, tied by the fire and he can only see his shadow but he can’t see himself*

Pamela: *Plato’s cave?*
Rose:  So that was what I was trying to do when I said that identity is not... if you’re looking
in a mirror it’s you, that’s the identity, but what you are right now is the image in the
mirror, so... it’s... and what you are trying to get towards is the real person and
everything you do is just a reflection.

Rose talks about the process of becoming this real person as one of finding “the face in her
silhouette” or the “object of her reflection.”

Pamela: Is becoming who you really are...just to use that phrase, I think that is what I got
from you, like you look in the mirror and see your reflection and that’s sort of who
you are

Rose: yes

Pamela: but really you’re the person...

Rose: yes, yes

Pamela: looking?

Rose: yes.

Similar to Hyde’s (1997/2007) understanding of gifts, Rose believes her inner-self
comes into being when she is not too self-conscious:

I think it is something that you are working towards but it’s not conscious. So the
choices that you make involuntarily lead you to it.

And, when the relational context is safe and supportive of free exchange.

I guess the times that I do feel most like myself is when I am not doing anything that I
need to think about. Like you know when you’re having a conversation with someone
new and you’re really thinking about what you’re saying but if you were to talk to
your sister or your mother then you’re not thinking about it and it’s very natural. So that’s what I mean when I am not thinking about what I am doing.

Rose’s original digital story including music is attached as accompanying material (DVD). In working poetically with Rose’s interview and story, I drew out the themes of being vs. becoming; finding a unique self and path; and holding on to meaningful relationships. I recommend viewing her digital story then coming back to the poem below.

**Reflections.**

If I told you I am not a girl
but a multitude of leaves
reflected in a pool,
alive and ever changing

Is identity something you are born with?
Is it something that you gain through every step you take, every bridge you cross, every mountain you decide to conquer?

If I told you I am not a girl
but a soul who
would climb up and over
a green mountain
rather than around
Or is it something you don’t really possess at all
but rather what you dream to be, your ideal,
your purpose, your meaning

Identity is certainly something that defines you,
it is the footprint of self in the broadest terms

If I told you I am not a girl
but am on my way to finding her,
in an unknown place

I am a sister
a female
in engineering
Romanian
an early entrant to university
a Stanford student
a writer…but I don’t think any one
of those by itself defines me

If I told you I am not a girl
but a pocket of stones
polished and warm,
and not just stones but a
hand that gathers and studies
them and when needed leaves
one or two behind
Some items are transient.
You find them like polished glass
pick them up to hoard like treasure
until you realize they have lost their polish.
Or it is simply time to throw
them back and pick another

If I told you I am not a girl
but waves in the ocean
always heading to shore,
that I am my sister’s sister
and half of the country between us

Some items will always be on the list.
Some items you borrow
from someone else until it’s your
time to really try them on.
Some items change over time and
grow like you do
And then there are those rocks you really want
to find, shiny, intricate, elusive, perfect…
Your castle, your perfect view, your secret
garden, your quiet corner, your morning glory

If I told you I am not a girl,
but a million moments leading
to a truer version of myself
a clearer reflection of myself,
would you still take my hand?

That’s what identity really means,
every silly thing,
everything that makes you laugh,
every hug you give or take,
every time you look forward
instead of backward, that’s all an
echo of who you really are.

Identity is the face in your silhouette,
the colour in your black and white
and the object in your reflection.
Final Words: an Arts-Based Articulation of Giftedness

Digital storytelling with three young people who were early entrants to university provided an intimate view into experiences of being and becoming and learning and knowing within this exceptional educational community. An arts-based inquiry provided the opportunity for young people who have been identified gifted—but who have been distanced from the experience of giftedness through the pressures of our modern edu-capitalist system—to fall back into giftedness through experiencing their poetic minds. Each piece presented deeply relational views of self, as they strived to express understandings in philosophical, metaphoric and image-based ways. In working poetically with the interviews, images and digital story texts I attended closely to the language and images, and their interplay, and connected with core themes, concepts and patterns unique to each story. In this way the participants are rendered back as poems in a participatory process and not scrutinized, assessed or dissected in technical terms. “We are the words we speak, write, think, hear, read, sing, play, dance and breathe. We speak, write, think, hear, read, sing, play, dance and breathe ourselves into being and becoming” (Leggo, 2005, p. 444). Through interacting with the language and images of the stories—through attending to the particular imaginative gestures made by the authors and responding in kind—I created a context for an arts-based articulation of giftedness.
Part II:

Past Buoy Lines:

Exploring Metaphors, Boundaries and Poetic Possibilities in Giftedness Research

Introduction

In this section, I seek through a poetic and narrative inquiry (Leggo, 2004) to explore the conceptual, physical, and emotional underpinnings of research methodology in the field of gifted education. First, I consider the metaphorical possibility of swimming rather than standing in the field of inquiry and how relationships to self, environment, and other would shift in ways potentially commensurate with the task of researching giftedness. Then, responses to a questionnaire asking researchers about their understandings, hopes, and fears in the use of “non-traditional” methodologies in the field of gifted education are explored through the creation of poetic aphorisms.
I am not Bear, l’Ours, Ursus, Bär

or any other syllables

you’ve pinned on me.

(M. Atwood, 2007)

During the summers of my childhood I spent many days at public beaches. This was before they closed for health reasons—before E. Coli and fear of UV rays, when slathering on coconut oil was still an option. I was born near the lakes of Northern Ontario: Nipissing, Nepewassi, and Wanapetei. This is where my mother grew up and where my parents met. My maternal grandmother could swim a mile across the lake and back. I too was a good swimmer, more coordinated in water than on land it seemed to me. The summer Lady Diana married Prince Charles, her train filling the aisle in a river of silk and brocade, I watched on a small black and white television at my grandparents’ cabin on the west arm of Lake Nipissing.

My parents moved south to Toronto in 1978, but every summer we escaped our sprawling suburb and headed north, trading the landscape of sidewalks, lawns, and sprinklers for rocks, trees, and lakes. Along HWY 69 we would stop in the small community of Pointe au Baril (Gun Barrel) to purchase blueberry pies, and then further on, where the French River meets Georgian Bay, we would stop at the French River Trading Post for ice cream and First Nations memorabilia. By the age of 7 I owned a small tomahawk made of wood and stone, as well as a brown plastic doll with black braids and a tawny dress with a zigzag hem. Soon after I added a leather rattle on a stick to my collection. I loved the very mention of French
River as I associated it entirely with this store. Twenty years later when my grandfather, separated from my grandmother, moved from his motel into a trailer on the banks of the French River itself, all I could conjure up were the towering aisles of this road-side gift shop of memory with the totem pole out front.

Many beaches of my memory look like this: A parking lot surrounded by trees, then grass, which gives way to patches of grassy sand, then to an unbroken expanse of sand. The sand is brownish grey, dotted with bits of calcite and smooth black stones—an unassuming landscape, the colour of pigeons and seagulls. Except, when I crouched down and scooped a palm of sand, it twinkled of pulverized granite—specks of green, yellow, and red. And, if I tilted my head to the shore, the slick tangles of sea-grass amassed along the water’s edge looked as strange as the shorn locks of a giant sea creature. The water stretched not to the horizon, but to the smudge of an uneven tree line drawn along the opposite shore. And always, the lake reflected the sky in shade and motion—from nickel to sapphire. No one word describes the colour of the water. We say blue but this is maybe our notion of water reflected back at us.

Mostly, the waves rolled in at low frequencies. Waves that reached my knees generated excitement of Elvis proportions. I would squeal and jump, writhe my body. Sometimes I could see my toes even while standing waist deep, especially in lakes near the Sudbury nickel mines. This was not a good sign as it meant the water was too acidic and could not sustain plant life. This was my first lesson about the murkiness of real life. On the beach, lifeguards in high red and white chairs surveyed swimmers within an area designated by a buoy line.

Other than grass, rocks, sea-grass, sand, water, lifeguard chairs staffed by lifeguards,
and buoy lines, what made it a beach was the presence of other beach-goers surrounded by their beach-gear: nylon and aluminum folding chairs and worn cotton blankets, blue and orange coolers, barbeques, plastic pails and shovels, striped inflatable beach balls, oversized terry cloth towels, neon bottles of suntan lotion, giant parasols, Kodak instamatics. Everywhere, bodies in bikinis, one-pieces, swimming trunks and Speedos. Families spaced out as strategically as small villages along the shore, allowing as much privacy and access to amenities as the terrain permitted. All this together with the warm sun on my skin signaled I was at the beach.

I know that some people went to secret swimming holes. Places hid behind tangled bushes, down imperceptible trails. Places that required work to reach. Places that due to their remoteness limited the amount of stuff one could carry in. Places with rock outcrops to jump from and maybe ropes from which to swing. Places with no signs to point the way or signal how to behave. These were not the beaches of my experience. My beaches had large signs: signs that denounced dogs, spitting, campfires, drinking, and other unruliness. My beaches had names taken from the local First Nations group. And, my beaches of memory had buoy lines.

Ropes of primary red, yellow and blue, strung out plastic buoys.
Nylon arms reach towards the shore.
Children scream, lifeguards survey, water surges in and out of bounds, promises to carry us away.
Maybe it was that age when all of society started to seem problematic; maybe it was the year my parents started to do everything wrong. Maybe I had gone as far as I could with the underwater handstand and the dead man’s float, but one day when I grabbed onto the buoy line it struck me that it was all the same water. The lifeguards from their perches could tell me to not swim on the other side, but it did not matter because the water flowed regardless. In that case one side was as good as the other, and the buoy line was a contrivance, its utility a chimera. It bothered me that no one else seemed to question the arbitrary nature of the line. Even though I was interested in swimming outside the line I was worried about getting in trouble. I was stuck between revelation and propriety. I tested the line but did not seriously swim over it. It did not change the fact that I got whistled down by the lifeguard for messing around.

Like a fence around a schoolyard, backyard, or prison-yard, buoy lines at a beach designate and enclose the leisure space. Two parallel lines connected by a third along the top reach like arms towards the shoreline. This is the top plane of an imaginary watery cube, homage to a swimming pool (itself a simulated lake), and the metaphor of, or reference to, a fence. Buoy lines delineate parameters, signal a degree of surveillance of these parameters and lay out limits for inclusion and exclusion. The lines are limited in their flexibility. They are fixed to the shore at a point that permits a safe swimming experience. They exist ostensibly to protect swimmers from the flowing nature of water, to provide information about the depth of the water, and to enable easy surveillance by lifeguards. While at the beach, all swimmers are expected to stay together inside the buoy lines. To stay together promises safety. To transgress the lines signals risk. On the inside of the buoy lines: family and familiarity, endless opportunities to demonstrate one’s skills at the underwater handstand
or the dead-man’s float, and time to meditate on clouds while floating on one’s back, avoiding the bodies of others. On the far side of the buoy lines: unknown depths, maybe death, and loss of self. What I recall is that I always felt compelled to swim right up along the edge of the buoy lines. If possible, I loved to swim right on top of the buoy line, straddle it, stand on it, summersault around it. I am sure I am not the only one.

**Mixing Methodological Metaphors: Swimming in the Field**

In this piece, I explore how metaphors germane to our inquiry processes emerge from our embodied experiences, and how by shifting metaphors we may open up increased possibilities for imagining, knowing and being, particularly with regards to educational research. I then draw connections specifically to giftedness and to the researching of individuals perceived as gifted and explore how our metaphors shape our knowledge and relationships to the subject. I started this paper with a narrative exploration of my experience of lakes as a child. Out of this process emerged a central metaphor, the buoy line as boundary, which I explore further on. While I believe that our knowledge of water and experiences of swimming may provide useful metaphors to explore our relationship with research methodology, I would like to begin on *terra firma* by exploring the experience and notion of *field*—as in *field of grass* and *field of inquiry*. Differences between walking in a field and swimming in a lake are many and, as metaphors, both enable different epistemological and imaginative possibilities. The following poem explores one morning walk through a field behind my house. In it I explore my physical experience in the field whilst caught in a moment of deep attention, and how connections between natural and cultural phenomena become visible and even merge in this particular poetic space of mind.
This morning as I
tricked sun-blinded
across a field of delphinium,
the black iridescence of
a slug caught my eye.

Sole of rubber
boot suspended –
I stood and mimed her
impossible slowness,
thick and unctuous.

I wanted to merge with her
then, be tucked
in a sweep of tall grass.
Sly as a comma
in a José Saramago novel.

Time slips past like
the slow hand
on the clock.
Like molasses in January,
my mom would say,
when January lasted
half the year and
molasses made every dish
a French-Canadian specialty.
~
When I got back,
dark plums, small
as kalamatas,
beckoned me to pick them
before they fell.
I could only reach a few.

Because of embodied experiences of fields, organized into knowledge through millennia of human interaction, the metaphor of field of inquiry invites particular kinds of conceptual movement and activity (for extensive exploration of how cognitions emerge from embodied experiences through the language of metaphors, see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). As with everything, fields (of grass) are experienced physically across four dimensions, the three spatial dimensions, and the fourth, time, which is intrinsic to experiencing the others. This is in tandem with the five senses, which also contribute their own perceptual information to what we can know about fields. By existing through our body and our senses along these dimensions we realize ever shifting perspectives and relations, as organized within and through shared knowledge of fields.

I propose that fields invite, in particular, an awareness of lateral spaces, trajectories, and surfaces. They are flat, open, and stable. It is likely one would traverse or journey across
a field. What else does one do in a field? When setting out, one must survey the terrain if he or she wishes to forge new pathways. In this way, fields provide the perfect context for an argument as expressed through the “journeying” metaphor, as in: we’ve covered some ground, but you strayed from the line of the argument, and now we are going in circles (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Because they are flat and stable, fields are also good places for building structures, which, like arguments (and theories), must have strong foundations. Thus, journeying and building are both likely to occur in a field. In addition, fields are “often bounded by fences or hedges” (see definition in New Oxford American [Software], 2005–2007). They are bounded areas. Like fields, humans also experience the world from within a bounded container. This container is known as a body and is wrapped in skin. Thus, we are able to differentiate the inside from the outside of our body. This basic human experience of containment and separateness from other bounded entities leads us to perceive most objects and concepts in similar terms. Thus, one can say whether something is inside or outside of the field. It is possible to travel between fields, but one must surmount barriers. Buoy lines are also a type of fence and create the sense of a bounded container. The differences between a fence and buoy line are limited, except for the significant fact that buoy lines float.

Field-based metaphors thus reify our experiences of fields as places that invite lateral movements across surfaces until a limit is reached. Activity too far above or below the surface is not always welcome or possible when toiling in a field. We must, for starters, be careful not to get into a rut. We can dig in our heels, work in the trenches (field warfare), and stake your claim (mining the field), but should avoid bogs because getting bogged down is deadly—best to just stay in the clear. If possible seek higher ground (hillock) to gain some
perspective, but do not get too used to *rarified air* (ivory tower structures); it is still important to *get your hands dirty* on occasion. Some of us who have our *head in the clouds* should really just come back *down to earth*. If we have lots of time or resources, we can *dig deeper*, even go *underground* for a while and become a *subversive*. Subversion is an essential act when working in a field: from the old French, *vertere* meaning *to turn* (now the French *verser* and related to the poetic term *verse*)—to subvert is the work of the plowman turning a row or a line (New Oxford American [Software], 2005–2007). But subversives, while necessary to growth in any field, are not always appreciated. They tend to like *upheaval* and *things can get mucky*.

While our bodies exist upwards and downwards through physical height, and we go further upwards through structure or downwards through the archeological acts of digging and excavating, I would argue that in most fields we experience this dimension less frequently, positively or consciously than the other dimensions. Beyond the problems the subversives down below or ivory tower dwellers up above face, the third dimension is the vertical axis we immediately occupy, it is the air we breathe down into our lungs, and it is the earth directly beneath our feet, it is located wherever we stand. The physical experience cum metaphor I would like to highlight therefore is this third dimension of depth. I believe that it is here we most radically shift and benefit when we head out of the field and into the lake.

**Giftedness and the Third Dimension**

Here is an artful example of how shifts in spatial relations lead to new ways of being and knowing. In Orson Scott Card’s (1985) science fiction classic, *Ender’s Game*, Ender, a profoundly gifted 6 year old boy, trains at a military academy with other children in order to save Earth from imminent destruction at the hands of an alien species known as the Buggers.
Ender excels beyond those twice his age due to his quick grasp of the implications of working in low and null gravity conditions. He realizes that the old rules of down and up need not apply; that what was considered “up” in normal gravity could now be “front” or “back” or whatever he chooses. This realization, at first disorienting, quickly becomes his strength.

For a sickening moment he tried to retain his old up-and-down orientation, his body attempting to right itself, searching for the gravity that wasn’t there.

Then he forced himself to change his view. He was hurtling towards a wall.

That was down. And at once he had to control himself. He wasn’t flying, he was falling. This was a dive. He could choose how he would hit the surface.

(Card, 1985, p. 56)

By the age of 12, Ender has obliterated the entire Bugger species all the while believing he was playing training games to prepare him for a future battle. The whole of humanity is elated. They celebrate victory, claim Ender as their saviour and prepare to colonize the Buggers’ now vacant planet. Ender though, having fully integrated the implications of spatial re-orientation, is under no compunction to follow their upwards and outwards trajectory. Grasping the implications of the violence he wrought on this unique species, he falls instead into a deep depression. Eventually, he makes contact with the last surviving member of the race, a queen who has remained in pupae waiting for him to arrive. Ender receives her story and writes it out for others to know. This story becomes a classic religious text for humanity, akin to a bible, and Ender becomes known as the Speaker for the Dead. In this way, he masters the art of true subversion: the turning up of the underground through the creation of verse, and he is able to reorient himself in relation to others for radical ethical gain.
...ethical not understood here by reference to a command issued by some superior being or moral law. Ethical understood, instead, in terms of the ethos or way of being of things derived from their location within an inescapable matrix of relationality that is both diachronic as well as synchronic, temporal as well as spatial. (Dillon, 2000, p. 2)

While from above water and buoy lines may appear as a field-like, two-dimensional surface, when we are in the lake we gain a new, and maybe more telling, perspective. Water as a medium invites immersion and submersion (from Latin mergere, meaning 'to dip' into-or under-), and thus movement “through” its own self, not only across its surface. We are relatively conscious of water as we move through it. While we are, for example, always submerged in air, we do not think about it much, and most of us do not have experience with a range of different physical possibilities in this dimension—gymnasts would be an exception. Children too, maybe. Typically we are head up, feet down, or lying prone, and our language reflects and reinforces this physical reality. It is good to keep our feet on the ground and our head up. Being head over heels is definitely an altered state. I would like to argue that being in water, and metaphors about water, reanimate our awareness of the ignored dimension of depth. Due to the relative density of water as compared to air we now have the capacity to radically reorient ourselves along this axis. Gravity is less of an issue. The medium invites play, new ways and perspectives not easily possible in a field. We can be horizontal, upside down, right side up, or on an angle, like synchronized swimmers. We move smoothly from one position to the next. By moving through water we gain expertise in the depth dimension, the dimension that connects our head and heart, and the line that
connects through us to the sky and the earth. Of the importance of depth as a metaphor and its significance to psychological inquiry Hillman (1983) says:

> The vertical direction refers to interiority as a capacity within all things…..

and this interiority if manifested by the physiognomic character of the things of the horizontal world. Depth is therefore not literally hidden, deep down, inside. Rather, the fantasy of depth encourages us to look at the world again, to read each event for ‘something deeper,’ to ‘insearch,’ rather than to research, for yet further significance below what seems to be merely evident and natural. Depth—rather than a literal or physical location—is a primary metaphor necessary for psychological thinking. (p. 39)

Thus, water, as a metaphor, enables what Ender, the 12-year-old boy who saved Earth, acquired—new and useful possibilities for how we orient ourselves in the world and in relationship to others.

~

If, with regards to understanding gifted education, we take the position of lifeguards in the high up chair then we only know who is in and who is out of bounds. We view the field as a one-dimensional plane; we forget that air, like water, flows; we forget we are always submerged; we forget that the air in our lungs was just now outside of us and is just now once again inside; we forget that inside and outside are actually conceptual conveniences, in that they depend on perspective. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) showed that our understandings of boundaries are structured through metaphors; this means that they are contingent and can shift through language use.
Inquiry into the nature of giftedness, genius, and creativity should by definition be at the limit and beyond of methodological innovation. It should ignore the buoy line, only noticing it to swim past it. Or, it should make as its primary business understanding the role of the buoy line in the face of the flowing nature of water. In this type of inquiry the buoy line is the subject. It is possible that under such laser type scrutiny the line would dissolve and this is another way of seeing our way clear. By locating oneself appropriately, by experiencing the implications of one’s location in the sea of academia similarly to how gifted individuals are positioned, in say, schools, the field becomes its own best subject. If instead we take the position of the lifeguard in the high up chair, we risk betraying our subject, by trading experience for a distant view. This betrayal, while couched in metaphor, is literal. I submit that all of us who swim in the sea—students, teachers, scholars—experience distance from the subject, consciously or not, to different effects, and this weakens our capacity to know, and weakens our imaginative possibilities. Maybe if like me, you have spent most of your time at public beaches, I invite you to now join me for a swim at a lesser-known swimming hole. Here is my invitation:

Dearest Inquirer,

We cannot make claims about giftedness by squinting through binoculars from inside the buoy lines at what lies beyond. How can one know about exceptionality from the vantage point of the culture’s most often tread waters? Please join me for a poetic excursion where we dip below the surface and swim towards new possibilities.

Sincerely,

An Inquirer
**Islands in the Stream: Voices from the Field**

In the following section researchers involved in Gifted Education and Psychology share their experiences, hopes, and fears in using so-called non-traditional methodologies in their research. Through an email questionnaire I asked the following questions: (a) What is your understanding of non-traditional research methodology in the field of gifted education and psychology? (b) Please identify the non-traditional research methodology(ies) that you have employed; (c) In consideration of the many aspects of the research process, the various stakeholders and the larger knowledge building process in the field, what do you consider to be the specific benefits derived from employing non-traditional methodologies? (d) Given the same as above, what do you consider to be specific challenges? (e) What are your hopes in employing such a methodology? and (f) What are your fears?

Through these questions I hoped to explore the following: Where are the current boundaries in this field? How do notions of boundaries figure in researchers’ work in gifted education? What does it mean to go out of bounds in this field? Respondents defined “non-traditional” for themselves, and while some had little sense of what the term might entail or questioned the validity of such a category, others situated their work entirely in these terms. When respondents left the question unanswered, the absence of words is also taken to mean something and is represented. The words and silences of researchers in the field of gifted education are here collected and represented in a curatorial fashion. My intent is poetic excursion into the language of community norms and epistemological assumptions couched in talk and silence about methodology and knowledge making. I hope to give a sense of how researchers imagine and experience methodological buoy lines and situate themselves in this regard. Too, I want to take a swim beyond the line and invite readers along. Out of 162
In working with the responses, in reading and re-reading them, in playing with and contemplating the words, what emerged was something akin to aphorisms, or words of wisdom and warning. I like this term “aphorism” for several reasons. An *aphorism* is “a short, pithy statement containing a truth of general import” (“aphorism;” Harper, 2001). In this way, an aphorism strives to makes a truth claim and exists in the world with a particular weight and authority. This is also what academic researchers work for. *Aphorism*, based on the Greek word *aphorizein*, meaning to “mark off, divide, bound, limit, separate,” has the same root as horizon. In this way an aphorism is a bounded entity like a field, a beach with buoy lines, or a human being. It is seemingly impossible to avoid notions of limits and separation when speaking—so embedded they are in our experience of language and being human. The aphorism, then, represents through its form as well as its content a particular approach to knowing and being in the world. Eisner (2005) said:

> In talking about experience and its relationship to the forms of representation that we employ, I am not talking about poetry and pictures, literature and dance, mathematics and literal statement simply as alternative means for displaying what we know. I am talking about the forms of understanding, the
unique forms of understanding that poetry and pictures, literature and dance, mathematics and literal language make possible. (p. 155)

**Poetic Aphorisms**

The following poetic aphorisms are sometimes achieved while at other times they are near-aphorisms, and near poetry, on the boundary of the quality that could perhaps lend them the power of a truth claim or the impact of artistry. This seems to me appropriate for how voices co-exist, collude, and collide to create knowledge through culture. Not all voices are equally positioned or equally suited to the form demanded. In working this way with the responses I draw inspiration and courage from scholars such as Thomas Barone (2008) who said,

> Although I do occasionally feel the need for research texts that guide me towards conventionally valid propositions, I also appreciate texts that offer varied (sometimes even conflicting) renditions of educational phenomena. These are narrative constructions with the power to lift the veil of conventionality from my eyes as they subtly raise disturbing questions about the necessity and desirability of comfortable, familiar educational discourses and practices. These are the products of an educational research that refuses closure to redirect an ongoing conversation. (p. 465)

The following words are more or less direct quotes; only occasionally have they been adjusted grammatically for length and poetic effect. Each section begins with the question as posed on the questionnaire. Sometimes the entire response to the question is presented; other times the words have been de-contextualized from longer passages and a central idea represented. In reading through the entire sequence of responses you will by the end have
heard from all 27 respondents although not all are represented in each section. Between each section are brief interludes where the many forms of so-called non-traditional inquiry in which the respondents have engaged are listed.

I

What is your understanding of non-traditional research methodology in the field of gifted education and psychology?

i.

One that makes a difference in the lives of children in an educational setting.

ii.

Any research technique that is non-replicable or from which generalizations cannot be drawn.

iii.

One that moves away from extraordinary
performance on standardized measures
of intelligence or “creativity tests” and turns
to the measurable technical
and creative behaviour of students
who are working toward the realization of their potential
in a particular domain
as well as the processing used by adults
who have realized their potential
in a particular domain

iv.

Assuming that non-traditional
is meant in a positive way,
it’s anything creative or innovative.

v.

Anything that is not taught
in a research methods course.

vi.

The least traditionally used
method in gifted education is experimental design. It’s difficult to do with special populations, especially those not universally defined.

vii.
The use of qualitative or mixed methods design that employs such theoretical frameworks as critical theory, queer theory, feminist theory, arts-based research, etc….

viii.
Investigation which does not include pre-set method and analysis, though it might be added to it.

ix.
Those heavily influenced
or borrowed from other disciplines.

x.

All kinds of research are embraced today.

xi.

I am not really sure there is such a thing.

II

~

Case study
Action research
Grounded theory
Illuminative Evaluation

~
What do you consider to be the specific benefits derived from employing non-traditional methodologies?

i. Preoccupation with “finding objective truth” narrowed the field to the point it was somewhat sterile.
Non-traditional methodologies helped rescue the field—and may help to keep it alive.

ii. Original questions cannot always be answered by well established methodologies.

iii. A different view of causality, which involves intention and persistence beyond
cost/benefit analysis
flexible
& adaptable
& tuned
to changing research situations

iv.

v.
They provide a different angle
to the picture.
Deepen and broaden
our understanding
in ways traditional methods
are not able.
vi.
Some non-traditional methods
have been instrumental in increasing
a researcher’s respectful treatment
of the persons being studied.

vii.
Knowing in a different way. Especially,
in a way psychology disdains.
Psychology is such a conservative discipline,
and it does not admit other ways of knowing
into the paradigm of
what is true,
what is known,
what is considered.

viii.
You get more reliable data,
answer questions not
to be answered with
traditional methods.
ix.

The information disseminated appeals to more stakeholders, you do not have to be an academic or a statistician to understand the topic.

~

Phenomenology
Photo elicitation
Content analysis
Thematic analysis
Critical theory

~

IV

*What do you consider to be specific challenges?*

i.

None.
ii.
It’s hugely important,
that they be applied
rigorously
carefully
credibly, and
are carefully articulated.

iii.
These are not the techniques
taught in graduate schools.
Nor or they the techniques
with which colleagues are familiar.
It’s more difficult getting research
published that departs
from mainstream research.

iv.
No good questions
lead to no-good
methodology.
v.

Insufficient explanation
of the researcher
agenda for doing the research.

vi.

Takes more time to collect
and analyze the data
and the investigator
has to be more aware of biases.

vii.

The biggest challenge is telling
a convincing story
and communicating it effectively.

viii.

For a student,
there could be some risks
in attempting innovative research.
 ix.

Reviewers who don’t know what the heck they are talking about,
who want practical examples in a theoretical piece,
who want a long methodology section in an arts-based piece,
who cannot understand what a poetic basis of mind is,
who haven’t read anything but quantitative empirical pieces.

I could go on.

~

Archival
Ethnographic
Practical Inquiry
Evaluation Research
~

V

What are your hopes in employing such a methodology?

i.

To get deeper
than the traditional test
and analysis method
ii.

To get more knowledge
about various variables,
and improve gifted education.

iii.

I study creativity.
If we’re going to get
any new insights
or new measures
or do anything that goes beyond
what we already know,
it has to be done *creatively*.

So many people who study creativity
are happy to rely on the same old measures,
which is a little ironic to me.

iv.

To be able to make an original contribution
to the field.
v.

Biography is both analytical and imaginative. It is a powerful tool for understanding the particular and for making inferences.

vi.

There are other ways of seeing, some people come from the arts, and “know” in a different way. I wanted people in the field to understand this.

vii.

That others will see its utility and adapt it for their own research
Narrative Methods

SEM

Arts-based Research

~

VI

*What are your fears?*

i.

Fears?

ii.

Only that I live too long.

iii.
iv. I fear getting bogged down

bogged down

in tiny details &

not being able to sort

sort the wheat sort the wheat

wheat from the chaff

v. The use of the poetic method has led
to some very bad poems

vi. The editor of ____________ gave a session on what he called “qualitative light” vs. “qualitative good.” “Light” was anything attempting to be alternative, and he publicly disparaged these attempts. This left me very disappointed in the possibility for innovation in the way of knowing in our field.
vii.
That it appears
less solid than
more accepted
research.
That it is less solid
than more accepted
research.

viii.
Maybe there are no real patterns
to be discerned.
Perhaps the most significant
events in our lives just happen

ix.
New techniques can fail
or even in succeeding
they might not be taken
seriously
by the powers-that-be
x.

I am

out of bounds

most of the time

when I am doing

my scholarly work
Part III:

Frogs, Flowers and Pinecones:

Stories about the Sharing (Or Not) of Gifts

Introduction

A 1955, classic Warner Brothers’ cartoon called “One Froggy Evening” is a perfect example of the relational and fluid nature of giftedness, and a cautionary tale about expecting one’s gift to be controllable or to perform on command for capitalist gain. In the cartoon a man finds a frog who can sing and dance and he imagines he will become rich thanks to the frog’s amazing abilities. Much to the man’s frustration, though, the frog never once performs when he tries to show him off to others. Despite, or because of, the poor man’s best efforts to capitalize on the frog’s incredible talent, the frog will not sing or dance in anyone else’s presence. In fact, the frog goes completely limp and simply “croaks.” Because it has a fairy-tale feel and archetypal resonance, I reproduce the synopsis for “One Froggy Evening” here in its entirety as found on Wikipedia.org (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Froggy_Evening):

A mid-1950s construction worker involved in the demolition of an 1892 building finds a box inside a cornerstone. He opens it to reveal a singing, dancing frog, complete with top hat and cane. The box also contains a deed dated April 16th, 1892. The man tries exploiting the frog's talents for money, but as it turns out, it will not perform in front of anyone else. For the rest of the cartoon, the man frantically tries to demonstrate the frog's abilities to the

16 View the full cartoon online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvX_TvnBcOU
outside world (first by trying to get an agent to accept him, then by renting out a theater), all to no avail. Eventually he is homeless (after spending all his money renting the theater) and living on a park bench, where the frog still performs for him. A policeman overhears this and approaches the man for disturbing the peace, but after seeing him accuse the frog of the singing, has the man committed to an asylum. Following his release, the haggard man spies a construction site and joyfully hides the box in the cornerstone of the Tregoweth Brown building that is under construction. The timeline then jumps to the year 2056 (100 years and at least 1 day after the cartoon's debut), where the building is demolished by futuristic ray guns, and the box with the frog is discovered yet again by a 21st century demolition man, who gets visions of dollar signs, starting the process all over again....

What is going on in this cartoon? Why does the frog refuse to share his amazing gift with the world? In *The Gift*, an ethnographic and philosophic study of the function and nature of gifts across diverse cultural and economic contexts, Lewis Hyde (1979/2007) explores how both material or outer-gifts as well as inner-gifts of inspiration and talent, are destroyed when they are appraised with an accountant’s eye:

The hegemony of the market can undermine the possibility of gift exchange, the esemplastic powers can be destroyed by an overvaluation of analytic cognition, song can be silenced by self-consciousness, and the plenitude of the imagination can be lost to the scarcity of logic. (Hyde, 1979/2007, p. 201)
Hyde’s central thesis is that when we give gifts without expectation of return and receive them without assessing their worth we strengthen relationships and community bonds. “It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two-people, while the sale of commodity leaves no necessary connection.” (Hyde, 1979/2007, p. 72) Through free exchange, use and circulation, gifts create social cohesion, and this is the function of gifts, both material gifts and inner-gifts, and the context that enables their liveliness.

I will now tell three more stories about gift sharing across contexts to help us contemplate the possibilities of making sense of gifts as agents of social unity.
i.

A Friend Brings You a Cutting from Her Garden….

it is from a plant you admired last time you visited her. Are you happy because she thought of you? Will you maybe feel gratitude for your friendship as the plant goes into bloom and you are reminded of her? Next time you see her, might you remember to bring some sunflower seeds from those tall beauties she commented on at the back of your yard? Or, after she leaves do you go online to the website of the local nursery and feel disappointment when you find out the plant is only worth 99 cents?

“Not worth much at all,” you decide. “Maybe if I let it grow, I can sell it for $1.50, then it will be worth something. But wait: with my time and water factored in, a bit of fertilizer, it will end up costing me more than if I hadn’t gotten the plant in the first place! How dare she burden me with this financial sinkhole of a plant!”

Of course, the first version is most accurate for most of us. We value the gift for what it stands for, a gesture of friendship, and an indication that another thought of you and wanted to share something of theirs. Gifts freely given (as by definition they must be) create intangible social outcomes not to be measured on a profit and loss statement. The gift travels along and reinforces ineffable yet necessary social pathways. We can easily see in the second instance that the recipient misses the point. The value lay not in the realm of capital but in the realm of relationship. Demanding capital to accrue from the gift destroyed the opportunity and created social divisiveness instead. I would say the effect in fact leaves a deeper and darker crater where the gift stood than if no gift appeared at all. The assessment of the gift in these terms creates a potential relational injury to the giver, in that a part of the self extended to make the gesture of connection and the connection was severed. This is how the
marketplace as the context for assessing the value of gifts destroys their “esemplastic powers.” (Hyde, 1979/2007, p. 201) The weighing and calculating needed in commodity trading (which is an important but separate function in society from gifting) signals a degree of social distance and renders the act of exchange, and one’s relationship to the object exchanged, impersonal.

Now imagine this same woman plants the cutting in a visible location at the front of her house. She is pleased as the plant grows into maturity. Alongside it are many beautiful specimens offered to her by her friends and neighbours. In their yards can also be found samples from her garden. In this way, they are all enriched. She takes pleasure in her garden and in sharing tips with her green thumb friends. One day, much to her surprise, she receives a call from Better Homes and Gardens. They are doing a feature on her neighbourhood and want to include her in their article. They tell her she is a gifted gardener, which she thinks is funny as she had never thought of it that way. In addition to the honour of being in the magazine she will receive a $500 gift certificate for the local nursery. On the day of the photo shoot she invites her neighbours over and they have tea and are photographed by the begonias. One of her neighbours volunteers at the local women’s center where she is helping to start a community garden project for single mothers. Feeling grateful for her friendship and lacking for nothing in the gardening department, the woman donates the gift certificate to the shelter, to help realize their project. Having this “seed” money enables the center to create a garden twice the size originally planned and involve more moms and kids in the process. Thanks to the surplus of squash, cucumbers, greens and tomatoes they are able to provide free lunches four days a week instead of the usual two days. Once the local bakery hears about the lunch and garden project, they donate their day old bagels and muffins
without even being asked. Soon close to 30 moms living on low incomes come every week to eat healthy lunches with their children and experience a new sense of social connection. Several of the mothers start to volunteer as peer support workers to help other moms like themselves.

**ii.**

Here is another story with a different ending:

**When I Was in Kindergarten…**

in Southern Ontario in the late 1970s, I had a teacher who was often angry. She terrified me with her voice, which she often raised to the point of screaming, and her impatient demeanor, which made our needs seem like mosquitoes, annoying and easily squashed. A tall (at least to me) stick of a woman with gunmetal grey curls. She was close to the age of retirement and unmarried with no children of her own. What was clear to my five-year old self was she did not like children at all.

One morning at recess, I arrived in the schoolyard to discover a multitude of yellow flowers had overtaken the lawn. I was besotted and decided to give my teacher a bouquet as a gift. In my enthusiasm, I entirely forgot my fear of her. Now, these were dandelions, not flowers, but to this day I believe dandelions cheer up boringly square patches of lawn and enjoy them. So, in my first act of solidarity with the resilient dandelion, I gathered a bunch as an offering. At the end of recess I approached my teacher at the front of the room where she stood monitoring children who were filing in.

“I have some flowers for you.” As I was in French school, I said this in French. As I was unsure of myself I used the voice young children use when talking at their shoes.
“Pardon?” She frowned down at me and at the bouquet. That is when under her gaze some sort of reverse magic transpired. The bright flowers I had selected turned meager. I had now only four near dead things, not a big lively bunch at all.

I was confused. What had happened to those other flowers? Now I was trapped offering ugly things and feeling embarrassed. It was already done but she made the assessment official:

“These aren’t flowers, those are weeds.” She took them from my hand and dropped them in the metal wastebasket beside her desk.

I was mortified to have given the teacher weeds and went to my seat. At the same time that I knew she was right about them being weeds a part of me knew she was wrong though. You don’t throw a gift in the garbage and call it weeds. Do you? How could she be right and wrong at the same time?

Needless to say I never gave her another gift. In this overly controlled school environment my year was marked by confusion and disorientation as my natural impulses to share what I loved led to dead ends or rebuttals. Even on a sensory level, colours, sounds and smells often refused to make sense, and the world got jumbled and indistinct as a close-up impressionist painting.

Despite this, my desire to learn and share kept popping up all over the place. One day a kind young woman arrived as a substitute teacher. I had been sitting at a table drawing and figuring out multiplication (inspired by the dandelion, I learned to multiply at a young age). Soon, I knew I had something good going on, something I needed to share. I took my work to this friendly teacher. Her eyes went wide and she paused for a moment. Then, she said in a serious but kind voice:
“You are a very smart little girl.”

And, on that day I was. Because on that day I found an opening where my learning could flow; an opportunity to gesture myself into the world. You keep waving until someone waves back with sincerity or your arm collapses, whatever happens first. If she had been my teacher, I maybe would have happily learned and grown that year but she was not. I soon forgot how to multiply until it was reintroduced on schedule in grade two. One has to wonder what else the children in that class forgot – wondrous things that were never reintroduced. A final thought: the issue of confounding the desire to learn and share with the seeking of praise is important to consider, as it is one of the ways gifts get converted into capital at their own peril. In this instance it was something in the teacher’s voice, her kind seriousness that helped me feel regarded. If she had condescended: Oh what a smart little girl you are! It would not have created the same possibility for a context of relationship.

Word finger

gift moon.
Fragile as It Was

Grade Four was the first and last time I was ever punched. It was a punch to my stomach, that sensitive home of butterflies and knots, and secret compartments for desert after a big meal. The assault took place in the classroom, a.k.a the war room, that place where children create their battle plans, the ones to be executed swiftly during recess, installment by installment, over three periods a day including the longer lunchtime break. But recess is another story.

The punch came from Aline’s boyfriend, Remi. He was walking towards me, and suddenly I was gasping for air and gripping the desk next to me. It was not a regular desk but one of those brown cubicles with high surrounding walls. It was known as une isolatoire. An isolator.

Aline’s parents were upset because while Aline had succeeded in the first and second round of testing that lead to inclusion in a new gifted program, she had been cut out of the running after the second round. And so, the day after a slim, white letter home announced her relative normalcy, announced in plain typed text that while she was a bright and successful student she didn’t qualify for special treatment, Aline dispatched her boyfriend to send a message to her new competitor, me, the only girl in the class who did qualify for special treatment. This whole business of testing and letters home was not connected in my mind to this new child-on-child violence in my life. I had no idea what it meant to be accepted into this program; my parents and I had never heard of such a thing and gave it surprisingly little thought. A gifted child is surdoué or occasionally surdouée. Over-endowed. Maybe this new class could help with the troublesome overage, collect the run off, trim the fat.
This blond boy, nine years old, knocked the wind right out of me. No one had seen him do it. My surprise at what he did was followed by a rapid gulping in of the act. I never told. It seemed to me that if others knew, including the teacher, they too might decide to join in.

Years later, the moment long forgotten and still without knowing why, I mentioned this classroom swipe to my friend Joya because we were talking about being punched, for some reason.

“That was the only time you were ever punched?” She asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“You had a pretty easy childhood then, compared to me, that is for sure.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Aline, in her twenties, organized a 10-year reunion for our grade eight graduating class. She did not contact me, or my best grade school friend, Chantal, and we found out about the reunion after it was over. At the time, I had no idea why she excluded us; it still did not make sense. It bothered me in a vague way. I had no burning desire to see my ex-classmates, but to be actively excluded? This puzzled me. At this time, I heard that Aline was pursuing a university degree and active in a Franco-Ontarian community organization, a seemingly successful young woman. I was working as a waitress in a local pub with no clear direction in life. It occurs to me now that she might have been happy to see me.

About this gifted class. I would go once a week, with another boy from my class named Tony Frenetti. You might think that Tony and I had many traits in common, but here is the thing: we didn’t. He was, in my mind, a troublemaker. He was disruptive, often talked out of turn, said inappropriate things, argued with the teacher and others. Year after year his
desk was inevitably pulled up right beside the teacher’s, Tony not able to sit still, keep quiet, do his work on his own. I did not like Tony. My opposite. Why would he and I, out of the whole school, be the only two children sent to a special class? They called it a pilot year; they had never done this before. They sent me, the only girl, along with seven boys from the district to a pullout class one day a week. I had always had this vague feeling that I was being sent to school as a punishment for something I had done wrong. I hated school but tried to amend for having to go by being good. That this troublemaker and I would be separated out, together, seemed like a bad sign and fed into an innate sense of myself as troubling to others. What was clear to me was that the adults in my midst felt that to be identified for a gifted program was an enviable thing, a lucky and distinct privilege. This much I knew. So, I worked at feeling lucky, yet took great pains not to be a show-off about it. I actively cultivated disinterest in myself out of sheer determination to balance the social scales. At first I accumulated more praise for not flaunting my over-endowments. It was a double bind. By high school I figured out I could stop being gifted altogether, that this was the best option. There are so many ways to disappear.

Here is what I remember from that gifted program during the first year: I learned how to calculate mortgage payments on a house I had theoretically bought, chosen out of the newspaper classifieds. (It was Toronto in the 1980s after all, who wasn’t into real estate?) I also made a beautiful Christmas wreath out of pinecones my mom and I gathered from under the inner-city pine trees that lined various parking lots in our Toronto suburb. My mom loved this wreath, and kept it for years and years, fragile as it was.
Part IV: Five Ways of Looking at Genius: Life with Attendant Spirits

Introduction

Genius—a word I like for the charge it carries, and for how it absorbs all the attention in a sentence and seduces your eye with the mysterious curve of its letters—is defined as a person who is exceptionally intelligent or creative. Embedded in our understanding of genius is the notion of someone being apart, someone who exists out of sync with the world, someone who fell, flew or was flung outside the terms of the norm. An original definition of the word “genius,” though, from Middle English and Latin is “an attendant spirit present from one's birth, innate ability or inclination” (New Oxford American). I like to think of a genius as someone who due to inclination and circumstance is able to maintain a relationship with their attendant spirit. When you look up genius in the thesaurus you get Einstein as a synonym. Now here are a few other ways of looking at genius. In interacting with aspects of these stories I seek to inquire into my own relationship with my attendant spirit.
Georgia O'Keefe

I read about a posthumous exhibit of Georgia O'Keefe’s work, which she had kept secret during her life (Drohojowska-Philip, 2002). This artist who was so careful about what she exhibited, whose life was a case study on issues of representation, who wrestled terms for self-definition out of others’ hands, lost control finally. My gut reaction was: “She should have burned that work!” Then, I remember my sadness at the Vancouver Art Gallery when I learned she in fact burned 40 of her paintings mid-career. Sadness for the loss of the work, and maybe sadness for the perfectionism and self-criticism I imagine fuelled her decision. This comes back to me now to complicate my knee-jerk response. “Should she have burned that work?” I wade through my own notebooks full of scribbles, snippets, fragments, titles, dreams, poems, diagrams, story outlines, quotes, citations. Floating words. Dreamish. Messy. What have I been doing? What do I plan to do? I struggle to transmit my own past self to my present self, my memories, dreams and reflections reconfigured, edited and reappraised, in an effort to re-present me/them/us for this work. I wrap this self in words, and re-fashion her as the narrator of a research inquiry.

Options:

Language growing progressively tighter, words like a corset shaping my form.
And/Or:

Language groooooow ing looooooooser

wa wa wa wavessssss of meaning,

Carrrrrrrryyyyy me a

waaay.

Representation is a constant negotiation with shifting, multilayered stakes. What was I getting at? What did I mean? How does giftedness relate to gender, relate to language, relate to research methodology, relate to representation, relate to imagination? My handwriting is cryptic, unhelpful. My work won’t be mounted in galleries after I am gone, but there is a part of me that would like to burn everything and start over.
Derrida Speaks of Hélène Cixous

French poststructuralist philosopher-giant, Jacques Derrida (2006), in a keynote address delivered at the inaugural conference at the Hélène Cixous archive at the National Library in Paris, says:

The noun ‘genius’, one supposes, names that which never yields anything to the generality of the nameable. Indeed the genius of the genius, if there is any, enjoins us to think how an absolute singularity subtracts itself from the community of the common, from the generality of genericness of the genre and thus from the shareable. One may readily believe genius generous; impossible that it be general or generic. Some would say that it amounts to a one-person genre. But this is another way of saying that it surpasses all genre of generality or the genericity of all genre. Another way of indicating that it exceeds all the laws of genres, of that which one calls genre in the arts, literary genres, for instance, or what one calls gender, sexual differences. Not to mention humankind in general, for each time that one allows oneself to say ‘genius’, one suspects that some super-human, inhuman, even monstrous force comes to exceed or overturn the order of species of the laws that govern genre.17 (Derrida, 2006, pp. 1-2)

17 Using Cixous's (2007) Dream I Tell You as a reference, this work argues that Cixous is the most important writer working within the French idiom. It also explores the notion of female genius. Derrida also explores the notion of female genius, and specifically, it seems, makes a case for the female genius as living outside of common terms. I struggle with this notion but feel it is vital to include as it is a persistent one. In my own experience I have sometimes felt that choices I made, which felt to me organic to who I was at the time, led me to be “outside” of where I thought I wanted to be. I do
This is the kind of quote you can read again and again. Especially if you, like me, are not a specialist in poststructuralist theory. You can read it for the rhythm, word play and poetry. You can read it for the ideas and philosophy. Not that these are separate from the poetry but it’s a question of emphasis in your intent. I like to take it sentence-by-sentence and then word-by-word. The first sentence, for example, starts with: “The noun ‘genius’.” We know we are talking about the meaning of the word, the word itself and its function. So far, so good. “—names that which never yields anything—.” So, its function is to identify “something” which never “gives way” to anything? Or, maybe never “produces” or “provides” anything? Either way “yield,” supposes the sense of giving, either by (not) giving/providing, or not giving in, or giving up. As this is about Cixous (but not by Cixous), we could also think of woman-as-genius (or a male view of a woman-genius) and the gendered meaning of the word ‘yield.’ Both in terms of women’s social role as being the yielding or giving ones (or not), or in terms of a harvest that “yields” or not. Notions of fecundity and nourishment follow, and in either sense “never yielding” is a decidedly unfeminine act. The words “never” and “anything” strike me as dramatic, and underlie maybe the irrevocability and commitment required of the genius. Never yield? Anything at all? “-to the generality of the nameable.” This part makes more sense when I consider the next sentence: “subtracting oneself from the community of the common.” “Community of the
common” and “generality of the nameable” seem like parallel ideas. So, Derrida believes that a ‘genius’ is someone who doesn’t produce or give way to anything nameable in common terms; someone whose relationship with community is to provide nothing that they can name/or something they can’t identify. Either way, the noun ‘genius’ serves as a placeholder, Derrida maintains, for that which can never, by definition, be included in the general.

One supposes?
The category of gifted as understood in schools is rooted in a particular history of psychology and social science as applied to education, and it is this particular history the category of gifted embodies. I have been reading *Abnormal* by Michel Foucault (2003), and *Goodness Personified: The Emergence of Gifted Children* (Margolin, 1994) a work on the social construction of giftedness influenced by Foucaultian analysis. Margolin says,

Despite appearances to the contrary, gifted child educators are not engaged in a conspiracy or plot against the ordinary. Whatever power is operating here is lighter, more subtle, and less self-conscious than anything describable as a “conspiracy” or “plot.” In fact, gifted child educators seem completely unaware that the various questions asked of the oracle [meaning scientific research], and the various rituals employed to elicit signs, are designed in such way that they determine the nature of the answers. They cannot acknowledge the ruse, because they enact it themselves. (p. 118)

Can my desire to deconstruct the foundations of giftedness, driven by my never-ending need to get to the “bottom of things” itself be attributed to my own giftedness? Can I suspend my post-structural attitude for a moment and just be gifted a priori, even while I am a construction in process? Can I be this and that? I never feel fabulous wearing the gifted identity, more resigned. The label played a prominent role in my development as a young person and enacting it mindfully as an adult maybe permits me access to more lucid memories, dreams and reflections about living in these terms. I get déjà vu and can ask: What is/was at play here? Who am/was I? In my urge to take giftedness apart I feel like the orobourous, the archetypal snake, eating my own tail. (Genre: Table for one? Monologue?)
Soliloquy? Swan Song?). I appreciate the stance of a critical theorist such as Margolin (1994), and find value in a discursive analysis, which makes visible connections between language, thought and culture. I also acknowledge that there is little room within gifted education to “acknowledge the ruse” and be critical of giftedness itself. I resist though his totalizing statements, which would deny me any ability as a “gifted educator” to be at odds with the continual reproduction of the category. It is a paradox to be sure. I work within the category I was given and bring problems I feel are part of the categorization of “gifted” to the table. If I need to become the table in order to stay in the room, then so be it. I accept and resist at the same time. Is this even possible? I reach for poetry to make it so. Why? I feel gifted education is but an intensified expression, a microcosm, of political and economic issues that are playing themselves out everywhere in schooling, and that working here can be a fulcrum against much larger forces. I admit that I have an anarchistic intent. I like to take things apart and don’t always put them back together neatly. Do not mistake me for a nihilist though. I am full of hope. I only seek, on behalf of students who have been identified gifted, deeper connections than what is made visible and available in general terms. I think of Frankenstein (Shelley, 1818/1983) and the doctor’s nameless “monster.” A creation gains consciousness and seeks to murder its creator. Did Dr. Frankenstein actually die at the end? I can’t remember now. Mary Shelley was 19 when she wrote Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus.
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

“Gifted”: The only special education label that rings with promise and represents potential social and economic capital. A negative label has its own challenges but at the very least does not seduce an individual into desiring it. This promise obscures and over-rides concerns about betrayal of self. The word *betrayal* originates in the Middle English from *be-* (meaning ‘thoroughly’) and the Old French ‘–tray or trair,’ (from the Latin ‘tradere’ or ‘hand over’). By identifying with a label, does one risk thoroughly-trading one’s self for an idea of a self, an object?

We see this duality of hatred and desire played out in reference to gifted characters in film and literature. In the film *Amadeus* (Zaentz, 1984), court composer Antonio Salieri so desires the genius Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart possesses that he murders him in an attempt to claim Mozart’s final work as his own. Salieri uses the young composer’s own excitable nature, intensity and drive against him: by disguising himself as the ghost of Mozart’s father he commissions a requiem from Mozart and works him into a state of nervous collapse. At the end of the film, an elderly Salieri, now confined to an insane asylum after a suicide attempt, confesses his story to a priest and ends by claiming he is the patron saint of the mediocre.
Chris Riley, in *The Finishing School*

In the novella *The Finishing School* Muriel Spark (2004) presents us with struggling novelist Rowland Mahler, director of a finishing school and creative writing teacher, who is driven to despair by the appearance of Chris Riley, a charming seventeen year-old writing prodigy. Chris seems to need no advice from Rowland and even gets a book deal while still at school for his epic historical novel on the murder of Mary Queen of Scots’ husband. Eventually Rowland can’t write, can’t think, can’t teach. He is obsessed with Chris, and enraged, convinced that Chris is deliberately tormenting him. Muriel Sparks evokes the double edge sword of desire and hatred for what this prodigy represents. Rowland’s wife, Nina, fears that Rowland is going to murder Chris. At first Chris seems guileless, a golden boy, loved by all. As the novella progresses, though, Chris gains more of a voice and a reversal occurs. He actually isn’t the innocent boy we had imagined but more complex and charged with his own ambitions, ideas of himself and desires that play on Rowland’s. Chris confesses he needs Rowland’s gaze in order to thrive. By the end of the novella, desire wins (for the moment) and Chris and Rowland become a romantic couple (Nina, fed up with Rowland, has run off with the neighbour by now). In this way, Chris and Rowland obtain the “objects of their desire” in a most literal way.
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering (Musical) Genius: 18

Imagining Glenn Gould

Introduction

In this piece I used poetry to explore representations of genius, talent and iconoclasm in the cultural imagination, as well as the limits of relationship within these terms. For the following poems, I drew on two documentaries about Canadian musician Glenn Gould, one from 1959 and the other from 2006, as well as the screenplay for Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould (Girard & McKellar, 1995).

Born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, pianist and composer Glenn Gould (1932-1982) gained renown in the 1950s for his recordings of Johann Sebastian Bach, his technical mastery, especially of contrapuntal form, and “his eccentric piano technique and personality” (“Glenn Gould.” In Wikipedia). The word eccentric comes up in even brief public discussions about Glenn Gould (as for example, “Glenn Gould” in Wikipedia). In this way normalcy is reified at his expense as talk of so-called eccentricity is woven through talk of his talent.

Watching footage of Gould in an interview as a young man, I am reminded of many young people I encounter in my work and research with adolescents identified as gifted. I dwell on his precise diction and his expansive vocabulary, bask in his intensity and idealism.

Gould’s musicianship was rooted in his deep emotional response to music, in a conception of art as spiritual and ethical, in his humanity itself. Gould abhorred the tradition of applause during a musical performance and spoke of the audience as evil. They watch performers risk so much, he said, without needing to risk anything themselves. Psychiatrist and poet Kazimierz Dabrowski postulated that highly creative individuals possess psycho-neural “overexcitabilities” which serve as catalysts for their psychological and moral development (Piechowski, 2002). Gould’s eccentricities, such as wearing gloves most of the time, rarely eating in the presence of others, feeling ill easily, were perhaps just a highly sensitive body’s response to the impact of the world—signs that he experienced himself in the world acutely and sought reprieve. The word eccentric (from late Latin and Greek ekkentros, ek- meaning ‘out of’ and -kentron meaning ‘center’) has its origins in late Middle English and means a circle or orbit not having the earth precisely at its center (Hawkins & Allen, 1991).

As I progressed through the writing of these poems, I touched my own heart as an observer. I observed my emotions in relation to his performances, interviews and depictions of his being. Using this felt sense of relativity, experiencing the emotions that rise up in the space between, I felt I understood his situation and my own better. I doubled and tripled back through these poems, expressing this perpetual e/motion between self and other. Through the use of superscript within the poems, I signal connections, layer fragments, and associate words and meanings across the page. In this way I seek to convey the polyphony of experience over time, the resonances and dissonances in my shifting sense of self in relation. Robert Bringhurst (2007) says of polyphony in music and poetry,

Forms, and therefore meanings, are achieved through the conjunction of other forms and meanings. That principle is basic to biology, chemistry, physics and
the history of art. In polyphonic structures, the conjunction is nondestructive.

The component forms and meanings survive within and beside and beneath
and on top of the meanings and forms their conjunction creates. (p. 59)

I have spent a lifetime in Special Education. The year I was identified for my first
gifted program as a child is the same year Glenn Gould died. Some days, poetry helps me to
hold my present as a researcher-educator and my past as a gifted-child in the same body.
Within these poems, I played in a field of emotion, memory and relationship and found new
possibilities and spaciousness in these places. There is no one clear path through; the poems
in their polyphonic relations invite permutation but do not demand it. I wish to invite the eye
and inner ear of the reader to stretch, to take in as much as possible, and to perform, like Glen
Gould, an expression of polyphonic splendor and living complexity.
No. 1: No One

Minutes after his death
they crack open his head,\(^{19}\)
polyphonic outpouring
liquid crystal sound.
Forget harm/ony
Gould cries,
piano like me was born
for counterpoint:
it's strings, my nerves,\(^{20}\)
it's keys, my bones.
A body of complex music.

Thirty-two short films about
Glenn Gould, \(^{21}\)
genius refracted,
still-life pulsates,
close-up of a hand (not) growing
old on the keys.

\(^{19}\) a body of complex music
\(^{20}\) close-up of a hand \(^{19}\)
\(^{21}\) feline over the piano \(^{20}\)
Start, finish,
start again,
the music spins out
a hundred webs
and Gould an ancient
spider plays alone
on the silk lines.

i watched images of you at twenty-seven body feline
over the piano emotions funneled pinhole exposure, a lunar eclipse.

sweet sadness of
re-cognition bubbles
up around my heart.

my image of you inert under scrutiny seems un-feeling un
poetic now I knew this once my image of you a bruise a
spot of darkness over tenderness.

soft flesh of
my heart
re-members.

22 inert under scrutiny
23 i knew this once 22
my image of you inert just a bruise a spot of darkness

image before i turned like the moon-turns (it is time & how you keep it) my
image of you over tenderness it is time & how you bend it.

i resonate (I knew this once)
a raison d’être (like the moon turning)

my heart
now fuller.

When the drill leaves
his temple, out spills
a fluid polyphony.
The clinic fills
like a rain barrel
during a sonic monsoon.
Every vibration
that Steinway on spindles
ever uttered.
Polyphony run amok,
liquid crystals line dancing.

______________________________

24 a bruise, a spot of darkness
25 my heart
The doctors bob like apples
in waves of sound.
One recalls
a childhood garden,
lavender fingers, gladiola arms,
raspberry cane knees,
thumb-sized centipedes
drunken bumblebees.
Crouched beside a Monarch
butterfly, she held her breath.

_Touch him and he dies!_

Another remembers
how he stumbled upon
a rabbit in a snare,
the feeling of the trembling body,
his hands too small too big
how he turned away,
but wept at dinner
when his Dad
carved the Sunday roast.

__________________________
26 out spills 25
27 feeling the trembling body 26
When the music ends they know only what they have forgotten.
No. 2: Stroke of Genius

Gould despaired of those who paid attention to him instead of his music. He opposed applause. He composed

_The Solitude Trilogy._

A slap on the back like a hammer like a hammer like a hammer on a wrong note, made him ill & off balance for weeks. In 1964 he stopped performing publicly, retreated to the studio until he suffered a stroke on his 50th birthday. Died days later.
At Fran’s in Toronto

he ate scrambled eggs
every night at 2am.

He could not eat with others.
He hungered while they slept.
I remember this along with
how he left the stage
halfway through life.

The piano repertoire
exhausted, he
aspired to conducting
and poetry.
PHOTOGRAPHER

(approaches Gould at an angle):

Gould

(at the piano):

How do you feel about photographs?

Must I?

PRODUCER

(disembodied voice over the speaker):

Gould

(begins to play):

Get him to put the gloves on the piano and to put on that scarf.

No!

I’ve had just about enough now of that type of picture!

PHOTOGRAPHER

(moves in close for a shot).
No. 4: Blessed

A truck stop
at the edge of town,
a waitress in love,
no music like this
on Earth, except here.

Gould in a booth for four,
clink of porcelain &
icicle cutlery, voices
swirl, accumulate.
Wool-swaddled fingers,
subtle body held
close, infinity close
at hand.

Gould in a bell jar,
space-born sounds,
neural net charged
brings him to God.
Shoulders stooped towards
his heart, he musics
the landscape.
This is what the music
means. He lives the Earth
into cosmic sound.

First name Glenn,
comes on strong
ends with a purr.
A name to gasp
& linger upon.
Oh Glenn! A hook
sunk in my river.

I would if I could
murmur Oh Glenn!
in your super-sonic ear.
But I can’t Oh Glenn!
You keep your distance creatively.
Another Glenn with two Ns
was John Glenn,
the first astronaut
to fly around
the earth.
Part VI: Mileva and Albert: a Poetic Biography

Introduction

This paper begins with biography, then moves past biography, or rather through biography, to explore the meaning and use of poetic engagement with biography in the study of advanced scientific expertise. I respond poetically to the love story of Mileva Maric and Albert Einstein in order to recognize the relational and situated nature of knowledge creation, and to highlight and critique influential narratives that shape our perceptions of advanced learning and development. I seek an empathic encounter with the subjects, and seek to open a space of inquiry with regards to how one responds, acts, feels and engages or not within unjust relational contexts. I seek to nurture greater “epistemological astuteness” to empower subjects on the receiving end of inequality. Denzin (2008) says,

In the first decade of a new century we need new stories, new narratives that embed the self in storied histories of sacred spaces and local places. We need to re-narrate the past. We need to tell the past and its stories in ways that allow us to disrupt conventional narratives and conventional history. Such disruptions help us to better understand how racism and social injustice have been seamlessly woven together…. (p. 119)

I introduce the story of Mileva Maric, a gifted young mathematician and scientist. At age 27 she married Albert Einstein thus entwining the story of her life to that of modern scientific progress - and the story of modern science to her own. Einstein, or the idea and image of Albert Einstein, has become synonymous with genius. It is only recently and reluctantly that details about his private life and relationships have surfaced. Mileva Maric’s
main contribution to the world was as a support to Einstein’s career and development, in that she provided the invisible labour of being a wife, mother and sounding board, and arguably she gave assistance on several of his most significant papers but the credit was never given. Despite much intellectual promise, within this context her own career never materialized and within a few years her mental and emotional health deteriorated along with her marriage. It is interesting to note that Maric was a contemporary of Marie Curie, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903. While it was difficult for women to succeed in the European public sphere at the beginning of the 19th century it was not impossible. Marie Curie’s marriage to Pierre Curie provided an enabling context for her gifts, while Maric’s marriage to Einstein did not. While they were both of Eastern European extraction, Curie resided and worked in France while Maric resided in Berne, Switzerland. The larger social and cultural milieu of France for Curie compared to Switzerland for Maric is also important to consider as a backdrop for their lives. Mileva Maric’s biography, like all historical representations, is a fragment of her life experience and filtered through time and circumstance.

I respond poetically to the story of Albert and Mileva, drawing first on a series of love letters written by the couple early in their relationship (Renn & Schulmann, 1992), and then on fragments of known information about the latter half of their lives (Gabor, 1995; Overbye, 2000; Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2003; Popovik, 2003). Through entering the language, rhythm and silences of their love story as shared in these letters and accounts, I experience something of its existence—something of the heart, mind and soul of this unique love story—as it developed within its particular social, cultural and economic milieu. I work through this “true” historical story—respond to it by embodying a perspective within the
story—thus evoking aspects of these past lives and relationships in the here and now. Hillman (1983/2005) says,

An event becomes an experience, moves from outer to inner, is made into soul, when it goes through a psychological process, when it is worked upon in several ways…. a simple narrative, just a story, is not enough to make soul.

(p. 26)

He includes poetry amongst the ways that a story can be worked with to “make soul.” And, Hillman continues:

A love story is but an histoire, one of mille e tre, only the outer history of emotional events, like a crowd of yellow daffodils, unless it be recollected in tranquility put through a psychological operation…. be put through the qualifying intelligence, the history-making of the psyche, sifted and weighed in the disciplined reflection of loving, or ritual, or dialectics, of an art…. (p. 27)

In this process, I gain perspective on my own situation, too, on my choices, challenges and possibilities as a woman in love while engaged in the development of my own talents and abilities at an advanced level. Speaking of the practice of writing about the intersections of your own deeply felt moments as related to society and culture, Denzin (2008) says,

__________________________

28 In perhaps a case of life imitating art, after I began this inquiry into Mileva and Albert’s story in 2007, I met and married a man who has a Ph.D. in Mathematics.
A critical autoethnographer enters those strange and familiar situations that connect critical biographical experiences (epiphanies) with culture, history, and social structure. He or she seeks out those narratives and stories people tell one another as they attempt to make sense of the epiphanies, or existential turning point moments in their lives. (p. 121)

Through the poetic act I merge my own lived moments with Mileva’s imagined experience in search of new knowledge, possibilities and insights. This is an interpretive venture, an attempt to experience storytelling and poetic response as integral to the creation of equitable spaces for human learning and development.

**Mileva & Albert: Courtship**

> I don’t think the structure of the human skull is to be blamed for man’s inability to understand the concept of infinity. He would certainly be able to understand it if, when young and while developing his sense of perception, he were allowed to venture out into the universe rather than being cooped up on earth or, worse yet, confined within four walls in a provincial backwater. (Mileva to Albert, as cited in Renn & Schulmann, 1992, p. 3)

So writes 22-year-old Mileva Maric from Heidelberg to 18-year-old Albert Einstein in Zurich. The year is 1897 and they have been friends for a year, both having been enrolled as Physics majors at the Poly/ETH in Zurich. When Mileva opts for time away in Heidelberg, despite not being able as a female to matriculate from the university there, the exchange of letters between Mileva and Albert begins. According to one of her few biographers Mileva set out to Heidelberg because she feared the consequences of her feelings for Albert (Gabor,
In her letters (Renn & Schulmann, 1992, pp. 3-4), she describes the satisfactions of her studies and of her enjoyment of being away.

“You said that I shouldn’t write until I was bored, and I waited and waited for boredom to set in, but until today my waiting had been in vain.”

“It really was too enjoyable in Prof. Lenard’s class yesterday; now he’s talking of the kinetic theory of gases”

“What is the point of falling in love nowadays anyways?” she asks, in reference to a friend of theirs who had fallen in love.”

In these early letters we also get, though, a sense of their emerging courtship and fondness for each other.

*Heidelberg: October 1897 (MM to AE)*

In return for the pleasure of your letter,
I write you now

from under the oaks
where the Neckar overflows

to share all I am learning.

Velocity of Oxygen:
hundreds of meters per second
to travel but fraction of a hair’s

---

29 The poems in the following section, all titled by a location and date, are based on a series of letters exchanged by Albert and Mileva, as compiled by Renn and Schulmann (1992).
breadth.

Our words,
made of such slight
but powerful forces.
Today’s sky—graphite grey,
impenetrable as infinity.

Perhaps infinite space
is only to be found in feelings
of infinite happiness.

And as you are farther from me
than a hair’s breadth,
I send these words
on paper, slipped
in a envelope.

I hope they
find you well.

Yours,
Mileva.

Mileva decided to return to the ETH in 1898, and Albert wrote to her in February of
that year (Renn & Schulman, 1992, pp. 4-5),

“I am glad that you intend to return here to continue your studies. Come back soon; I
am sure you won’t regret your decision.”
"Everything that you need to catch up on your studies can be found tightly packed in our notebooks."

"You will, of course, have to give up your old pleasant room which a Zurich philistine now occupies...serves you right you little runaway!"

Zurich: February 1898 (AE to MM)

The desire to write you conquered me.
Oh, come back
you little runaway!

strength of materials,
dynamics, thermal motion,
await you.

Projective geometry.

(you, the shape of my soul,
I cannot express)

And more. Our professor,
rough
impenetrable
brilliant
profound.

(See how I reveal myself already?)

Everything you need to know
tucked in our notebooks.

**Mileva: Early Years**

Mileva was born in 1875 in the village of Titel in the province of Vojvodina, Serbia, which was then located in the Hungarian region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Even then, Vojdovina was ethnically diverse with more than 26 different ethnic groups and six official languages spoken. Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina was called the “Athens of Serbia” and the region was also known for its Serbian nationalism and for a cultivated image of its residents as “brigands and cut-throat business men” (Overbye, 2000, p. 29).

Mileva was the oldest of three children, with a younger sister named Zorka and younger brother named Milos. She was born with a dislocated hip which caused her to limp, a birth defect fairly common in the region, and which her sister also shared. She was characterized as a serious and intense child. Her father, Milos Maric, retired from the army into the civil service and her family was fairly wealthy occupying a 200-acre estate nicknamed The Spire. Milos was a self-made and successful man with an “exaggerated respect for learning” (Overbye, 2000, p. 30) who encouraged his daughters to excel. He was ambitious for them and taught them German at home, as this was the language to know in order to succeed in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Mileva is reputed to have been her father’s favorite and was doted upon in her family. She received superior schooling, was academically precocious, and as a child showed a passion and talent for music and painting. Her interest in math soon proved insatiable and one of her teachers told her father: “Pay attention to that child! It is an unusual phenomenon” (Overbye, 2000, p. 30). Her father was a continual support and advocate for her, and eventually used his clout to help her gain
admittance at the age of 15 to the Royal Classical Gymnasium in Zagreb, an all-male university prep school, known for its physics labs. Mileva was one of the first women in the empire to join the boys in such a school. Despite a bout of illness that delayed her final exams she ended by scoring the highest math and physics grades in her class.

Mileva then studied at the Higher Daughter’s School, and passed her Matura exam which was her ticket to university. At the time, most European universities would allow women to audit classes but not enroll as regular students, so women could not obtain degrees. The University of Zurich began admitting women in 1865, and in 1867 was the first university in Europe to grant a Ph.D. to a woman. As such, many from less progressive countries headed to Zurich for an education, and it became a hotbed of “socialism and suffragettes” (Overbye, 2000, p. 31). In 1894, Mileva decided to go to the University of Zurich and was admitted on her first application attempt (Oregon Public Broadcaster, 2003). In 1896 she began studying medicine but by October she switched to the university’s Polytechnical Institute (Poly/ETH) to study math and physics. At the age of 21 she was the fifth woman ever to be accepted to the ETH (the first had been admitted in 1891), and the only woman in her class of five students. One of her classmates was Albert Einstein, who was 17 years old.

**Mileva & Albert: Relationship Emerging**

Over the next few years Mileva and Albert were to develop a friendship that would turn into love. Two years into her degree, Mileva opts for a semester away in Heidelberg but would return to Zurich (and Albert) at semester’s end. From this point onwards, Mileva and Albert’s relationship was said to have unstoppable momentum.
Zurich, November 1898 (AE to MM)

Sunday,
Marco Besso died.
Terrible. Yet
better than a life
of misery.
May I come over and read
with you this evening?

Milan, March 1899 (AE to MM)

pattern
    the line of your
        back, the curve
of our psyche{ic
& physio——logical
lives entwined.

Your image      (my mother fears)
is my future.

Meanwhile
musings on radiation
take on substance.

Best wishes, etc…

(Esp. the latter!)

Paradise, August, 1899 (AE to MM)

Alone

in Paradise,

I study

datmospheric movements.

While you, my dove,

mistress to our perfect household.

study gray theory,

Yes. It is hard to believe

you are not beside

me.

Mileva wrote to Albert, in 1899:

Both your letters have found me contented at our country retreat... Our series of
shared experiences has secretely given me a strange feeling that is evoked at the
slightest touch, without necessarily conjuring up the memory of a particular moment,
and makes me feel, so it seems, as if I were in my room once again.
Kac, August, 1899 (MM to AE)

I write to you
from the garden,
strange feelings
your letter evoked,
at the slightest touch
warm
memories of being
in my room once again.
while scarlet fever
rages in the city
of Novi Sad
I am safe here
tucked in hot
healthy air where
sour cherry trees
bloom for a second time.

Paradise, August, 1899 (AE to MM)

electro-dynamics of moving bodies,
to reality does not correspond.
I believe without being able to ascribe meaning to physical motion.

If only you very beautiful a robust girl
tell me tell me tell me reality experiments agree with you

only in empty space can electrical forces be defined

we understand one another’s dark souls

also drinking coffee sausages etc….
By September of 1899 Albert wrote to Mileva from Milan where he was on holiday with his family: I’ll be back at “our place” around the 15th; I am really looking forward to returning because it is still the nicest and coziest place” (AE to MM, September 28th, 1899).

This period marks the turn in Mileva’s academic success and in her autonomy. Because of the gap away she had to sit the intermediate examinations in October 1899, one year after Einstein. She expressed much stress and frustration and leaned on Albert for assistance to cover lost ground. Despite her fears, her marks in Physics were by some accounts the same as Einstein's and by some accounts higher. Albert was beginning to experience interpersonal difficulties with one of their professors, Weber, whom he felt wasn’t covering contemporary material. Because of this Albert set out on his own course of study, and Mileva seemingly became Albert’s “accomplice and studymate” (Overbye, 2000, p. 37). They had a modern love affair, viewed themselves as free-thinkers and lived a bohemian student, café-frequenting life. Some have speculated that Mileva’s academic decline can be attributed to her inability to “keep up” with Albert’s style and his genius, that it was too disruptive for her. He was a maverick and she a dutiful student—stereotypical characterizations of male and female giftedness. The creation of Einstein as an independent genius hinges on him being seen as stepping apart and ahead from others, leaving them in his wake. Prior to this point, Mileva never had difficulty keeping up, if anything others vied to keep up with her. Mileva and Albert’s communication at this point was full of scientific ponderings and references indicating they interacted as peers. She is, though, reputed to have taken care of Albert, was known to be fairly maternal towards him, and saw her role to include supporting him and his work. It seems clear that within this context her priorities began to shift as the reality of the incommensurability of a family and career for a woman most likely began to dilute her focus.
Today I received the outline of your foot.
I hold it in my hands
as I sit on the edge
of the bed. I imagine you
bending to trace your toes,
complete your flesh
in my mind.
I will knit your socks, first,
and study for
my Physics exam,
after I finish
with the red wool.

Mileva’s friends were not fond of Albert, and his friends were not fond of her. Even more importantly, Albert’s mother was determinedly opposed to their relationship and set up fierce opposition. Later Albert wrote to Mileva: “We will be students as long as we live, and won’t give a damn about the world” (AE to MM, December 12, 1901). The romance of this view jars with reality. While Albert and Mileva felt that their relationship was very modern, and he encouraged her academic success, in 1900 she had to sit the final examinations and failed these with an average mark of 4. She returned to Vojvodina intending to study and retake the examinations the next year. But in 1901, after a holiday with Albert in Lake Como,

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The following poems emerged from details shared in biographical accounts, and speak to a period after the letter correspondence ended, particularly the early years of their marriage until the publication of the famous papers in 1905.
Mileva discovered she was pregnant. She again failed the final examination for the teaching certificate in July, 1901. Now Mileva’s position became extremely vulnerable. Unmarried, pregnant, 27 years old and academically failing, she felt she needed Albert, and needed to secure her future to his. In January 1902, back in Vojvodina, she gave birth to their daughter Lieserl who was apparently given up for adoption. (There also exists theories that she died of scarlet fever. There is scant mention of this daughter in their surviving correspondence.  

Albert wrote but never visited Mileva during this period in Vojvodina, and preoccupied himself with finding work, which was a struggle for him. Mileva began to fear that Albert might be influenced by his mother and desert her, and so she began to campaign for his attention. 

“Now you are really not coming tomorrow again! And you don’t even say: I’m coming on Sunday instead” (MM to AE, November 13th, 1901).

“I have such a precious little sweetheart and what a nice little package she sent me!...The goodies are unbelievably delicious, and for each one I eat I give you a kiss in my thoughts” (AE to MM, December 28th, 1901).

31  an infant shaped
silence grows,
her petal soft
eyelids flicker.
We are quiet
lest she wake.
“How beautiful the world will look when I’m your little wife, you’ll see. There will be no happier woman in the world—in which case the man must also be happy” (MM to AE, May 1901).

During this period Albert wrote to her of his tutoring work and his next letter to her said:

“How beautiful the world will look when I’m your little wife, you’ll see. There will be
no happier woman in the world—in which case the man must also be happy” (MM to AE, May 1901).

During this period Albert wrote to her of his tutoring work and his next letter to her said:

“Don’t be jealous of Habicht and Frosch—what are they to me compared to you!”

(AE to MM, February 17, 1902)

Mileva believed that she might continue to participate in the science world vicariously:

“When you are my wife we will work diligently on science together so that we don’t
become old philistines right”? (AE to MM, December 28th, 1901)

Mileva and Albert were married on January 6, 1903 in Berne. Mileva’s star never rose again. Albert’s was just about to take off.

**Mileva & Albert: Marriage and the Theory of Relativity**

There is a controversy surrounding whether Mileva was involved in the creation of the Theory of Relativity and whether or not her husband unjustly shut her out of recognition. The narrative has enough holes to enable different interpretations depending on the alliance of the storyteller. What some historians hold up as incontrovertible facts are dismissed or radically downplayed by others. It seems that in the early years of their marriage Mileva did contribute to Albert’s work, and these years coincide with his most productive years. In the month following the completion of the paper outlining the Theory of Relativity in 1905, Mileva and Albert visited her parents for the first time together. She tells her father (in some accounts it is a Serbian friend): "Not long ago we finished some important work that will make my husband world famous" (Gabor, 1995, p. 21; Overbye, 2000, p. 140; Oregon Public
Broadcast, 2003). Albert is credited with saying to a group on this visit, “I need my wife. She solves all my mathematical problems” (Gabor, 1995, p. 20; Overbye, 2000, p. 140). Mileva and Albert’s son, Hans Albert, as well as a student who lived with them for a time would later confirm that this was in fact true (Gabor, 1995). To the friends and relatives whom she knew as a child, Mileva had gone out into the world and done well. She was the young math genius who had returned home for a visit with a handsome and charming, if not a bit eccentric, husband. On the increasingly uneven terrain of their marriage, though, the promise they would do science together translated first into her proofreading his papers and doing some of the math (Gabor, 1995), but eventually to exclusion from his work altogether. By 1907 any collaborative spirit that had been held out for dissipated. That year Mileva contributed a great deal of time and energy to one final project, known as the Maschinchen project but her name was never mentioned in correspondence and was not on the eventual patent. When asked why, Mileva apparently quipped: “Why? After all we are ein Stein (one stone)” (Overbye, 2000, p. 113). This was her last foray into science.

Meteors

earth air-born,

light-travelers.

Where do they land catapulted from their orbit?

Does god slip

them a cushion

to say: thank you for visiting,

I remember you fondly,
I loved you once?

Doubtful.

I confess my faith
in relativity is dead.
I see Newton
behind your back.

I can’t help
but calculate
trajectories and worry
about impact.

Observe: Angyalka Laszlo,
Gypsy pole-vaulter
barred from the 1936
Berlin Olympics.
Her contortions in space
perfectly executed.

So now I sit bright
as an ember,
listen to my thoughts hiss like
oxygen to the flame.
When syllables fall
from my lips, they are as
compact as coal

my mind

my mind

my mind

pulses
in my skull while

somewhere an ancient mollusk
forms a pearl in its shell,

my heart

beats still

(proof of infinity: a million hearts
in concert do not roar like the ocean.)

The night we met,
we sipped chilled vodka,
you plucked a violin,
we pictured a sound wave
and how we might ride it.

My prehistory is now
in this field things remain
I can no longer say what.

Time sits on her own lap,
like a child suckling.
I lay my head on her chest
to hear
my way.

That the executors of Einstein’s estate went to great lengths to conceal the letters and personal details of his relationships after his death, speaks to the investment in the reputation of this man, beyond an investment in his humanity. In a letter to her friend, Helene Savic, Mileva herself said of her husband’s growing fame:

*He is now regarded as the best of the German-language physicists, and they give him a lot of honors. I am very happy for his success, because he really does deserve it; I only hope and wish that fame does not have a harmful effect on his humanity.* (Mileva to Helene, September 3, 1909, as cited in Popovic, p. 14)

And, in a letter to Helene later that winter, Mileva says,
With that kind of fame he does not have much time left for his wife. I read between the lines a certain impish tone when you wrote that I must be jealous of science. But what can you do? One gets the pearl, another the box. (Mileva to Helene, Winter 1909, as cited in Popovic, p. 14)

Yet, Mileva was cast as a difficult and moody woman, from whom Albert rightly distanced himself. The tragedy of Mileva’s life after this point, and the escalation of emotional abuse by her husband, became a fairly recognized fact. Albert was a distant husband, rarely home, and was known to have had affairs. Mileva was deeply lonely. She wrote to her friend Helen:

I often have a feeling, when I sit in our little apartment, that I am sitting in Zurich in a certain room and am living my most wonderful days. It is ridiculous that in my older days I gladly think of those times. (Mileva to Helene, December 1906, as cited in Popovic, p. 89)

As the marriage deteriorated further Alert wrote in a letter to a lover:

I treat my wife as an employee whom I cannot fire. (Oregon Public Broadcaster, 2003)

What is at stake is control or authority over how to tell the story of the development of modern scientific knowledge. When the story erases the tracks of injustice and reproduces inequity through omission, poetic renderings serve to reintegrate these social, emotional and relational dimensions through imaginative leaps and empathetic connections.

I was a mathematician
as a girl, a Bohemian statistician,
a number tigress, primed.

Now your door
hangs on iron hinges.
You calculate therein while
I turn my body
to the stench of laundry,
the tangled mop.
A tigress makes a terrible wife.
Thoughts ensnarl
like a skulk of foxes,
inner words
whip feral.

(In a time of badger scholars
and roaming circuses,
what choice but to marry
the wolf at the door?

What choice
choice o i ch ce

c e e e none ee

h i

c ?)nonenonenone
Listless. Lifeless.

Not the same as obedient. I am not a dog.

My mind, once sharp,
stored in a drawer
with dull blades,
grows useless.

I can now be found
amongst polished spoons,
& white cotton windles,
scalded, scrubbed, hung
to dry in our narrow kitchen.

They never completely dried that winter
we discovered Relativity.

Rashes festered,
fevers came and went.

Soon after you published our Theory
I killed our hope
for one last child.

Now you know.
Living with his new lover, Albert demanded a divorce in 1916 and after some attempts at reconciliation instigated by Mileva for the sake of their sons, she granted him one in 1919. Mileva granted a divorce on the condition that any future Nobel Prize money would be hers, and Albert agreed. Albert was the model of emotional detachment after the divorce. In a letter to Mileva’s friend Helen Savic he wrote:

> Despite terrible appearances my life goes on in full harmony; I am entirely devoted to reflection. I resemble a farsighted man who is charmed by the vast horizon and whom the foreground bothers only when an opaque object prevents him from seeing. (Albert to Helene, October 16, 1916)

And, to his friend Michel Besso, Albert wrote:

> We men are pitiful, dependent creatures, I’ll admit that to anyone with pleasure but compared to these women each of us is a king...She (Mileva) wouldn’t be worth it even if she were a hundred times in the right...To think that this should happen to scientists. (Albert to Michel Besso, as cited in Overbye, 2000, p. 302).

After the divorce, Mileva had the first of several breakdowns, and a series of heart attacks, and took to bed for close to three years. This same period (1915-1917) for Albert “represented arguably the most prodigious effort of sustained brilliance on the part of one man in the history of physics” (Overbye, 2000, p. 327). From this point onwards Mileva would struggle to support herself and her children including a son who was diagnosed with
schizophrenia. Albert’s involvement with his family after this point was conflicted and minimal. Mileva died on August 4, 1948 after a mental and physical collapse.

**Postscript: Poetry, Biography and Epistemological Astuteness**

When I talk to women friends about my idea for writing the story of Mileva and using it to elicit and engage with girls’ experiences in math and science, they get excited, and nod emphatically. It is like I am telling them something that they have wanted to hear. The sharing of Mileva’s experience elicits confessions from women. They resonate with her across time and culture:

> I ended up writing a section of my boyfriend’s thesis and he didn’t want to name me in the acknowledgements; I dropped out of high school math because all of the rules reminded me of my over-bearing father; I felt that if I could have spent time trying to really understand math instead of getting the right answer then maybe I would have done better.

Mileva’s biography is culturally and historically situated and it can also be read as an archetype. Her story resonates with particular subjective experiences to this day. It is an entry point, an axle that enters the wheel, a tool to move us. Her biography evokes stories of knowledge creation, authorship, fame, love, loss, labour, passion, recognition, struggles for autonomy, struggles for becoming a “someone” and more. These responses renew my commitment to cultivating this relationship with Mileva. How we relate, or not, to Mileva and the characters in her life is the study at hand. This is a story we are all part of and that we know already in our own ways. Like us, Mileva is a pattern, her life a shifting constellation,
frozen in various ways through various retellings; these serve as epistemological markers.

Working poetically with biography creates a space that allows for certain possibilities, and possibilities appear in the form of questions and invitations for engagement.
Where and when can I enter this story?

What moves me?

Where does its axle connect to my inner wheel?

What part of this story touches me?

What is my impression of Mileva?

What would I say to her?

Do I have any advice?

Do I understand her?

What does it feel like to read this story?
You have two studies
with doors.
I count them
from where I lurk
behind the couch.
    Can’t sort
my thoughts
let alone my heap
of books. Words
barnacle under foot.

How did I become so
exposed to the elements? No wall to keep
the dog out,
bread knife rasps,
burnt toast thunders,
the cream screams
in the fridge.

Should I, like Emily Carr, hang
my table from the ceiling?
Paint with domestic life
swinging overhead?
The absence of Mileva takes everyday work. Experiences such as Mileva’s provide the ground for our contemporary knowledge, and epistemological astuteness requires understanding the conditions within which our knowledge is produced. The process of working poetically with biography, of turning stories into histories, illuminates the cultural terrain in ways that help us understand the perspectives of those excluded from traditional historical accounts. The disciplines of science and math, as well as one’s experiences within these disciplines, are rarely read historically; thus they are experiences that have not yet slipped through the loophole of story into public historical consciousness. Bruner (1990) says, “The existence of story as a form is a perpetual guarantee that humankind will ‘go meta’ on received versions of reality” (p. 55). Based on Hillman’s (1983/2005) work, we could qualify Bruner’s quote slightly and say: the existence of history as a form is a perpetual guarantee that humankind will “go meta” on received versions of reality.

To enable conscious awareness of our lived experiences of knowledge construction and how we exist in epistemological terms we need the process of poetic engagement to help us “digest” our stories. Poetry evokes a movement from object to subject, from other to self, from head to heart and back again. It is an “endless travel of discovery into the objective world and the subjective self” (Fuhrer, 2004, p. 27). The poetic biography of Mileva Maric can serve as an axial device, as a process and tool that moves us. By responding to her story we can join her in patterning; we can weave, play, think, dream, write what we know and feel amid the erected markers of her life.
Conclusion

Strengths, Limitations and Contributions of This Arts-Based Inquiry

Through this arts-based inquiry I invite a deeper look into the meanings and possibilities within giftedness research and education through artful approaches. I bring aesthetic ways of knowing to gifted education and research a field that has mainly evolved from traditions of scientific rationality expressed through psycho-educational assessment. How will my work speak to the field of gifted education using this unfamiliar language? Am I attempting to graft my flowering branch onto an inhospitable tree? I feel there are two possibilities. One: select the appropriate spot to connect to for there are more and less hospitable locations. Two: plant a healthy sapling nearby that brings strengths from both fields together. I am fond of the latter choice, although not a stranger to the first.

Hybrid

This dissertation is:

a cross-pollination,
a hip-hop tango.

1+1 =3,
a car run on electricity.
A tasty broccoflower,
a sweet mule (donkey + horse).

Where the possibilities
of two kinds meet,

at the corner of Artful Inquiry Lane
& Giftedness Street.

At its heart giftedness and the sharing of gifts is a poetic rather than a technical process that is more closely allied with shared living and knowing than with radical difference. Because we live our lives idiosyncratically we gain wisdom about life through attending to details of experience. If you trace the meanings held in a small detail, a word for example, you can soon end up quite far from where you started. We are entirely enfolded and connected in our living processes. So, through attending to particulars of experience and dwelling in singular perspectives this inquiry is radically limited but that is precisely its strength as an arts-based, literary exploration. It invites readers to participate in particular experiences of living and knowing giftedness, and in so doing invites them into the endless possibilities held in their own limited perspectives.
And this is how the frame cracks

In a dream,
a painting hangs on a wall.

In the painting,
every image, story, legend, myth, joke, poem, fact,
about genius is possible.

From where I stand
I recognize a few.

But in this dream-painting,
every thing ever becomes something else.
So Beethoven is Charlie Chaplin who is Neils Bohr.
No one is singular or purely themselves
and ontological states wildly disrespect each other’s sovereignty so
people are stories and stories are objects
and objects are stories and stories are people
so objects are people and people are objects
and objects are alive.
Einstein is an umbrella,  
a useful invention we carry with us.

This is Bruegel’s peasant dance,  
a convoluted conversation of bodies co-mingling,  
and a crimson sash  
frayed but held up  
by the wind or the momentum  
of the dance  
is the feeling of genius.  
(and how the artist painted the sash to show this movement  
is the feeling of inquiry into genius)

These dancing bodies are gifted minds.  
Boisterous mind-bodies that press the limits of the frame.

This is what we do, they sing.  
This is what we do!

This is how the frame cracks.

I hold the space open with my being,  
which is now dancing too.
I sought to identify and articulate underlying aesthetic values in the work, namely, poetry, polyphony, fluidity and freedom, as I wished to connect the creative process of giftedness to a larger conversation about living creatively, especially within systems devoted to technical ways of knowing and being. Arts-based inquirers across fields are deeply involved in exploring and communicating what it means to know through artistic means, and in this way they trade actively in creative gifts within the academy. I hope my work supports arts-based researchers to theorize and philosophize about the radical function and experience of their gift-sharing within the academy towards the creation of an ethical scholarly culture.
Afterword

In the end…

Last night I dreamt I was traveling along a river, on a fast moving barge with people, past a city where I used to live. While it was an old familiar place, there were mountains too, the same ones as where I now live and go to school.

The barge stopped by the buildings where the government employees worked, and I had the option of getting off, and almost did, but then realized I needed to wait one more stop to get downtown, to the heart of the city.

In the end, I didn’t get off downtown though. I stayed on the barge as it turned around and headed up the river back to where I began.
Even a good dream must end. Everything has its patterns, rhythms and cycles. When I began my Master’s in 2003, my research into giftedness felt like a hot coal in my hand; I needed to discharge the heat, the energy, the words, as quickly as possible. In the past few years, I have sought to dwell with the intensity of my being in a way more akin to the firing of pottery than the flash of fireworks. Leonard Cohen’s (1992) words comfort me, too: *Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.* (track 5)

*What have I accomplished here? What is important to remember from this process, these inquiries into living and knowing giftedness? How shall I end?*

Through the six arts-based—poetic and narrative—inquiries in this collection I expand ways of knowing and relating to gifts and giftedness beyond dominant methodological forms and standard categorical, binary terms. An arts-based inquiry approach supports intrinsically relational, emotional and situated ways of making sense of gifts and giftedness.

*Should I talk more about polyphony as a way of ethical relation? How polyphony as a form supports sensitivity? That we need to acknowledge and nurture the polyphony in the world.*

The themes of poetry, polyphony, fluidity and freedom emerged and these are understood as aesthetic practices that support our ability to know giftedness in arts-based terms.
Or, maybe I should say more about the importance of conceptualizing educational inquiry into giftedness in diverse ways?

Tell them about what happened last week….

Should I say more about conducting research with young people who have been overly scrutinized and assessed, and the importance of poetic ways of being and knowing in these contexts?

I also make space for my own exceptional learning history and approach research as a living and transformative practice. This situated approach to research enables me to integrate exceptional ways of being—exceptional learning situations—with ways of knowing and representing knowledge.

Or, maybe how the process of living one’s gift, which shares much with a poetic process, makes improbable bedfellows with capitalist ambitions?

Tell them about what happened last week…

Should I say more about the challenges for women who seek creative and intellectual authority amidst relationships and family?

Last week, I…
Last week, I met with a pre-service teacher about her inquiry project into best practices for working with gifted children at the elementary level. Similar to me, her interest in gifted education stems from her own difficult experiences having been identified gifted as a child. Being in a teacher education program has released in her an unexpected flood of memories and intense emotions. It has been a difficult process for her but in acknowledging and sharing her emotions, it seems to me that her learning has gained a whole new and unexpected depth as she is better able to live and make sense of her own particular story in the midst of becoming a teacher. I sincerely admire her emotional honesty and commitment to her process.

I had met with her once before, talked for a while, shared some of my own stories and thoughts, listened to hers. When we met this second time, she told me that while she found the material I referred her to useful enough the most main thing for her was just the knowledge that I was there.

*That I exist.*

That she is not unique in the world, after all.

I remember too that keen feeling of needing to know I was not unique in the world. It has subsided somewhat in the past few years. I no longer feel this day-to-day.

I am glad I am here now, too.

And, I know exactly what she means.
References


*Educational Researcher, 37* (6), 321–329 DOI: 10.3102/0013189X08324229

Appendix A: Letter of Permission

An Arts-Based Inquiry into Radical Acceleration in a University Setting

May 28, 2010

Dear ,

I would like to request your permission to include your digital story in my Doctoral dissertation with the possibility of also using it in conference presentations. Appropriate credit will be given in association with the images (e.g., your name, title of the work, and 'digital story included with permission').

Please indicate your permission by signing the letter where indicated below. If you agree, please also indicate your preferences regarding confidentiality:

Yes  No  My full name may be used in association with my digital story in Pamela Richardson’s Doctoral dissertation.

Yes  No  My full name may be used in association with my digital story in conference presentations made by Pamela Richardson.

Please return this letter to me as soon as possible. My fax number is xxx-xxx-xxxx (Attention: Pamela Richardson). By signing this letter, you are confirming that you own the copyright to the above described material.

______________________________
(Your name, printed)

______________________________
(Your signature)

Sincerely,
Pamela Richardson
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

An Arts-Based Inquiry into Radical Acceleration in a University Setting

Principal Investigator: Dr. Marion Porath, UBC, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education. (604) 822-6045. marion.porath@ubc.ca

Co-investigator: Pamela Richardson, M.A., Ph.D Student in Special Education. UBC, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education. (604) XXX-XXXX. This research project is part of my dissertation project.

Purpose: This project uses digital storytelling to examine learning and development for radically accelerated adolescents in a university setting.

Study Procedures: You will create a three to five minute “digital story” (digital pictures combined with voice, music and text) about your experience as a university student. You will have access to free expert training, as well as, the necessary software and technology to do so. You will be invited to share and discuss your story in one-on-one interviews with the co-investigator, and in a focus-group along with the other story authors/participants. Each step in this process is completely voluntary. You may take part in the free training (which will be open to the entire community of early-entrants at UBC) and decide after that experience if you would like to be involved the research project. You may withdraw from the study at any time, or take part in select aspects only (e.g. interview but not focus-group).

Time commitment: About 11.5 hours over a four-month period.
Digital Storytelling workshop: 2 daytime sessions over two month. (2 x 2 hrs=4hrs)
Digital Story Creation: Approx 5 hours
Individual interview: 20-30mins.
Focus-group: 2 hours

Confidentiality: Your confidentiality will be ensured in several ways: (1) Transcripts, notes and audio-files from interviews and focus-groups will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and files password protected on the researcher’s computer. Only the above listed researchers will have access to the data. (2) You will be identified by a pseudonym at all times, and identifying information will be omitted or altered. The digital stories will be your property. You are invited to share and discuss them as part of the research project but will maintain complete ownership over the digital files and product.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.
If you have further questions about this study:

Please contact Pamela Richardson by phone at (604) XXX-XXXX or by email at XXXXX@shaw.ca or Dr. Marion Porath by phone at (604) 822-6045 or by email at marion.porath@ubc.ca

Consent:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without concern about repercussions in any form. If you are involved with the “Peer Mentorship Group” please know that your decision to not participate in this study does not in any way affect your involvement with that group.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records:

_______________________________________
Participant Signature

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in this study:

_______________________________________
Participant Signature Date

_______________________________________
Printed Name of the Participant
### Appendix C: Certificate of Approval

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL- MINIMAL RISK RENEWAL**

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<th>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</th>
<th>DEPARTMENT</th>
<th>UBC BREB NUMBER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marion J. Porth</td>
<td>UBC/Education/Educational &amp; Counseling Psychology, and Special Education</td>
<td>H07-00272</td>
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<th>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</th>
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**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):**
Pamela Richardson

**SPONSORING AGENCIES:**
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

**PROJECT TITLE:**
An Arts-Based Inquiry into Radical Acceleration in a University Setting

**EXPIRY DATE OF THIS APPROVAL:** March 9, 2010

**APPROVAL DATE:** March 9, 2009

The Annual Renewal for Study have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

*Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board*

- Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
- Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
- Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
- Dr. Laure Ford, Associate Chair
- Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair